

§31. The Moral Universe



Then in the midst brake silence the father of men and immortals,
 since in the depths of his heart he remembered the noble Aegisthus
 slaughtered by King Agamemnon's son, far-famous Orestes.
 Mindful of him, these words he addressed to the gods everlasting:
 "Verily, how these mortals of earth give blame to the heaven!
 Evil is sent by the gods, they affirm! It is they that in folly,
 ay, in the madness of folly, o'erleaping their destiny, seek it.
 Thus did Aegisthus, in spite of his fate predestined, in madness
 marry the wife of Atrides, and murdered her lord at his coming.
 Fully he knew of the doom that impended – for this we foretold him,
 Sending him Hermes, the keen-eyed Slayer of Argus, to warn him
 neither to murder the man, nor his wife to solicit as suitor . . .

– *Odyssey 1:28-39*

Thus, at the beginning, does the *Odyssey* poet set forth the moral universe in which she will be operating. But why all the fuss?

Because the moral universe under which the *Iliad* had been operating does not exist; that universe is ruled by the sword, and behind the sword is hatred. The minimum decencies of chivalry are denied by Achilles at the end (22:350):

"No supplications to me, thou dog, by knees or by parents!
 Nay, I would that wrath and fury of mine would impel me
 even to cut thy flesh myself into pieces, and eat it
 raw, for the deeds thou has wrought; so verily none shall deliver
 thee from the dogs . . .

. . . why, not even so shall thy worshipful mother
 lay on a bier the offspring borne of herself, and bewail him;
 never! The dogs and the birds lone-flying shall wholly devour thee."

Never doubt that this has its fans, then and now. But the proprieties have their fans too. And the idea of justice, of what is right enforced by human law; that what is wrong is the wrongdoer's own fault, and can fairly be punished, rather than ascribed (as Agamemnon does, in *Id* 9:115f) to a god-sent madness for which the doer *is not himself accountable*, loomed larger in people's thinking as the Dark Days faded, and a communal order of living once again appeared.

Our misfortunes are not given by fate,¹ nor are they imposed by the gods. They are *our own fault*. This is the revolution, and the *Odyssey* is its herald.

¹For a careful analysis of this and related terms, see Yamagata **Morality**.