

## QUESTIONS OF AGENCY

A sermon preached by Galen Guengerich  
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μῆνιν ἄειδε θεὰ Πηληϊάδεω Ἀχιλῆος

Thus begins the oldest and one of the most influential stories in all of Western literature: Homer’s *Iliad*, composed nearly three thousand years ago. The *Iliad* and its sequel, the *Odyssey*, were the Harry Potter stories of the ancient world: epic in length, encyclopedic in scope, and wildly popular.

The very first word of the *Iliad* is the Greek word μῆνιν, which means “rage.” The word refers to the rage of the Greek hero Achilles, who becomes enraged when his share of war plunder, a young maiden named Briseis, is taken from him by the Greek commander Agamemnon.

In a compelling new translation of the *Iliad*, Stephen Mitchell opens the story with these words:

The rage of Achilles—sing it now, goddess, sing *through* me  
the deadly rage that caused the Achaeans such grief  
and hurled down to Hades the souls of so many fighters,  
leaving their naked flesh to be eaten by dogs  
and carrion birds, as the will of Zeus was accomplished.

*Moby Dick*, written 2,500 years later by Herman Melville during the time he was a member of All Souls (he sat in the back pew), is also fueled by rage—the rage of a whaling captain named Ahab. A great white whale that Ahab dubbed Moby Dick had, during a previous voyage, destroyed Ahab’s ship and bitten off his leg. Ahab vowed revenge. As the story of Ahab’s vendetta voyage unfolds, he comes to view Moby Dick not only as the perpetrator of an evil act, but as the sum and substance of all evil absolutely. In a telling passage, Melville writes:

The White Whale swam before [Ahab] as the monomaniac  
incarnation of all those malicious agencies which some deep men  
feel eating in them, till they are left living on with half a heart and  
half a lung... All evil, to crazy Ahab, were visibly personified, and  
made practically assailable in Moby-Dick. He piled upon the  
whale's white hump the sum of all the general rage and hate felt by  
his whole race from Adam down.

During the closing chase near the end of the story, Ahab hurls his last harpoon at Moby Dick, along with a final invective: “...to the last I grapple with thee; from hell's heart I stab at thee; for hate's sake I spit my last breath at thee.”

Words like these seem distressingly familiar these days. My own sense is that the tide of rage in our nation is rising. The identity of the whale varies, of course, depending

on who's enraged, and at what. The sum of evil—the incarnation of malicious agency—gets personified, in turn, by various groups: gays, or immigrants, or feminists, or Muslims, or poor people, or liberals. Or—most recently—by corporations and rich people.

It's true that relatively few of the people currently occupying Wall Street seem enraged. But that's not necessarily a good thing. My own view is that every successful process of transformation—stopping genocide, defeating apartheid, overthrowing tyranny—initially rises from a deep sense of outrage at the status quo. But the fire of rage can quickly burn out of control, becoming either destructive (as with Achilles) or self-destructive (as with Ahab), or both. In order to accomplish some positive good, rage must yield to the call of moral purpose.

When I read Chris Hedges' recent blog supporting the occupation of Wall Street, I sensed immediately his rage. Winner of the Pulitzer Prize for his New York Times coverage of global terrorism, Hedges is not known for his subtlety or even-handedness. If words were sparks, Hedges would be a flamethrower. He's been outspoken in his belief that our elected officials, our media, and our courts are, as he puts it, "wholly owned subsidiaries of the corporate state."

We live in a country, Hedges says, "where the rule of law means nothing" and "where war, financial speculation and internal surveillance are the only real business of the state." In this country, he continues, "you, as a citizen, are nothing more than a commodity to corporate systems of power, one to be used and discarded." Like a prophet of old, Hedges issues an ultimatum: "Either you join the revolt taking place on Wall Street and in the financial districts of other cities across the country or you stand on the wrong side of history. Either you obstruct...the plundering by the criminal class on Wall Street...or become the passive enabler of a monstrous evil."

In literary terms, rage is a malignant form of anger that has morphed into madness; the Latin root of rage also forms the root of the word rabies. As invoked by Homer and Melville, rage is an understandable, though often ultimately self-destructive, human response to forces beyond our control: the will of the gods, in Achilles' case, or the power of the natural world, in Ahab's. Achilles' rage led him to waste a decade fighting a pointless war, and Ahab's rage eventually dragged him to the bottom of the sea. In its self-destruction, rage is like resentment, which someone once described as drinking poison and waiting for the other person to die.

Is the call to obstruct the plundering an invitation to become Captain Ahab, blindly enraged at the White Whale of Wall Street? To paraphrase Shakespeare, shall we first kill all the corporations? Or is it a call to become, say, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who used his rage at our nation's racism to fuel a clear sense of moral purpose?

In either case, rage seems justified. Three years ago, within a period of months, we lost 20% of our national net worth. The aggregate value of all residential real estate in the U.S. today is 40% less than it was five years ago. Unemployment remains stubbornly high: 85% of students graduating from college last June planned to move back home with their parents. Measures of economic inequality—such as the Gini coefficient—continue to climb. Bank lending remains perilously low—except for lending to the government, from which banks can borrow at virtually no interest and to which banks can lend back at virtually no risk. The profit from these transactions alone, as calculated by Institutional Investor Report, yielded banks a windfall of more than \$200

billion during the first half of 2011. In bailing out the banks, we managed to privatize profits and socialize risk.

In the face of such widespread devastation and disparity, rage seems an appropriate response. It's also dangerous: it can seduce you into fighting pointless battles or drag you to the bottom of the sea. For example, the division of the population into the 1% who are gleeful sinners and the 99% who are downtrodden saints may be rhetorically appealing, but it's also morally perverse. It indicts many good people without whose help we'd be in a far worse mess, and it exonerates many selfish people whose voices and votes helped get us into this mess. Besides, given the chance, relatively few of the 99% would be enraged by an opportunity to join the 1%.

My hope is that the protests will spark the tinder of our moral purpose, but I worry that they will become self-serving and self-absorbed. Rage can just as easily burn down the village as save it. The challenge is to focus our moral purpose and address this problem at its source.

I believe the economic problem we face is, at heart, a moral problem. How so? Just as the physical universe can be described in terms of energy, so the moral universe can be described in terms of agency. Our problem is neither capitalism in general nor corporations in particular. The truth is that malevolent people made malicious decisions. Once such decisions get institutionalized, it requires moral leadership to set things right. The questions before us are questions of agency.

In his treatise on ethics, Aristotle set out a theory of moral responsibility—perhaps the first on record. A moral agent, in his view, is someone who has the ability to deliberate among options and decide upon a course of action. In moral terms, an agent is worthy of praise or blame based on intention, not outcome.

If you offer to help a friend move from one apartment to another, and along the way you happen to drop her Ming Dynasty vase, shattering it into many pieces, you are not worth of blame, morally speaking. On the other hand, if you become angry with your friend, pick up the vase, and hurl it across the room, you are blameworthy.

Confronted with a broken Ming vase—or a broken economy, for that matter—how can you assess whether certain actions are praiseworthy or blameworthy? You need to be able to judge intentions. Moral agency requires transparency.

In other words, if there are rules that need to be followed, then you need both to follow the rules and to be seen to be following the rules. Some companies have done the opposite: they have not followed the rules, all the while trying desperately not to be seen not following the rules. By the same token, the process of bundling toxic sub-prime mortgage loans into pretty packages and selling them as bond-quality securities seems to define immoral behavior: malicious intent masked by duplicitous behavior.

Here's the ultimate question—the final question and the most important: who is being held accountable for these immoral actions? Ah, there's the rub, and there's the moral problem. We map the moral universe in terms of moral agency, which requires transparency to make it functional and accountability to make it valid. The moral calculus is simple: no accountability, then no morality.

In Michael Lewis's new book titled *Boomerang*, he describes how Greece managed to keep its budget deficit under 3% of GDP, as required, during its first eight years in the European Union. The government borrowed heavily and surreptitiously, aided by the same people whose skills had been honed in the process of securitizing the

American sub-prime market. When revenues were still too low, the government simply moved some of its expenses off the books—the defense budget, for example.

When it came to light two years ago that the deficit was actually 15% instead of 3%, investigators discovered another underlying problem: lots of Greeks don't pay their income taxes. Why? Because nothing happens if they don't. For example, Lewis reports that an estimated two-thirds of Greek doctors paid no income tax because they reported incomes under 12,000 euros a year—despite a law making it a jailable offense to cheat the government. “If the law was enforced,” one tax collector told Lewis, “every doctor in Greece would be in jail.”

Here's a question: if one Greek doctor were jailed each month for tax-evasion, how many months would it take for the rest to become compliant? My guess is five months. The moral calculus is simple: accountability yields morality.

If people can consistently get away with immoral behavior, then the system itself is immoral. How to fix our system of governance and finance? I'd start on K Street, where the necessary functions of governance and the legitimate interests of business overlap—often to devastating effect. Perhaps the worst idea to come out of the first decade of this new millennium is the idea that deregulation leads to an economic Promised Land. That's like responding to traffic congestion at 79<sup>th</sup> and Lexington by ripping down all the traffic signals. We need to stop sending corporate foxes into the regulatory henhouse, where conflicts of interest too often get resolved in ways that intentionally sabotage the common good.

What is the answer to our present predicament? The answer is an urgent application of moral agency, which requires transparency and accountability. It will also require courage—both from people who work on Wall Street and from those who do not. The battle for accountability is always hard won. Once bad decisions get institutionalized, it requires moral leadership to set things right.

On Tuesday evening, Holly and I watched the first of five episodes in a new PBS series entitled *Women, War, and Peace*. The documentary reveals the horrific details of how tens of thousands of Muslim women were imprisoned by Serb forces during the Balkans war in the 1990s and systematically raped. I found it almost impossible to watch, yet impossible to ignore. At least since the days of Achilles and Agamemnon, women and girls have been considered war plunder—“rewards” for the victors in battle to rape with impunity. In the aftermath of the Balkans war, however, the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia charged three Serbian soldiers—for the first time in history—with using rape as a weapon of war.

Sixteen women—ordinary citizens—who had been imprisoned in the Bosnian town of Foca mustered the courage to take the witness stand against the soldiers. Despite present danger—the accused soldiers and their families remained in Foca, where the women also lived—the women spoke out. “I came to testify,” one said—words that form the title of the documentary. The men were held accountable: they were convicted and received prison sentences varying from 10 to 28 years.

Here's a question: how many men would need to be jailed for using rape as a weapon of war before the practice would stop?

If you find yourself enraged at the calamities and atrocities in our world, that's a good thing. But don't let your rage consume you or seduce you into fighting a battle that's not worth fighting and that you'll never win. Harness your rage: let it give you a clear-headed sense of moral purpose.

For my part, I remain optimistic about our prospects. The word of optimism derives from the ancient Greek word *ops*, which means simply “power.” Optimism is the power to do the work that is ours to do. As Voltaire enjoined in *Candide*, we must tend our fields—not other fields, or better fields, or different fields, but our fields. We need to do the work that is ours to do. In this spirit optimism, go find the place that is yours—and occupy it.