

# Aeschylus' Genealogy of Morals

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**SUMMARY:** I examine genealogical metaphors and related causal statements in the plays of Aeschylus, particularly the *Oresteia*, and demonstrate how, when taken together, they present a systematic view of ethical behavior and its consequences, necessary for a comprehensive understanding of Aeschylean thought. While Aeschylus' perspective falls firmly within the Solonian tradition of *koros-hybris-atê*, he adds piety—mortals' recognition of their common subordination to the divine, which encourages them to respect the human status of others—as an essential element for human behavior. Piety is an essential prerequisite for justness, particularly important for Aeschylus because of his identification of Zeus with justice.

## I. THE GENEALOGICAL METAPHOR

παλαίφατος δ' ἐν βροτοῖς γέρων λόγος  
τέτυκται, μέγαν τελε-  
σθέντα φωτὸς ὄλβον  
τεκνοῦσθαι μηδ' ἄπαιδα θνήσκειν,  
ἐκ δ' ἀγαθᾶς τύχας γένει  
βλαστάνειν ἀκόρεστον οἰζύν (A. A. 750–56<sup>1</sup>).

An old saying was fashioned long ago  
among mortals: once it has become  
great, a person's success  
bears offspring and does not die childless,  
but from good fortune for a family  
sprouts forth unending misery.

<sup>1</sup> Except where otherwise noted the Greek text of Aeschylus is Page. Translations are my own.

Thus the Chorus in the *Agamemnon* gives expression to the common and pessimistic Greek belief that human success brings unhappiness. The genealogical metaphor used in this passage is striking. Τεκνοῦσθαι, together with the adjective ἄπαιδα (754), delineates graphically and effectively the close causal connection traditionally seen between good fortune and misery. Great success gives birth (that is to say, leads inevitably) to ruin.

Such a use of genealogy to express relationships between concepts is not original with Aeschylus; it is found in a number of archaic Greek writers, notably Hesiod, whose *Theogony* is an extended genealogy not only of the gods but also of the physical, social, and psychological features of the universe. We generally understand Hesiod's use of theogony as a metaphorical portrayal of the relationships between the various powers of nature, society, and human psychology, including those values like justice that we consider abstract.<sup>2</sup> When Hesiod makes *Dikē* the daughter of Zeus, for example, what he asserts is not simply that the goddess was the physical offspring of Zeus (though he may indeed have believed that); more important, he means that Justice somehow emanates from Zeus, concerns him personally, and is a direct product of his reign in heaven. Norman Brown (8) remarks, "In Hesiod's myth-language, the character of a divine power is revealed in his children."

Herbert Abel has traced the development in early Greek poetry of the genealogy of ethical concepts in particular (92–101). He observes that this metaphor springs naturally from the anthropomorphic way the Greeks thought about their gods—that is, about the forces outside and beyond the human individual. Particular personal beings with individual characteristics, he maintains, are always more easily grasped than abstract ideas, and the metaphor of the family tree asserts important relationships between them.

Hesiod, of course, uses the image of biological descent in a thorough and systematic way so that it becomes the organizing principle of his whole *Theogony*. The pervasive use of procreation and descent in his work suggests that he thought of the genealogies as something more than metaphor, indeed as the embodiment of basic truths about reality and nature, for which procreation is of such great importance. The same is true of Aeschylus' use of the metaphor; as in Hesiod, it appears to be a statement of fundamental causal relationships between modes of human behavior on the one hand, and human happiness or misery on the other.

<sup>2</sup> As Solmsen (114–15) says, "Hesiod, we may be sure, knew that Strife leads to—or produces—Toil, Hunger, Forgetfulness, and many other loathsome entities, but his 'theological' bent led him to conceive what we should call a causal relationship in terms of the birth of one divine entity from another." See also Brown's Introduction.

In what follows I examine several genealogical metaphors and related causal statements in the plays of Aeschylus, particularly the *Oresteia*, and demonstrate how, when taken together, they present a systematic view of ethical behavior and its consequences. My main intent is to delineate as clearly as I can the causal chain, which is of core importance for any comprehensive understanding of Aeschylean thought.

## II. ANTECEDENT NOTIONS

To return to the passage with which we began, Aeschylus has the Chorus use a genealogical metaphor when citing the traditional notion that great wealth or good fortune leads to misery: ὄλβος (*olbos*) gives birth to οἰζύς (*oizus*). Therefore it is better to be poor and obscure than to risk the retaliation of Zeus for great success (cf. the Chorus' worries in *A.* 468–71). This “old saying” refers to the age-old notion of the φθόνος θεῶν (*phthonos theōn*), which asserts that whenever humans are fortunate, the gods become jealous of their position and bring them low. The mere fact of prosperity brings with it its inevitable reversal.

But this notion is raised by the Chorus only to be rejected. For, after presenting the “old saying” with its assertion of a direct connection between prosperity and ruin, they go on to propose an alternate view, one that they claim to be uniquely theirs (*A.* 757–62):

δίχα δ' ἄλλων μονόφρων εἰ-  
 μί· τὸ δυσσεβὲς γὰρ ἔργον  
 μετὰ μὲν πλείονα τίττει,  
 σφετέραι δ' εἰκότα γένναι·  
 οἴκων γὰρ εὐθυδίκων  
 καλλίπαις πότμος αἰεΐ.

But apart from others I hold a singular  
 opinion. For the impious act  
 bears more afterwards,  
 things like their own parent.  
 For the fate of just houses  
 is always a beautiful child.

Success by itself does not lead to misery, they maintain; impious acts do. The clear implication is that it is actually impiety and the acts that result from it that lead directly (or indirectly) to misery. This statement comes in the second stasimon of the play after several stanzas on “the lion cub that turns” (Helen) and on the dire effects of the crime Paris has committed. Immediately after the Chorus introduces the notion of divine retribution (an *Erinys*,

749) for the violation of guest-friendship, they present the view just cited that it is not wealth but impiety that leads to misery. The violation of guest-friendship is such an act of impiety against Zeus Xenios. They go on to assert that a house that acts justly, by contrast—presumably even a prosperous one—has a fate that is a beautiful child (καλλίπαις πότμος), i.e., a good fate.<sup>3</sup> There is no inevitable calamity for the successful, but one's happiness depends on how such success is handled.

Aeschylus was not the first to question the tradition of success automatically leading to disaster. Earlier poets had already viewed the relationship as rather more complex. Solon (6.3–4 West) sees a progression from ὄλβος (*olbos*) to κόρος (*koros*<sup>4</sup>) to ὕβρις (*hybris*):

τίκτει γὰρ κόρος ὕβριν, ὅταν πολὺς ὄλβος ἔπηται  
ἀνθρώποις ὁπόσοις μὴ νόος ἄρτιος ᾖ.<sup>5</sup>

For surfeit gives birth to arrogance, whenever much success comes  
to humans whose mind is not sound.

His use of the birth metaphor here is the first appearance of a genealogical sequence of moral characteristics of this sort. By it Solon asserts that surfeit (*koros*)—too much wealth or success (*olbos*)—produces arrogance (*hybris*).<sup>6</sup> Elsewhere he makes it clear that it is arrogance that leads to ruin (*atê*; 13.9–13 West):

<sup>3</sup> This last phrase is the subject of some dispute, but the context suggests that the translation above gives the general sense. Verrall (95) comments, “καλλίπαις πότμος combines in one phrase the ideas that the prosperity of the house is reproduced in successive generations, and that this prosperity is itself the child of righteousness, as misery is of sin.” This may be claiming rather much for the phrase but is, I believe, on the right track. In any case, prosperity is seen as the result of justness.

<sup>4</sup> See Helm.

<sup>5</sup> This distich is one of several in Solon that also appear in Theognis, sometimes with slight though here insignificant variations (153–54 West): “τίκτει γὰρ κόρος ὕβριν, ὅταν κακῶι ὄλβος ἔπηται / ἀνθρώπῳ καὶ ὅτῳ μὴ νόος ἄρτιος ᾖ.”

<sup>6</sup> Fisher, in his masterful analysis of the meanings of *hybris*, defines it in this way (1): “... *hybris* is essentially the serious assault on the honour of another, which is likely to cause shame, and lead to anger and attempts at revenge. *Hybris* is often, but by no means necessarily, an act of violence; it is essentially deliberate activity, and the typical motive for such infliction of dishonour is the pleasure of expressing a sense of superiority, rather than compulsion, need or desire for wealth. *Hybris* is often seen to be characteristic of the young, and/or of the rich and/or upper classes; it is often associated with drunkenness. *Hybris* thus most often denotes specific acts or general behaviour directed against others, rather than attitudes; ...”

πλοῦτον ...

ὃν δ' ἄνδρες τιμῶσιν ὑφ' ὕβριος, οὐ κατὰ κόσμον  
ἔρχεται, ἀλλ' ἀδίκους ἔργμασι πειθόμενος  
οὐκ ἐθέλων ἔπεται, ταχέως δ' ἀναμίσγεται ἄτηι.

Wealth ...

that men honor through arrogance does not come  
in an orderly manner, but when obeying unjust deeds  
it follows unwillingly and is quickly mixed with ruin.<sup>7</sup>

So, though Solon agrees with the view that success may lead to misery, he specifies that it does so not automatically but rather via surfeit and its attendant arrogant pride.<sup>8</sup>

This becomes a traditional theme, as is shown by Aeschylus' contemporary Pindar, who observes in *Pythian* 2 that the great sinner Ixion was not able to abide great success, but in his arrogance made an attempt on Hera. This act of *hybris*, of course, brought disaster (25–29):

εὐμένεσσι γὰρ παρὰ Κρονίδαις  
γλυκὺν ἐλὼν βίον, μακρὸν οὐχ ὑπέμεινεν ὄλ-  
βον, μαινομέναις φρασίν  
Ἦρας ὅτ' ἐράσσατο, τὰν Διὸς εὖναι λάχον  
πολυγαθές· ἀλλὰ νιν ὕβρις εἰς αὐάταν ὑπεράφανον  
ᾤρσεν·

This rightly recognizes the role of dishonor in *hybris*, but it strikes me as putting rather more emphasis on this concept than called for and underplays the attitude that lies behind it. Fisher does broaden the definition, however, in the remainder of the sentence left incomplete above: "... it may, though, on occasion, especially in more reflective or philosophical texts, denote the drive or the desire, in a specific individual, or in humans generally, to engage in such behaviour directed against others." For reasons I shall explain later, I believe that Aeschylus (in this "more reflective text") puts the emphasis on the attitude. Cairns (52) offers some corrective to Fisher in noting that *hybris* can accommodate self-assertion even in the absence of a victim. Philippiades fr. 27 (Kassel-Austin) provides a reference to the necessary element of violence: "Anyone who uses violence against a weak person is guilty of *hybris*, not *hamartia*" (ὕβριζιν, οὐχ ἁμαρτάνειν δοκεῖ; cited by Kopff on the Classics list: <http://omega.cohums.ohio-state.edu:8080/hyper-lists/classics-l/99-02-01/0269.html>).

<sup>7</sup> Or, "and ruin is quickly mixed in." The grammatical case of the final word of the Greek is uncertain, but whether nominative or dative *atê* must appear *after* arrogance. On *atê* as "ruin" here see n. 10 below.

<sup>8</sup> See also Theognis 605–6, 693–94, and 1173–76 (West) for similar ideas.

For, although from the benevolent offspring of Kronos  
 he received a sweet life, he did not patiently abide  
 his success long, when with mind deranged  
 he desired Hera, whom the delightful bed of Zeus had received;  
 but (this) arrogance cast him into conspicuous ruin.<sup>9</sup>

Pindar thus explains the progression from *olbos* to *atê* by observing that Ixion acted not only from arrogance (*hybris*), but with a deranged mind (μαινόμεναις φρασίν, “crazed wits”). In Solon, too, the negative progression is restricted to “men whose mind is not sound.”

Similar views are expressed by Theognis (230–31 West):

χρήματά τοι θνητοῖς γίνεται ἀφροσύνη,  
 ἄτη δ’ ἐξ αὐτῆς ἀναφαίνεται.

Possessions, you see, become folly for mortals  
 and from it appears ruin.

Thus the view of the poets held that it is folly that brings ruin, not simple success. There is, to be sure, a potential redundancy in saying that folly leads to *atê*, since *atê* in Homer usually means “folly” or “infatuation.” But in these genealogies it is most often restricted to the later sense of “ruin,” whereas folly is made explicit by the use of another term, such as *ἄνοια* (*anoia*).<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> The text is Bowra’s. Wyatt (266) would translate *atê* as “remorse” or even “surfeit,” but this sense seems rather forced and inappropriate to the context here. Remorse may have attended his situation, but surely Pindar has in mind the punishment that Ixion received.

<sup>10</sup> Doyle disagrees, and would translate *atê* “folly” in most cases before Sophocles. For example, he argues for this subjective sense of the term in the case of Solon 13.9–13 (quoted above; see 1984: 37). But the *hybris* and unjust deeds (ἄδικα ἔργματα) mentioned in that passage of Solon are *results* of folly, not causes, whereas *atê* comes later. The logic is this: men pursue wealth (or success), but when *hybris* and injustice are the means to it, it comes reluctantly and is soon mixed with *atê*. There is a clear sequence here: arrogance and injustice, then wealth, then *atê*. Earlier in the poem (13.7–8 West) Solon had said, “I yearn to have wealth, but I don’t want to gain it unjustly, for justice (i.e., punishment) will surely follow.” He continues after our passage by saying that *atê* starts small, like a fire, then grows slowly (like a plant sending forth flowers—4.35 West), and then blossoms forth. In poem 13 *atê* is clearly a punishment (25 τίσις) that comes after violence (11 ὕβρις) and injustice (12 ἄδικα ἔργματα). Ruin is more appropriate to this context than folly, and the same is generally true elsewhere in the genealogies. Padel (163) agrees that “tragedy increasingly uses the word *atê* more of the ‘disaster,’ rather than of the mental blindness that causes it.” She preserves the ambiguity, however, when she says (118), “In tragedy, madness incarnates the double bind of someone ‘struck’ for doing something that a similar ‘blow’ goaded them to do.”

### III. AESCHYLUS' INNOVATION

The Chorus in the *Agamemnon*, however, identifies impiety as a significant cause of grief, and this is where the uniqueness of its view lies.<sup>11</sup> *Dussebia*—the failure in one's actions to respect the gods, their position, and their power—is what draws the ire of the gods down upon mankind, not just petty envy. Mortals are subordinate to the gods (and to Zeus in particular), and when they do not recognize their position they are prone to thinking of themselves as superior to others, thereby usurping the position of the gods.<sup>12</sup> Then they become arrogant toward others and substitute their own self-seeking sense of justice for the just and benevolent will of Zeus. This is the most important role of piety in this context, in establishing the proper relationship between humans and gods and among humans. Lack of piety is occasioned by and thus a sign of folly.<sup>13</sup>

The lines that follow continue the ethical genealogy (A. 763–71):

φιλεῖ δὲ τίκτειν ὕβρις  
 μὲν παλαιὰ νεά-  
 ζουσιν ἐν κακοῖς βροτῶν  
 ὕβριν, τότε ἢ τόθ', ὅτε τὸ κύ-  
 ριον μόλῃ φάος τόκου,  
 δαίμονά τε τὸν ἄμαχον ἀπόλε-  
 μον, ἀνίερρον θράσος μελαί-  
 νας μελάθροισιν ἄτας,  
 εἰδόμενον τοκεῦσιν.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Denniston and Page (136) also miss the point and see no difference from Solon. Conacher (29) rightly sees that the novelty lies in the emphasis on the impious deed.

<sup>12</sup> Euben (77) writes, "... injustice in the broadest sense is pushing one's claims too far, seeking mastery and domination instead of recognizing the legitimacy of what is other." Cf. Mikalson (151) on the *Bacchae*: "Pentheus' lack of good judgment and wisdom become impiety only when, because of it, he misunderstands his relationship to a god. He fails to understand who he is, who the god is, and therefore his proper behavior towards the god." See also Dodds 1960b: 506.

<sup>13</sup> Theognis, too, sees impiety as another effect of folly: 1135–50, 1179–80 West.

<sup>14</sup> The whole passage, like many in Aeschylus, is fraught with textual difficulties. Nevertheless, commentators, while providing various versions of the text, seem to agree with the general sense given by the marginal note found in Triclinius' manuscript (Neapolitanus II.F.31, folio 136 verso; the text is from O. L. Smith 161): "τίκτει, φησὶν, ἡ παλαιὰ ὕβρις νεὰν ὕβριν καὶ κότον καὶ τὸν ἄμαχον δαίμονα, ὅ ἐστι τὸ ἀνίερρον καὶ ἀσεβὲς θράσος ἐν τοῖς οἴκοις τῆς ἄτης. τοῦτο δὲ λέγει ὅτι ὁ ὕβριστῆς καὶ θρασὺς ἄταις ἐμπίπτει." (The ancient pride, says (sc. the Chorus), gives birth to young pride and anger and the spirit that cannot be fought, which is the unholy and impious daring in the houses of destruction. And this means that the insolent and rash person falls into destruction.)

But old arrogance loves to give birth  
 to arrogance which grows anew  
 in the evils of mortals,  
 at one time or another, when the appointed light of birth comes,  
 and to its kindred spirit, which cannot be fought  
 or battled: unholy rashness,  
 in the halls of dark ruin,  
 a thing made like its parents.

The new sequence is: arrogance (*hybris*) bears arrogance,<sup>15</sup> then rash behavior (*thrasos*), which, being born in the halls of destruction (*atê*), has a beginning that portends an ominous end. *Hybris* normally includes not just arrogance but also daring and violent acts prompted by arrogance. Aeschylus, however, here uses two different terms: *thrasos* for the action and *hybris* for the mental state or attitude that prompts it.<sup>16</sup> Thus he separates the mental state from the resulting impulse to action, as with *atê*, which he more often uses for the result of folly, namely ruin, denoting folly itself by *anoia* (*Prom.* 1079, *Sept.* 402), each seen in its passage as leading to destruction.<sup>17</sup> In a similar way, then, he restricts *hybris* to a person's attitude of being more important

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This scholion is traditional and not simply Triclinius' own paraphrase, as is shown by the fact that it appears in the format reserved in the manuscript for the *scholia palaia*, although how "ancient" it is we cannot accurately determine. "Anger" (*kotos*) of the manuscripts at A. 767, though not altogether inappropriate, is found nowhere else in this context. It does not stand without suspicion in the text, and while the scholiast includes it in the first part of his paraphrase, he omits it from his summary in the second sentence. Most modern editors reject it, or see in the word a corruption of the root *tek-/tok-* (Murray, Wilamowitz, Page, but not Fraenkel), which would continue the image of birth. Lattimore follows the majority view. Elsewhere *kotos* plays no role in such genealogies, nor does it seem particularly appropriate to the context here, and I agree with its emendation from κότον to τόκου. I have, however, deviated from Page's text by accepting Pauw's emendation of the MSS εἰδομένων to εἰδόμενον (modifying θράσος), rather than Casaubon's -ας, which Page accepts. For the emendation see Wellauer ad loc.

<sup>15</sup> Here the genealogy begins recursively as it did just before at A. 758–59, where the impious act gave birth to more impious acts; like produces like and impiety is compounded. So too with *hybris*. Note that this genealogy relates to the ethical ideas and resulting actions more than to the humans actors characterized by them.

<sup>16</sup> See n. 6 above.

<sup>17</sup> Herington 75: "It (sc. ἄτη) signifies, according to its context, both the psychological state of 'infatuation,' the loss of judgment that leads one to forget the limits imposed by the condition of being human; and the objective outcome of that loss of judgment, namely 'disaster.'" See also Wyatt on the double meaning of ἄτη.



than others (though *thrasos*, too, can refer either to a mental state or to an action; these ambiguities show how closely in all three concepts the mental state and the resulting actions lie in the Greek mind).

Still, at first glance, this sequence seems to be at variance with the earlier lines (A. 758–60) in which *impiety* is seen as the cause of misery. In 763 *hybris* is the parent. But each passage simply gives an abbreviated version of the family line, with the earlier set including only the second and last members (*impiety* and misery) and leaving out the intermediate generations. The relationship between impiety and arrogance is clearly established by the Chorus of the *Eumenides* (534–37):<sup>18</sup>

δυσσεβίας μὲν ὕβρις τέκος ὡς ἐτύμως,  
ἐκ δ' ὑγείας  
φρενῶν ὁ πᾶσιν φίλος  
καὶ πολύευκτος ὄλβος.

How truly is arrogance the child of impiety,  
but from health of mind (*sc. comes*)  
that which is dear to all  
and much desired: prosperity.

When human beings are impious through ignoring the position of the gods and their own subordination to them, they come to feel that they are more important than their position warrants and hence act with excessive pride and arrogance. The resulting attitude of superiority over others leads them to believe that they are entitled to harm the others. Thus impiety is the crucial attitude that leads to *hybris* and the intermediary between folly and arrogance. So Aeschylus identifies the immediate source of *hybris* and inserts it as an additional generation in the family tree. Impiety, then, is a cause of misery, as A. 758–60 implied, but only indirectly, inasmuch as it produces the *hybris* that eventuates in the destructive punishment of violence.

By contrast, ὑγεία φρενῶν leads to prosperity. Although the phrase appears only this once in Aeschylus, its converse, νόσος φρενῶν, occurs at *Persians* 750, in the significant and well-known passage in which the ghost of Darius appears and laments the awful fate of the Persian forces in Greece,

<sup>18</sup> Not all passages in tragedy, of course, express the views of the playwright himself, and we must avoid the error of seeing the Chorus as the spokesman for the poet; but we can assume with some confidence that where the sentiment is consonant with the general tenor of the drama, it may be taken as the author's affirmation of an important connection. Snell, too, observes that the Choruses of the *Eumenides* have special importance despite the Furies' specific role (144). See also Dodds 1960a: 23.

reprimands Xerxes for his behavior, and predicts the further loss to the Greeks at Plataea (681–842).<sup>19</sup> In attempting to understand and explain why it is that the Persian forces—despite their overwhelming numbers—were defeated by the Greeks, Darius points to Xerxes’ bridging of the Hellespont as the main cause of the downfall (743–50). This subjugation and restraint of the god of the sea is a major breach of piety and a clear sign of Xerxes’ failure to reverence the gods. In fact, Darius observes, he acted in ignorance (744 οὐ κατείδως) and without careful planning (749 οὐκ εὐβουλία); indeed (and here is where the phrase in question occurs) he was infected with a disease of his mind (750 νόσος φρενῶν). This is the ultimate cause of his disastrous behavior, and the consequent deeds at the Hellespont constitute a new rashness (744 νέωι θράσει). Previous kings of Persia were εὐφρων (772, cf. 767), whereas Xerxes “shows new folly” (782 νέ’ ἀφρονεῖ<sup>20</sup>). In addition to the offense against Poseidon, these grave personal defects led to the subsequent wanton destruction of the temples on the Acropolis (809–12).

This ethical perspective embraces that of both Solon and Pindar, who underscored the role of folly in bringing disaster, but adds the emphasis on impiety as its immediate product. Hence folly, impiety, and *hybris* are all closely linked in the *Persians*, as later in the *Oresteia*; folly is the source of the other two, which in turn ultimately lead to rash behavior, only to be punished by destruction in the end.<sup>21</sup>

The complete genealogy,<sup>22</sup> then, suggests that *anoia*<sup>23</sup> produces *dussebia*, which gives birth to *hybris*, the parent of *thrasos*, and that *atê* ultimately follows. The family tree appears in Figure 1.

<sup>19</sup> This speech of Darius plays an important thematic role in the play. As a ghost he has no reason to lie, and it is reasonable to think that he speaks for more than himself here. Broadhead (xxix) correctly asserts that in Darius’ utterances we have “the concentrated essence of the poet’s philosophy.”

<sup>20</sup> Or, if we read νέα φρονεῖ, “thinks new (and therefore inferior and probably dangerous) thoughts.”

<sup>21</sup> Citing Sophocles’ Creon and Pentheus, Mikalson (179) observes, “An impiety was the product of ‘wrong thinking,’ as piety was the result of ‘right’ or ‘safe’ thinking.”

<sup>22</sup> For the sake of vividness I extend the metaphor of birth without meaning to imply that the full causal system is expressed in genealogical form by Aeschylus.

<sup>23</sup> This is a term that Aeschylus uses in *Seven* 402, where it may be taken to sum up μὴ φρονεῖν καλῶς (or νε’ ἀφρονεῖν), etc.; i.e., νόσος φρενῶν. Theognis also uses *anoia* (453 West) but more often *aphrosunê* (230, 590).

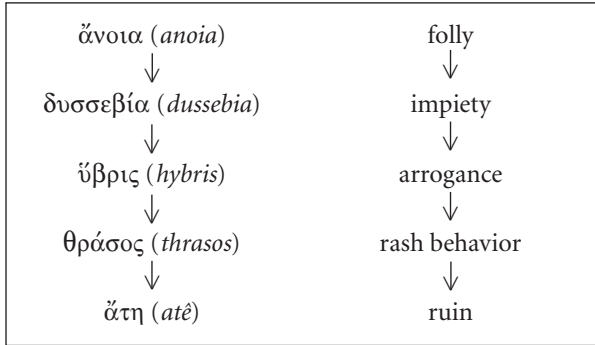


Figure 1.

We can once more refer to Darius' ghost, who points out that the worst of evils (807 κακῶν ὑψιστ(α)) is the punishment (ἄποινα) for pride and godless thinking (808); those who perpetrate evil must suffer no less evil (813–14 κακῶς δράσαντες οὐκ ἐλάσσονα / πάσχουσι). He continues (*Pers.* 820–31), the defeat at Plataea will show

ὥς οὐχ ὑπέρφεν θνητὸν ὄντα χρὴ φρονεῖν·  
 ὑβρις γὰρ ἐξανθοῦς' ἐκάρπωσε στάχυν  
 ἄτης, ὅθεν πάγκλαυτον ἐξαμαῖ θέρος.  
 τοιαῦθ' ὀρώντες τῶνδε τάπιτίμια  
 μέμνησθ' Ἀθηνῶν Ἑλλάδος τε, μηδέ τις  
 ὑπερφρονήσας τὸν παρόντα δαίμονα  
 ἄλλων ἐρασθεῖς ὄλβον ἐκχέη μέγαν.  
 Ζεὺς τοι κολαστὴς τῶν ὑπερκόμπων ἄγαν  
 φρονημάτων ἔπεστιν, εὐθυνοῖς βαρὺς.  
 πρὸς ταῦτ' ἐκείνον σωφρονεῖν κεχρημένον<sup>24</sup>  
 πινύσκειτ' εὐλόγοισι νουθετήμασιν  
 λῆξαι θεοβλαβοῦνθ' ὑπερκόμπῳ θράσει.

that being mortal one must learn not to be overly proud;  
 for arrogance having blossomed forth produces the kernel  
 of ruin, from which it reaps a harvest lamented by all.  
 When you see that such is the recompense of these actions,  
 remember Athens and Hellas, and let no one  
 scorn his present fortune, because he has  
 come to love other things, and pour out great wealth (*sc.* for them).

<sup>24</sup> Adopting the accusative singular of the marginal variant favored by Broadhead in place of the masculine nominative plural of the manuscripts (printed between daggers by Page).

Zeus, you see, stands above us as a punisher  
 of too-boastful thoughts, a severe chastiser.  
 In response to this, since he needs to be prudent,  
 instruct that man (*sc.* Xerxes) with reasonable admonition  
 to stop sinning against the gods with his over-boastful daring.

Aeschylus in his characteristic way shifts metaphors, using first an agricultural image<sup>25</sup> and then a juridical one, but the succession of ideas is exactly what we have posited from the genealogical passages. To avoid the ruin that is the logical and necessary descendant of godless thoughts and arrogance, human beings must be instructed with sound reason (εὐλόγοισι νοουθετήμασιν), become prudent (σωφρονεῖν), and cease from prideful rash behavior that affronts the gods (λῆξαι θεοβλαβὸν θ' ὑπερκόμπῳ θράσει). Otherwise punishment will follow.<sup>26</sup> Darius had followed such a rule, and so Aeschylus uses his wealth and success to provide a pointed contrast to his son's unhappy experience. Darius' advice must be taken seriously.

Thus the *Persians* clearly anticipates the set of causal relationships expressed in the *Oresteia*. In using the genealogical metaphor, Aeschylus suggests that there is an almost biological relationship between folly and impiety on the one hand, and the sort of arrogance and rash behavior that is punished by disaster on the other. In short, Aeschylus has taken over the traditional genealogy of *hybris-atē* with Solon's addition of folly, and augmented it by inserting impiety, separating the arrogance of *hybris* into the arrogant attitude and the rash acts that follow from it, and (like Solon) restricting *atē* to the sense of ruin. It is in keeping with Aeschylus' connection of justice with Zeus and his attendant amplification of the divine that his primary contribution to the genealogy lies in the addition of *dussebia*, which is seen as an essential link between folly and arrogance.

#### IV. THE POSITIVE GENEALOGY

We might not unreasonably expect Aeschylus to provide us with a genealogy of the positive ethical concepts to parallel this negative one, but he does not. Individual virtues are rarely personified in Greek thought, possibly because they are so closely associated with what is viewed as essential in humanity

<sup>25</sup> Michelini (96) notes that in agriculture ὑβρίζω indicates the burgeoning of plants that must be treated by pruning to avoid a bad harvest.

<sup>26</sup> An anonymous referee for *TAPA* calls attention to the fact that the only other place where εὐθυνοζ occurs in Aeschylus is at *Eu.* 273, where it refers to Hades as punisher of ἀσέβεια, and that Theognis 39–40 West envisions the city giving birth to a man who will be a punisher of evil arrogance (εὐθυντήρα κακῆς ὕβριος).

(see Abel 99).<sup>27</sup> Greek tragedy tends to focus on the dark side of human nature rather than on the light, and the human proclivities that are more conspicuous in Aeschylus' plays, indeed in most of Greek tragedy, are the negative ones: those that destroy rather than those that lead to success, those that are therefore condemned rather than those that are commended.<sup>28</sup> Yet we can infer from the negative sequence in Aeschylus that prosperity, the opposite of ruin, requires the reverse of folly, impiety, arrogance, and rash action, however they may be conceived.

The *Eumenides* passage that affirms that *dussebia* is the mother of *hybris* (534–37, see above, section III) also claims that prosperity comes from “health of wits.” By providing us with the *men ... de* contrast,<sup>29</sup> the Furies suggest that these are opposing progressions in the ethical life of human beings, but not necessarily that the elements given are the corresponding members of the progression. Impiety leads to arrogance, yes, and right thinking to prosperity, but that is not necessarily to contrast impiety and right thinking directly any more than it is to set arrogance over against prosperity. What is important here is the general trend, and the poet has merely selected the elements of the opposing genealogies that he wants to emphasize; as noted, he gives us *complementary* members, not the corresponding ones. The logical pairs are these: wrong thinking/right thinking, impiety/piety, arrogance/prudence,<sup>30</sup> rash behavior/justness<sup>31</sup> and prosperity/destruction. The Furies have adumbrated the fuller family tree by giving us selected elements of each main branch.

These positive qualities are characteristically Greek and by Aeschylus' time fairly conventional. In the *Seven against Thebes* Aeschylus has conveniently compressed the most important positive ethical ideals into a single line, when Eteocles describes the seer Amphiaraus as “a prudent, just, noble, pious man”

<sup>27</sup> It is as if the virtues are qualities that humans seek and view as being under their control, whereas the vices are entities external to them that seem to overpower them against their will.

<sup>28</sup> As Vickers (224) finds, in Greek myth “ethical values are more demonstrated in the breach than in the observance.”

<sup>29</sup> Note the similar ὑβρις μὲν . . . Δίκᾳ δὲ in A. 764–73.

<sup>30</sup> Also in Theognis 379 West. On this important pair of contrasting values see North 33 and *passim*.

<sup>31</sup> This may seem an odd pair, but here I am only being descriptive; δίκαιος is in fact the term that Aeschylus uses where we might expect the opposite of θράσος (discretion?). Θράσος is, as we have remarked, not just “rashness” but also the associated rash actions. When action proceeds from arrogance, the result is indiscretion and the abrogation of proper relationships, hence injustice.

(610 σῶφρων δίκαιος ἀγαθὸς εὐσεβὴς ἀνὴρ). Aeschylus here lists all of the important qualities—all, that is, except one. It is crucial to the plot of the play that, because of the characteristics included in this line, Amphiaraus is singularly ill-suited to participate in the attack on Thebes with the other six, whose chief characteristics are just the opposite of these except in one regard, and that is the quality that is omitted from the list: good sense. Indeed the poet goes on to say that Amphiaraus participates in the attack βίῳ φρενῶν, “in violence of his wits” (or “against his better judgment,” 612). In all other ways, however, he serves as a contrast in character to his allies. The primary symbol of this contrast is his shield, which, unlike the shields of his allies, carries no arrogant device symbolic of *hybris*—indeed it carries no device at all, for, as the Theban Spy (592) points out, “he wants not to seem, but to be best.” Nevertheless, because of his temporary folly he shares destruction with his comrades in spite of his former piety.

It is the opposites of these primary virtues, then, that (not surprisingly) the poet finds most reprehensible. These—impiety, arrogance, and rash action, plus foolishness—may also be seen in the *Seven*, where the opposing forces are intentionally portrayed as having antithetical ethical qualities. The attacking forces are (with the exception of Amphiaraus, as we have noted) all characterized by a kind of *hybris*: boastful arrogance coupled with a disregard for and even defiance of the gods, which is destined to be punished with annihilation. Representative is not Amphiaraus, but Parthenopaios, who reveres his spear more than Zeus (529); or Kapaneus, who boasts that he will take the city whether Zeus wants him to or not, an impious boast that involves, as the Spy says, thought not appropriate to a human being (425). The foolishness and impiety of their speech go beyond the bounds of propriety and underscore the injustice of their attack on Thebes, which will be their downfall.

So when the playwright describes Amphiaraus, we have in pithy expression what is later to become a virtual canon of cardinal Greek virtues, and one of the first appearances of the canon.<sup>32</sup> Its importance for us is that it gives a preliminary indication of the qualities that Aeschylus finds most praiseworthy among human beings.

Several other passages help establish the relationships between the virtues. The lines in the *Persians* on the punishment of impiety (820–31, quoted above) end in a suggestion that the genealogy of vice and punishment is balanced by similar notions of virtue and reward. The connection of the first three members is implicit in the passage quoted earlier, where instruction by sound rea-

<sup>32</sup> As North points out (41). Socrates included bravery along with wisdom, piety, temperance, and justice (see, for example, Benson 9).

son is needed to make a person stop affronting the gods, become modest, and desist from proud rashness (*Pers.* 829–31; cf. *Supp.* 418). And just as punishment follows upon vice, so reward follows upon virtue; the same *Eumenides* passage that maintains that pride is the child of impiety (534, quoted above) also offers, as we have seen, a contrast by affirming that prosperity comes from soundness of mind. The phrase “health of mind” is, as we have noted, the precise opposite of the “disease of mind” decried by Darius (*Pers.* 750). Here we have the first and last members of the family tree (*phronêsis* and *olbos*), with the connection again abbreviated. Later, after the *Eumenides* passage just cited, we find the immediate antecedent of prosperity to be justness; the person who does right (*Eu.* 550 δίκαιος ὢν), free-willed, without constraint, will not be unprosperous (551 οὐκ ἄνολβος ἔσται), whereas failure to honor the altar of justice and seeking gain with a force contrary to the gods will be punished (538–42). This honoring of justice is exemplified in showing respect (*sebas*) to one’s parents and to the stranger (545–49). Likewise, we have seen that in the *kallipais* passage of the *Agamemnon*, just before the Chorus listed the descendants of *hybris*, they maintained that “the fate of just houses is always a beautiful child” (*A.* 761–62). Human wealth alone does not lead to misery, they claim, but impiety fostering rash acts does. A house that acts justly—even a prosperous one—has a good fate. So also Justice honors the righteous life, shuns ill-gotten wealth, and approaches things that are holy (*A.* 775–80, with 778 ὄσια).

Thus a number of passages in Aeschylus confirm the positive genealogical scheme that may be inferred from the previously identified negative one (see Fig. 2).

Negative	Positive
ἄνοια ( <i>anoia</i> = folly)	φρόνησις ( <i>phronêsis</i> = good sense)
↓	↓
δυσσεβία ( <i>dussebia</i> = impiety)	εὐσέβεια ( <i>eusebeia</i> = piety)
↓	↓
ὑβρις ( <i>hybris</i> = arrogance)	σωφροσύνη ( <i>sôphrosunê</i> = prudence)
↓	↓
θράσος ( <i>thrasos</i> = rash behavior)	δικαιοσύνη ( <i>dikaiousunê</i> = justness)
↓	↓
ἄτη ( <i>atê</i> = ruin)	ὄλβος ( <i>olbos</i> = prosperity)

Figure 2.

Intellectual qualities govern one's attitude toward the gods, which determine attitudes towards others and actions that produce in turn success or ruin.

These then are the parallel genealogies suggested by Aeschylus. They are built out of evidence from a collection of disparate passages, but form a solid conceptual whole. They become clear only progressively as the plays unfold.<sup>33</sup> That they represent the Aeschylean perspective is borne out by the plays as a whole, where the progression is exemplified. The relationships implied by the genealogies clarify the underlying assumptions of the *Persians* and, as I shall proceed to show, contribute significantly to our understanding of the *Oresteia*, with its special concern for crime and punishment.

## V. THE ORESTEIA

In the *Oresteia* ethical relationships are explored through a series of violent acts that bring this causal chain sharply into focus. The trilogy depicts the violent actions of Paris, Agamemnon, Clytemnestra, and Orestes. When their actions do not arise from the fundamental virtues, beginning with *phronêsis* and *eusebeia*, they lead to negative results and are punished; when they do adhere to the virtues, the characters are absolved of guilt. It is within this context that we see the working out of Aeschylus' sequence of ethical concepts and their effects on the life of the agents.

### A. Paris

The case against Paris, perhaps the simplest and clearest, is laid out in the first stasimon of the *Agamemnon* (355–402), where the Chorus celebrates, somewhat hesitantly, Clytemnestra's assertion that Troy has fallen. They view this event as a punishment of Paris for carrying off Helen, saying (A. 369–84),

οὐκ ἔφατις  
θεοὺς βροτῶν ἀξιοῦσθαι μέλειν  
ᾧσοις ἀθίκτων χάρις  
πατοῖθ'· ὁ δ' οὐκ εὐσεβής·  
πέφανται δ' ἐγγόνοις  
†ἀτολμήτων ἄρη†  
πνεόντων μείζον ἢ δικαίως,  
φλεόντων δωμάτων ὑπέρφευ,  
ὑπὲρ τὸ βέλτιστον· ἔστω δ' ἀπή-

<sup>33</sup> Lebeck has argued persuasively that in the *Oresteia* verbal images and symbols move from enigma to clarity over the course of the trilogy. As she says (131), "Initial obscurity is gradually dispelled as later passages cast light on earlier." Just so, the genealogy of ethical ideals is built up gradually and becomes complete only in the *Eumenides*.



μαντον, ὥστ' ἀπαρκεῖν  
 εὖ πραπίδων λαχόντι.  
 οὐ γὰρ ἔστιν ἔπαλξις  
 πλούτου πρὸς Κόρον ἀνδρὶ  
 λακτίσαντι μέγαν Δίκας  
 βωμὸν εἰς ἀφάνειαν.

Someone denied that  
 the gods consider it worthwhile to be concerned for mortals  
 by whom the grace of things that ought not be touched  
 is trampled; but he was not pious.  
 The curse for things that ought not be dared  
 has been revealed to the descendants  
 of those who breathe more than justly [i.e., live beyond what is just],  
 of houses that teem with too much abundance,  
 beyond what is best; let it [i.e., abundance/wealth] be  
 without pain, so as to be sufficient  
 for one who has been allotted good sense.  
 For there is no defense  
 in wealth against greed for a man  
 who has kicked the great altar  
 of Justice into obscurity.

The indefinite τις in 369 must refer to or at least include Paris, who is mentioned just before (363) and after (399), as the object of Zeus' punishment. The description fits him well. He did not have enough good sense to be content with the abundance of what he had and has demonstrated his impiety by denying, if only implicitly, that the gods care for how mortals act or that they punish behavior that oversteps the bounds of propriety. Such a foolish view is responsible for Paris' impious failure to respect the laws of hospitality guaranteed by Zeus Xenios (362; 400–402). His arrogance leads to the rash impropriety of carrying off Helen (375 ἀτολμήτων “things that ought not be dared”), an unjust act (376 μείζον ἢ δικαίως), and he himself can be described as unjust (398 ἄδικον), having “kicked the great altar of Justice into obscurity” (383–84). Thus lack of sense, impiety, arrogance, rashness, and injustice lead to destruction, which ultimately strikes not only him but, as in the case of Xerxes, his whole people.

Some, like Denniston and Page (xxix and 103), deny Paris' responsibility on the grounds that he was compelled by Persuasion (385 Πειθῶ) to do what he did. As has often been observed, this view ignores the multiple levels of motivation present in the *Oresteia*; the events of the plays may be seen as resulting independently from (1) the curse on the house, (2) the actions of the

gods, especially Zeus, and (3) ordinary human motivations. All of these are at work at once through what Dodds (1951: 7 and note 32) has called “overdetermination.” Note the view of the connection that Aeschylus ascribes to Darius: “Whenever a person is himself eager, the god also joins in” (*Pers.* 742). Especially when viewed as a psychological force, Peitho does not remove human responsibility any more than, say, Aphrodite’s intervention would (cf. Dodds 1951: 27). In the *Eumenides* (esp. 970) Athena uses Peitho to persuade the Furies to change their role, but this in no way deprives the Furies of their choice. Since Peitho particularly appeals to the mind, evil persuasion may, as with Paris, contribute to *anoia*. Persuasion is often contrasted with compulsion, and here the relative freedom under persuasion becomes evident. Finley (284) speaks of “the moral cogency of reason.” Thus Peitho or no Peitho, Paris is responsible for his own actions, and hence may be described by the Chorus as *adikos*.

The Herald, too, says of Paris (A. 534–37):

ὀφλὼν γὰρ ἄρπαγῆς τε καὶ κλοπῆς δίκην  
τοῦ ῥυσίου θ’ ἤμαρτε καὶ πανώλεθρον  
αὐτόχθονον πατρῶιον ἔθρισεν δόμον.  
διπλᾶ δ’ ἔτεισαν Πριαμίδαί θ’ ἀμάρτια.

For owing the penalty for rape and theft  
he both lost his plunder and destroyed  
his father’s house completely, earth and all.  
The sons of Priam paid double for their sins.

Paris’ sins are clearly delineated—rape and theft—and he and his family have paid twice the penalty for them.

The second stasimon of the *Agamemnon*, though focusing more on Helen, reemphasizes Paris’ responsibility by stressing his dishonoring of the table of hospitality and of Zeus, the guardian of the hearth (A. 701–3). It is for this reason that the lion cub becomes a priest of destruction (735–36 ἱερεὺς τις Ἄτας), and an avenger (Ἐρινύς) appears for Zeus in his role as god of hospitality (748–49). It is reflection on this that leads the Chorus to assert that the origin of ruin lies in impiety, arrogance, and rash behavior (750–71, the passage with which we began), and then to conclude with praise of Justice (772–80 Δίκη).

### B. *Agamemnon*

The instrument of Zeus’ punishment of Paris and his city of Troy was the Greek army under the Atreidae (A. 60–62; cf. 131–34 and 355–66), with the

elder son of Atreus in charge. Agamemnon thereby becomes the agent of Zeus, and on the divine level his actions may be justified. But in the process of carrying out Zeus' will, Agamemnon himself becomes guilty because of an arrogance and daring that is expressed in several ways. The first lies in putting his own personal reputation above the life of his daughter, Iphigeneia, and in sacrificing her in order to enable the fleet to set sail and himself to carry out an expedition of personal aggrandizement. This point needs to be explored in some detail, given the history of controversy that surrounds it.<sup>34</sup>

It is too often argued<sup>35</sup> that Agamemnon really has no choice, that he must appease Artemis, since she has been offended, and that it is she, a divinity, who demands the sacrifice of Agamemnon's daughter. Furthermore, if Agamemnon is to be the agent of Zeus, he must get the ships moving, and this too requires the appeasement of the goddess. But Artemis had to be appeased in the *Agamemnon* not for something that Agamemnon had done (as in an earlier tradition), but rather for what he was about to do.<sup>36</sup> This is symbolized by the image of the two eagles seizing and devouring the pregnant hare (A. 108–20). The Chorus reports that the seer expressly interpreted this as a sign that Troy would ultimately be destroyed (122–30), and further that this was the very reason that Artemis was angry (134–38). It must, then, have been the Trojan expedition itself together with the impending fall of Troy that infuriated Artemis; she did not feel that the death and suffering of innocents that was bound to be involved in the war was justified (cf. Conacher's Appendix, 76–83). The Chorus of the *Agamemnon* hints at this later, calling the Atreidae "killers of many" (461 πολυκτόνων). As Parry (88–89) says, "The Chorus, while staunchly loyal to him, lyrically define Agamemnon's intolerable dilemma in such a way that our sympathy for his position of being damned if he does and damned if he doesn't is overlaid with our horrified rejection of child-murder as a solution to any human problem."

<sup>34</sup> For defense of the position taken in what follows, see (among others) Finley 252 and 258, Kitto 3, Peradotto 249–58, and in large part P. Smith n. 101. Lloyd-Jones concurs that Agamemnon is guilty, but argues that the guilt ultimately derives from the curse on the house of Atreus. Lebeck (40) affirms Agamemnon's ability to make the ultimate choice, and Conacher (77) stays with this growing consensus. Otis devotes a chapter to "The Guilt of Agamemnon" (3–11, esp. 7–9, though he disagrees with Finley and Kitto on why Agamemnon is guilty, referring it instead to the change of a basically noble character that results from his decision to sacrifice Iphigeneia).

<sup>35</sup> For example, Fraenkel (2: 441), Denniston and Page (88), Webster (152). Lesky (85) would have it both ways, referring to "the close union of necessity imposed by the gods and the personal decision to act." That is, having become aware of the necessity of killing Iphigeneia, Agamemnon then also desires it.

<sup>36</sup> Conacher (77) notes that Fraenkel attributes this view to Conington.

The main issue, after all, is largely the fate of one person, Helen, and, as Aeschylus has the Chorus say, the wife of another (448 ἄλλοτρίας), who has broken her marriage vows (62 πολυάνορος). Given the crime, the punishment by the Greeks is excessive (see P. Smith *passim*) and characterized by the Chorus as without justice (464 ἄνευ δίκας), and by the Herald as twice what was deserved (537 διπλᾶ ... θάμάρτια). Before Agamemnon gets involved in such mass destruction of innocents, Artemis wants him to be aware of the seriousness of what he is doing, and forces him to destroy the life of one dear to him as a sign before he even begins. She gives him one more chance to decide; if he will not return home, his only alternative is to choose the way of violence, and this *hybris* is symbolized by the sacrilege of sacrificing his own innocent daughter. Otis (20, 35) telescopes this to a choice between the “good” Iphigeneia and the “bad” Helen. Note that Artemis does not actually require him to make the sacrifice; it is (in this interpretation) a conditional prophecy: *if* he wants the ships to sail, he must sacrifice Iphigeneia. Hence the importance and genuineness of Agamemnon’s deliberation.

But, the critics argue, was Agamemnon not required to go whether he wanted to or not, inasmuch as he was the agent of Zeus? No. He is indeed the agent of Zeus, and the Chorus sees him as such, but he himself does not.<sup>37</sup> The reason he expresses for the decision to go ahead with the sacrifice is not duty to Zeus, but rather that he does not want to be a deserter (212 λιπόνανς). Note the significance of motivation here, so important in the third play of the trilogy. If Agamemnon’s motive had been to act as Zeus’s agent, the situation would have been quite different. Thoughtfulness and piety would have guarded him against arrogance. But as it is, he makes his choice largely for his own personal position and glory, and it is for this reason that Artemis forces him to realize from the start what a dreadful choice he is making.<sup>38</sup> That is why Aeschylus has the Chorus describe his decision in some of the worst value terms available: *dussebê*, *anagnon*, *anieron* (A. 218–21):

ἐπεὶ δ’ ἀνάγκας ἔδω λέπαδνον  
φρενὸς πνέων δυσσεβῆ τροπαίαν  
ἄναγνον ἀνίερων, τόθεν  
τὸ παντότολμον φρονεῖν μετέγνω·

But when he put on the yoke of necessity,  
breathing a change of his mind, impious,  
unhallowed, sacrilegious, from then on  
he resolved to consider trying anything.

<sup>37</sup> Kitto 5, Hammond 46 (especially good on personal freedom), Conacher 60 n. 2, 167.

<sup>38</sup> Peradotto describes this as Agamemnon’s ἡθος (256), and it comes pretty close to Fisher’s definition of *hybris* (above, n. 6).

Denniston and Page argue that “necessity” means that he has no choice, but the fact that he “put on” the yoke himself belies that. The active voice is critical here; he does it himself, it is his own decision. Furthermore, it is not simply a matter of Agamemnon being caught between two mutually contradictory commands, as some have argued. Granted he is in a position in which he can make no satisfactory choice, but it is his motivation at issue.<sup>39</sup>

This impious decision involves a change in Agamemnon so that he begins to set his mind on the extremes of rashness. It is insanity that makes mortals rash in this way (222–23 βροτοὺς θρασύνει ... παρακοπά) and is the first cause of ill. Note the progression: there is a change in his thinking (proleptically described as already impious), and this insanity leads to rash behavior. With the exception of *hybris*, the genealogy is all there. The Chorus, too, later characterizes this action as rash behavior (803 *thrasos*) that results from poor thinking (A. 799–804):

σὺ δέ μοι τότε μὲν στέλλων στρατιάν  
 Ἑλένης ἔνεκ', οὐκ ἐπικεύσω,  
 κάρτ' ἀπομούσως ἦσθα γεγραμμένως  
 οὐδ' εὖ πραπίδων οἶακα νέμων,  
 θράσος ἐκ θυσιῶν  
 ἀνδράσι θνήσκουσι κομίζων.

But then, when you were sending out the army  
 for the sake of Helen—I will not hide it,  
 you were drawn very discordantly  
 and were not well controlling the rudder of your mind,  
 bringing rashness from sacrifices  
 to men who were dying.

The “rashness from sacrifices” that results from failure to control his mind refers, of course, to the sacrifice of Iphigeneia, and it is this in particular that the Chorus finds “discordant.”<sup>40</sup>

<sup>39</sup> Nussbaum (250–51) argues in a similar vein that it is not so much the choice that Agamemnon makes that puts him in the wrong, but rather the manner of action—the fact that he embraced the deed and did not oppose it. She focuses on his emotions, although his motivation is more relevant to the play. She rightly emphasizes the importance of piety towards the gods, Agamemnon's failure in this regard, and the relevance of the Hymn to Zeus to all of this (257).

<sup>40</sup> Line 803 presents us with another textual crux, and there is considerable disagreement on its interpretation. The manuscripts read: θράσος ἐκούσιον, which is unmetrical; Triclinius emended to θάρσος. Some read θάρσος with him or take *thrasos* in its positive sense of the courage that Agamemnon supplies to the men in the army. But Fraenkel argues against such a usage on the grounds that κομίζω cannot mean “implant.” In any

The death of his daughter is not the only indicator of Agamemnon's shortcomings; so is the whole Trojan expedition. The Chorus' words have already revealed not only their own discomfort but also widespread dissatisfaction with the expedition and with Agamemnon himself, both in the army (429–55) and at home (456–58; cf. 800–804 above, with the final emphasis on the deaths of his men). The plunder of cities and the attendant destruction of innocent human life forebode punishment by the gods (459–74). Furthermore, Agamemnon destroyed the temples and altars of the gods at Troy (525–28) and shows no remorse when he returns to Argos.<sup>41</sup>

The notorious impiety of the famous tapestry scene only confirms and reinforces Agamemnon's guilt. Here we find in miniature the same negative sequence of ideals. Agamemnon is initially reluctant to walk on the tapestries, because one must honor the gods (922 θεοὺς ... τιμαλφεῖν), not take their prerogatives (925 λέγω κατ' ἄνδρα, μὴ θεόν, σέβειν ἐμέ), if one wants to enjoy success (928 ὀλβίσιαι). But Clytemnestra succeeds in warping his mind so that he actually does entertain the evil thoughts that he wanted to avoid (927 κακῶς φρονεῖν) and forgets the prerogatives of the gods. The arrogance of putting himself in the role of a god leads him to the symbolic rash act of trampling down beautiful things—symbolic of the destruction of Troy and its temples—that will be followed immediately by disaster.<sup>42</sup>

Clytemnestra, of course, is quick to point to Iphigeneia's death as she attempts to justify her own actions (1417, 1431–33, 1525–27), and she adds the personal affront to herself, that Agamemnon has brought Cassandra back with

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case this sense would make θνήσκουσι unintelligible. It must be the negative sense of “rashness” that the Chorus has in mind. But whose rashness? Some would retain the reading of the manuscripts and assign the rashness to Helen, who has just been mentioned; Agamemnon allows her willing rashness to cause the death of his men, and the Chorus has already implied (62) that such a cause is not worth it. In fact, however, the rashness of Agamemnon himself better fits the preceding two lines with their critical view of his actions. Then Ahrens' conjecture ἐκ θυσιῶν is perfectly in order, though it is a shame to lose the ἐκούσιον (unmetrical though it is), which would emphasize the deficiency of Agamemnon's motivation.

<sup>41</sup> As Lloyd-Jones notes (Segal 66). He summarizes (Segal 71), “Even his righteous revenge upon the Trojans involves Agamemnon in yet further guilt. In one sense, it is a triumph of divine justice; in another, an atrocious crime; the instrument of Zeus' punishment of Troy must himself be punished.” See also Foley 210: “Agamemnon's own description of the army's behavior at the city's fall (A. 821–28) ... taints him with impiety.”

<sup>42</sup> Or, as Parry (96) puts it, “Agamemnon steps onto the carpet of tyrants. Of course, this act in itself is not responsible for his doom. Rather it symbolizes that weakness in his character which the lyricism of the odes has already suggested to us ... .”

him, intending to install a slave in the house next to his lawful wife (1438–47). Agamemnon may indeed be the agent of Zeus, but as the result of his lack of sense and piety he also has become guilty of his own deeds of violence.<sup>43</sup> And so his destruction is swift once he returns home, as he is cut down by Clytemnestra, guided, she says, by the avenging fury of her daughter (1431–33) and of the house of Atreus (1501–2).

### C. Clytemnestra

Yet in a similar way Clytemnestra herself becomes both the agent of the gods in punishing her husband for his deeds and guilty of precisely the same arrogance and violence (see Foley 204–6). While she defends her murder of Agamemnon on the grounds that he had killed their daughter (1417, and 1525–29) and had been unfaithful to her (1438–43), nevertheless there are incriminating circumstances: she has been living with Aegisthus in her husband's absence, and her desire to have Agamemnon out of the way appears clearly to have had at least as much to do with her own infidelity (cf. Orestes' reference at *Ch.* 895) as with her desire for vengeance or her role as agent of the curse on the house (1501), which she brings forward largely as pretexts.<sup>44</sup> Winnington-Ingram (Segal 87) ascribes the murder to her jealousy of Agamemnon and his power and "status as a man."

The theme of Clytemnestra's impiety is most explicit in the *Choephoroi*, where Aeschylus pays it particular attention. The Chorus calls her "godless" (δύσθεος, *Ch.* 46 and 525; cf. her "godless thought," δύσθεον φρόνημα, against her children in 191). Since her murder of Agamemnon, reverence (σέβας) is gone in Argos (55). Making success one's god is a form of impiety that inevitably threatens disaster (59–62). She has made a mockery of the libations to Agamemnon, which are not sincere (43 points in this direction, while 189

<sup>43</sup> Garner (30) comments on the way the *Oresteia* is often charged with ambiguity: "the same people simultaneously have and do not have justice on their side," and Mikalson (161) notes that "on occasion the gods punish the impious through agents who are themselves impious or otherwise morally culpable."

<sup>44</sup> Hammond, too, argues (43–44): "Her motives are hatred of Agamemnon (1374f., 1391, 1407f.), lust for blood (1384f. and 1427f.), and adulterous love for the despicable wolf, Aegisthus (1224f., 1258f., 1435f., and 1625f.). These motives figure more prominently in the play than any grief for Iphigeneia; indeed Clytemnestra's picture of Iphigeneia greeting her father with a kiss in the underworld (1556f.) is inspired not by love for Iphigeneia but by hatred for Agamemnon. These motives are important precisely because Clytemnestra acted of her own choice; they and the thoughts she expresses determine the quality of her action, and Aeschylus leaves us in no doubt that her motives and so her acts were criminal." See also Conacher 167.

shows that she would never cut a ritual lock for her dead husband), come too late (515–16), and are insufficient (519). The offering is called by the Chorus “a favor given with an ill will” (43 χάριν ἀχάριτον), and Orestes characterizes it as wretched (517 δειλαία). Such a lack of sincerity and religious duty only matches her behavior at the funeral, which was performed without participation of the citizens, without grief, and without lamentation (430–33). She even mutilated the body before burial (439–44). Her children invoke her as “all-daring mother” (430 πάντολμε μήτηρ, echoing the παντότολμον of Agamemnon in *A.* 221), and her deeds are “unhallowed” (986 ἄναγνα). She has unlawfully transgressed the reverence owed to Zeus (644–45 τὸ πᾶν Διὸς σέβας παρεκβάντος οὐ θεμιστῶς).

Contrast with this the sincerity of her children in their devotion to Agamemnon. Orestes’ first act on return is to perform the rites of respect at his father’s tomb (*Ch.* 1–9). Electra still wears signs of mourning (16–17), and she attempts to turn the offerings of her mother to more genuine performance (84–95), or at least to defeat their original purpose (96–99). Orestes seeks the rituals that are the right of the dead (320–22, 483–84). The Chorus approves of their acts (510), and even they, foreign slaves though they are, genuinely lament and tear their cheeks for Agamemnon (21–31). Their ritual lament serves its purpose: to motivate Orestes and Electra to punish Clytemnestra.

Already in the *Agamemnon* the guilt of Clytemnestra is emphasized by the appearance of Aegisthus, who, though unwilling to carry out the murder himself, thereupon takes advantage of his position to play the tyrant, as he threatens the members of the Chorus when they express loyalty to their former king (*A.* 1617–24). They call particular attention to his *hybris* (1612) and adultery (1626). Clytemnestra, too, is obviously hypocritical in her criticism of Agamemnon’s bringing Cassandra home; after all, she has established a rival to him in his own home while he was absent, and this is rather different from bringing home a woman as booty from the war. Thus, just as Agamemnon’s punishment of Paris only served to create new crimes that in turn required punishment, so Clytemnestra’s punishment of Agamemnon demands an equal penalty, and we can only expect a continuation of the sequence of murders.

Anne Lebeck (74–79) notes that the verb πατέω—“trample with the foot,” unique to the *Oresteia*—is used metaphorically of all the major wrong-doers in these plays: Paris (*A.* 372), Thyestes (*A.* 1193), Clytemnestra and Aegisthus (*A.* 1357), as well as literally of Agamemnon in the tapestry scene (*A.* 957). Thus this verb serves to tie together their reprehensible actions, and urges us to view these actions in the same negative light. The echoes confirm that Agamemnon’s treading of the tapestries is symbolic of wrong-doing in general. Accordingly, Justice punishes wrong-doers with the same vivid verb (*Ch.* 642).



### D. Orestes

Now it would seem that when Orestes avenges his father by killing his mother the chronicle of punished crimes is only going to be carried one logical step farther, and that he too will meet his ruin as a penalty. But the circumstances here are quite different, for Orestes (unlike Clytemnestra or Agamemnon or Paris) is not motivated exclusively or even primarily by personal advantage. While his father and mother acted unwittingly as agents of Zeus in punishing *hybris* and were really motivated by their own private gain, Orestes finds his primary motivation in the command of Apollo.<sup>45</sup> In his first speech he invokes Zeus (*Ch.* 17), and throughout the second play he acts in accord with the oracle (558–59, 900, 941, 1030–31). To be sure he considers other compelling motives for the deed (297–305), but these are not sufficient to make him act; his father's ghost, his sister, the Chorus in the *Kommos*, and finally Pylades are all needed to urge him on. Thus it is Apollo's oracle that provides the final impetus, and Orestes can claim that he acted justly, ἐνδίκως (988), in accord with the behests of Apollo (1030). Finley (273) remarks, "He had not, like his parents, sought chiefly his own good, but the end of evil." He alone of the four main characters can claim *explicit* divine sanction for his deeds, and he alone claims this sanction as his ultimate motivation. In fact, he is prepared to die for the deed (*Ch.* 438), thereby demonstrating his utter lack of self-interest.<sup>46</sup> Consequently the Chorus can call the murder "blameless" (830 ἀνεπίμορφον); indeed, the word they use here is not murder, but ἄτη, the very term that denotes divine punishment, and they say "Justice guided his hand" (948–49).

The importance of this motive can be seen in the crucial moment of the blow, for just when he is about to strike he hesitates, aware of the awful sanctions against matricide.<sup>47</sup> But he acts decisively when Pylades utters his only three lines in the play (*Ch.* 900–902), reminding him of the oracle of Apollo. Orestes considers the response and says, "I judge (κρίνω) that you win, and you advise me well" (903).

<sup>45</sup> Despite Garvie (xxxiv), who downplays what he calls Orestes' "purity of spirit," concluding that Orestes "becomes as guilty as his father." Although he stresses the parallels between Orestes on the one hand and Agamemnon and Clytemnestra on the other (xxxv), these parallels only serve to heighten the differences: thesis-thesis-antithesis. After all, Agamemnon and Clytemnestra die, and Orestes does not.

<sup>46</sup> Peradotto (258) contrasts Orestes' ἡθος with that of Agamemnon, affirming his "purity of intent."

<sup>47</sup> Foley (205) notes that Clytemnestra herself does not struggle with her decision to kill Agamemnon.

In short, reflection (*phronêsis*) leads to obedience to the gods (*eusebeia*); Orestes is therefore prudent (*sôphrôn*) and his act justified (*dikaion*). In this vein the Chorus comments (*Ch.* 935–41, 948–49):

ἔμολε μὲν Δίκᾱ Πριαμίδαις χρόνῳι,  
 βαθύδικος ποινά·  
 ἔμολε δ' ἐς δόμον τὸν Ἀγαμέμνονος  
 διπλοῦς λέων, διπλοῦς Ἄρης·  
 ἔλασε δ' ἐς τὸ πᾶν  
 ὁ πυθόχρηστος φυγᾶς  
 θεόθεν εὖ φραδαῖσιν ὠρμημένος.  
 ... ἔθιγε δ' ἐν μάχαι χερὸς ἐτήτυμος  
 Διὸς κόρα ...

Justice came in time to the sons of Priam,  
 a penalty heavy but just;  
 and to the house of Agamemnon came  
 the double lion, the double attack,  
 and he struck to completion—  
 the exile supported by the Pythian prophecy,  
 rightly set in motion by admonitions from the god.  
 ... and in the battle the true daughter of Zeus  
 (*sc. Dikê*) touched his hand ...

In other words, as a *conscious* agent of Zeus, Orestes neither deserves nor provokes punishment for killing his mother. This is why the Chorus calls the deed “blameless” (831). Although he admits committing the deed, he acted not out of ignorance but out of knowledge and self-control, not out of pride but rather out of piety, not out of self-aggrandizement but in obedience to the demands of Zeus.<sup>48</sup> The Chorus comments on the deed by saying, “It is

<sup>48</sup> Dodds (1960a: 30) states the matter clearly: “Orestes’ case is again different. We see him stand where his mother once stood, in the palace doorway; once again a man and a woman lie dead at the Avenger’s feet; but where Clytemnestra carried a bloody sword Orestes carries a θαλλός and a wreath (*Ch.* 1035). The parallelism is intentional and significant; so is the difference. Outwardly, his situation resembles hers; inwardly, there is a deep gulf between them. It is not merely that Orestes is humble where she was arrogant, or that his motives are ‘purer’ than hers; like her, he has simple human motives, which he does not conceal (299–304). The deeper difference is that the divine purpose, of which both Agamemnon and Clytemnestra were unconscious and guilty agents, is for Orestes something consciously known and humbly, though not easily, accepted. He is aware that his act is a crime, even before he has committed it (930 τὸ μὴ χρεῶν, cf. 1016–17 and 1029); but receiving it as a duty, he stands as a type of all those who take upon themselves ‘the necessary guilt of human action.’”

right to respect (σέβειν) the power that holds the heaven" (*Ch.* 960). Later Apollo himself will say that he persuaded Orestes to kill his mother (*Eu.* 84), and the Furies will turn that into a charge against him (*Eu.* 202). Likewise, in the *Choephoroi* Electra had been concerned to retain her piety (122) when she prayed for him to come and avenge her father (138–39), and this was emphasized when she asked Agamemnon himself to grant her to be more temperate and pious than her mother (*sôphronesteran* and *eusebesteran*, 140–41). So because Orestes obeyed Zeus out of piety, his was an act that could be justified by the poet, and he ultimately wins ὄλβος as the Chorus had prayed (865).

There is no denying the complexity and difficulty of Agamemnon's choice at Aulis, but the experience of Orestes in a similar situation shows that what is at issue is not simply the choice, but, as we have stressed, the motivation. In each case the punishment demanded by Zeus entails some wrong-doing from the human point of view, but it is essential to the drama that the focus be on the intent, and that is why the jury is required. Nevertheless, such a heinous deed cannot be allowed to go unatoned. The objective guilt of Orestes is still there, only diminished, not removed, by his primary motives. Orestes himself recognizes the ambivalence of his act; he hesitates more than once, and after it is accomplished sees that it is soiled (*Ch.* 1016–17). Martha Nussbaum (258) notes his remorse in contrast to the self-congratulation of his father, and observes, "even such rationally justifiable killings violate a moral claim and demand emotions and thoughts appropriate to a situation of violation" (264–65). So Orestes is willing to accept punishment and make atonement (*Ch.* 1034–35), and does so before his trial (*Eu.* 276–77).

It is also instructive to note the differences between Orestes' situation and that of Clytemnestra. Orestes says, referring to his mother's libations for his father, "If one should pour out everything on behalf of a single death, the hardship would be in vain" (*Ch.* 520–21). This, of course, reflects the perspective of the Furies, that an untimely death must be avenged. Yet later Orestes himself will be able to atone for his murder of Clytemnestra. What is different? Orestes' action is justified by the oracle and his own attitude, though he must still atone for the deed and remove the objective fact of pollution. Yet, since Clytemnestra was not justified in killing Agamemnon, either by divine command or motivation, no atonement will help. Thus the *Oresteia* presupposes and therefore confirms the importance of the two ethical chains of descent that we have posited. Since Orestes' motivation and attitude can be described in terms of the genealogy of virtues rather than their opposites, his actions are vindicated.

The Furies predictably disagree, since they take the traditional and much simpler view, that the bare fact of one person's untimely death at the hands

of another is sufficient grounds for vengeance; they are after all agents of Clytemnestra. Δράσαντα παθεῖν: the one who has acted shall suffer, the killer shall be killed (*Ch.* 310–14; cf. *Eu.* 209–12, 261–72, 312–20).

The conflict here over the nature of justice and its implementation comes to focus on the issue of whether Orestes is really justified in killing his mother. The Furies demand the unqualified punishment of Orestes, while Apollo defends him on the grounds that he himself had commanded the murder, and that Orestes had acted justly by avenging his father's death at Zeus' command. That Apollo was responsible is emphasized repeatedly both in the *Choephori* (269–97, 900–903, 954–57, 1030–32) and in the *Eumenides* (84, 198–202, 463–67, 579–80, 593–94, 797–99), and as the prophet of Zeus (*Eu.* 19) Apollo speaks Zeus' will (615–18). Orestes says explicitly, "I killed the woman who gave me birth, I will not deny it, As a penalty for the murder of my dearest father. And Apollo is jointly responsible for it" (463–65). Later he repeats, "I killed her ... By the prophetic orders of this god" (588, 594; cf. 598–99). Apollo agrees: "... I am responsible For the murder of this man's mother" (579–80).

On the other hand, the Furies are not at all interested in why Orestes acted as he did or whether Apollo or Zeus was involved. Their only concern is the unnatural death of a person, especially at the hands of a relative (*Eu.* 212, 421–27). They say, "For where is there such incentive to kill one's mother? (*Eu.* 427 ποῦ γὰρ τοσοῦτο κέντρον ὥς μητροκτονεῖν;), and are unmoved by special pleading (383–84). There is no apparent way in which this conflict can be resolved, for it represents countervailing divine claims and altogether different views on what constitutes justice. When the problem is finally brought to Athena for arbitration, the jury of Athenian citizens impaneled to resolve the dispute will not only make a decision on Orestes' guilt or innocence but will also thereby determine which system of justice is to prevail in the future.

Against the Furies' reasonable arguments about tradition and their own responsibilities within the old order of things is posed Apollo's strange claim that it is a more serious crime to fail to avenge one's father than to kill one's mother, since the father, not the mother, is the true parent. Yet these specious arguments only serve to produce a hung jury, since the Furies have a legitimate claim to their position and do not care whether Orestes is justified or not, believing that no justification is sufficient to turn aside divine retribution. The human jury is caught between the old and the new, where the new has its allure but the old retains its claims. As president of the court, Athena is required to break the tie.

The point at issue here is not so much the logic of the decision (made on the notoriously dubious grounds—apparently justified by the new biology of the day—that the father is the true parent) but rather how justice can best

be achieved while at the same time preserving society. The *Persians* had concentrated on the fact that unprincipled violence is punished by destruction; the *Oresteia* in its turn concerns itself with the process by which justice is secured and the penalty determined. The old system of retributive justice as a purely mechanical thing, requiring in all cases that the nearest of kin take revenge for the death of a relative (an eye for an eye, a life for a life, blood for blood), stands opposed to a new system of trial by jury, which need not be mechanical but can rationally take into consideration motivation and extenuating circumstances. The remarkable shift in emphasis observed here involves not simply the substitution of a political institution for family vengeance in the administration of justice, important though that step is, but also allows for the consideration of motives in the judgment of guilt or innocence. The introduction of a role for motivation points to the importance of the main-springs of action, and whether an action is just depends upon whether or not it is carried out in accordance with the will of the gods and especially of Zeus, the guarantor of justice. That is to say, just actions depend on the recognition of a shared humanity and on the impossibility of attaining divinity. Injustice emerges when human beings place themselves in a position superior to their fellows that only the gods possess. This is why Aeschylus is concerned to show how motivation operates in the genealogy of morals and leads to virtue or vice depending on its point of origin. This is why piety—Aeschylus' own addition—plays such a crucial role in the genealogy.

A jury trial can further guarantee a decision and an end to the process rather than requiring a continuous succession of retributive acts that can only end with the extinction of a family. The issue is between different systems of justice—that of the tribe versus that of the polis—and is reflected in the conflict between the two generations of gods: the old, earthly deities as represented by the Furies, who are at best neutral to human concerns and at worst hostile and malevolent, and the new heavenly Olympian gods embodied in Apollo and Athena, who represent Zeus and are benevolent toward mankind. For the Furies, Justice depends on the ability to carry it out: the strength of an individual or family. Not so a jury trial, which relies on the strength and stability of the city. As in the *Prometheus*, the concern is with the relative merits of brute force and rational discourse. The outcome does not, as the Furies fear, throw the *harmonia* of the system off balance, but rather guarantees its effectiveness in another way, a way more appropriate to the radical changes in society and the advances of civilization. Moral questions are judged to be not simply the concern of one person or of his family, but rather of all of society; everyone benefits from their peaceful resolution and suffers from a failure to resolve them.

These twin concerns, then, underscore the importance of the moral relationships expressed in the genealogy; motivation is crucial because it determines with which side of the ethical family tree a set of acts is connected. The jury trial is necessary to remove from the individual the burden of guilt associated with punishing the wrong-doing of another. It takes responsibility for punishment from the family and places it with the state, thus signaling a decline in the importance of the larger family unit and undercutting the force of the inherited curse that runs through more than one of Aeschylus' trilogies. For the *Oresteia* the genealogy of moral ideals is fundamental to the working out of the plot and for the interconnection of the separate plays of the trilogy, and it contributes directly to the establishment of a new standard of justice. This is Aeschylus' answer to the pessimism and despair of a Theognis (see Dodds 1951: 30).

## VI. SUMMARY

Aeschylus places himself firmly in the tradition of the *koros-hybris-atê* ethic proposed by Solon, but he revises that tradition by recognizing the importance of piety to the sequence. Piety—mortals' recognition of their common subordination to the divine and of their equal status to each other—is particularly important for Aeschylus because of his identification of the gods, especially Zeus, with justice. The notion that there is some objective principle of just and ethical conduct that exists independently of the narrowness of the individual human's experience and that is ultimately connected with his happiness or misfortune in a profound way gives such a principle status in a society where definitions of justice had previously rested with the individual and his family. The judgment of individuals is fragile and clouded by self-interest and passion, whereas a jury can broaden the perspective of the judgment and free it from the narrow concerns of the individual.<sup>49</sup>

There is for Aeschylus no automatic progression from wealth to ruin, but only a tendency, which can be resisted by intelligence born of learning to see the appropriate relationship of a person to the gods (*eusebeia*), to oneself (*sôphrosunê*), and to others (*dikaïosunê*). This is the framework of justice (*Dikê*) that Aeschylus sees leading to prosperity (*olbos*)—not simply wealth, but well-being in a much broader sense: contentment with what one has. Solon saw the importance of justness, but Aeschylus contends that it depends on

<sup>49</sup> Lebeck 206 n. 11: "σέβας, σέβω, and σεμνός are theme words, made conspicuous by repetition throughout the trilogy. This verbal recurrence is linked with the action of *Eumenides*, anticipates and plays upon it. In the last drama the Furies struggle to retain the reverence and honor owed them and are appeased when worshiped as Semnae, their local cult title among the Athenians."

something outside the individual: the recognition of the place of the individual in the universe, which he describes in terms of piety, and which embraces one's role in society and one's relationships with other human beings as well. In response to the problem that life does not seem to work that way, Aeschylus points to the new structure of justice that has been established in Athens, the jury trial that is intended to help to maintain the Justice of Zeus. Aeschylus exemplifies this view in a series of vignettes, first in the *Persians* with Xerxes and then in the *Oresteia*, starting with Paris and the Trojans, and continuing through Agamemnon and Clytemnestra, using the trilogy form to show a progression, and finally a break in the chain, as Orestes reaches a precarious wisdom.

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