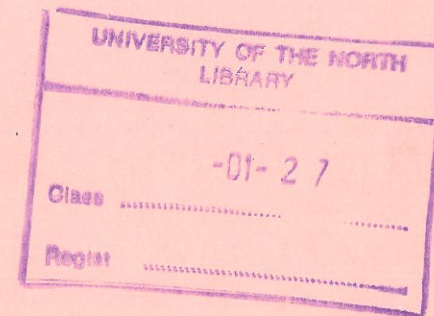


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GREEK ETHICS AND LITERATURE

F. SAAYMAN



Inaugural address delivered on accepting the chair in classical
languages of the University of the North on Wednesday, 29th
August 1986

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M.A. (UP), D. Litt. (US)

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PIETERSBURG

GREEK ETHICS AND LITERATURE

Introduction

Mister vice-chancellor, deans of faculties, distinguished guests, colleagues, ladies and gentlemen, I have decided to give a rather popular type of lecture that will be of general interest. Therefore I shall tell a few Greek stories and show where and how they fit into certain spheres of the academic and scientific work of the Classicist. In order to do this I shall treat the history of Greek Ethics to a considerable extent. It will become apparent that there are different stages in Greek ethics, and that leads to the next scientific point of departure, viz. literary contrast as formalized in theory by the Prague Functionalist school at the start of this century. I shall try to illustrate that the Classical tragedian, Aeschylus, employed historically different stages of ethical ideas precisely in order to create literary contrast.

Like all good literature, Greek literature reflects the human attitude towards life, especially when it tries to account for human suffering, as in the texts that I shall treat. Since the problem of explaining suffering, which is an ethical problem, is related to man's view of his position in the universe, Greek literature can be described as universal, for they, like us, constantly tried to define their own situation by means of an ethical framework, based either on religion or philosophy. Therefore when we read Greek literature, we do not deal with 'ancient' problems, but with the ongoing problem of mankind's ethical view of the reason for all his troubles. Different historical periods and cultures always have different explanations. Therefore it is important, when dealing with Greek literature, to know both the historical circumstances of the relevant periods, as well as their general religious or philosophical climates, since these elements determine and constitute man's view of himself in his environment and thus determines his opinion on ethics. I do not supply a definition of ethics, since this lecture will show that Greek ethics constantly changed. Broadly speaking, with ethics I refer to some form of control over human conduct, and also to explanations given for human suffering, as e.g. when it is seen as some form of punishment.

Greek religion and ethics in historical perspective

I shall deal with my topic in divisions that span the following three historical periods: The Homeric or Epic period (1600-1200 B.C.), then we jump the Dark Ages (1200-800 B.C.) and come to the Archaic age (800-490 B.C.), and the Classical age (490-404 B.C.).

The problem of identifying ethical ideas in Greek religion

'The categorizing of beliefs as religious or political or social is a relatively new custom (and I may add so also of ethics). The ancient Greeks, for instance, did not have a word for religion; but they did have many concepts concerning the behaviour of their gods and concerning their own expected duty to the gods'. (Ember & Ember, pp. 275-6). Havelock tries to explain the absence of conceptualization in the authors between Hesiod (800 B.C.) and Plato (after 400 B.C.) in terms of an inadequate syntax, incapable of forming definitions, because of the scarce use of the word 'to be'. I.e. the Greek language couldn't say: 'Ethics is . . .'. Although I find this argument totally absurd, it is also true that the Greek authors' mentions of it were incidental to other purposes' (Havelock, p. 14), and by using these mentions, one can draw up what in modern terminology is called 'a framework of reference', despite the fact that one has to follow an oblique approach because of the lack of categorization, mentioned by Ember & Ember. The main authorities on the manifestation of Greek ethics, are Dodds and Adkins. Both Dodds and Adkins approach the problem from a viewpoint which takes into account anthropology and socio-psychology within specific sets of historical circumstances. This seems to me to be the most profitable approach.

Shame Culture

Dodds calls the society of the Homeric period a Shame culture where virtue means mainly that one must be a good fighter. Adkins labels such values as competitive values, in a competitive society. At this historical stage of Greece (i.e. of the Trojan War) the social organization was that of kinship groups or clans, and ethically survival against outsiders was the prime consideration. To succeed in survival is called virtue (*areté*) in the *Iliad*; to fail in the competition for survival is to suffer disgrace. Therefore one may steal from other people as long as you are not caught out; you may kill other people in battle and this will be the most highly esteemed manifestation of virtue.

Now the first story: The first written literature of the West is the *Iliad* of Homer, describing the battle of twelve Greek tribes or clans against the city of Troy in Asia-Minor: Paris, one of the many sons of king Priamos of Troy went on a diplomatic mission to Sparta, where he was the guest of king Menelaos and his beautiful wife Helena. Paris fell in love with Helena and abducted her to Troy. Immediately Menelaos and his brother Agamemnon who was king of Mycenae, summoned the aid of ten other kings and set a fleet of a thousand ships to sea. For ten years they waged a terrible war at Troy, during which time many brave heroes fell on both sides. Eventually Troy was conquered: the city was burnt down,

the men all killed and the women and children sold into slavery The question whether it was right to kill so many people for the sake of an abducted woman, never arose. What motivated the Greeks throughout, was that Paris had broken the laws of hospitality and had harmed the *honour* of Menelaos by stealing his wife. Within this large epic the same type of situation arises among the Greeks themselves, as a literary technique of scaling down the large and vast scope of the ethical reasons for the war to a sufficiently perceptible size, which then becomes the theme and binding factor of the whole epic. I refer to the conflict between Achilles and Agamemnon. Each of these two kings had captured a concubine for themselves from among the Trojan women. Unfortunately Agamemnon had to give his Chryseis up to her father, who was a priest of Apollo and had invoked the wrath of Apollo against the Greeks, who subsequently suffered a plague in their camp. Agamemnon, being the nominal leader of the Greeks, then merely took Briseis, the concubine of Achilles. Both are kings: Achilles feels that his honour is slighted so much that he withdraws his whole tribe of Myrmidons from battle. He rejoices in the terrible losses that the other Greeks, under command of Agamemnon, now suffer . . . until on a day his best friend, Patroclus, is killed by the Trojan hero Hector. This moves Achilles into action again and he kills Hector. After the battle he ties the dead Hector behind his chariot and drags him from the walls of Troy, in full view of all the Trojans, towards the Greek camp. This act has only one purpose: to humiliate Hector even in death. In the attitude of Achilles one can see that the bonds of the clan are much stronger than those with external groups, be it other Greek clans or the Trojans, the common foe of all the Greeks.

A famous anecdote about a Spartan boy's endurance also illustrates the competitive values of a shame culture very aptly. (The Spartans were very conservative and did not actually undergo the same ethical changes as most other city-states of Greece). It is told that a Spartan boy was apprehended by a farmer just after he had caught a fox on his farm. Just in time he hid the fox under his tunic to conceal it from the farmer. The fox 'devoured the boy's vitals' (as the history-books always formulate it), but the boy did not show any sign of pain. The farmer simply had to believe his lies. This boy was always held forth as an example of Spartan virtue! That he lied or had stolen was never considered 'wrong' by the Spartans.

To conclude this section, I quote an archaism on which the Classical tragedian Sophocles based his drama *Ajax*: 'Do well to your friends, and harm your enemies'.

Guilt culture

The historical period of guilt culture in Greece starts with the Archaic age. A guilt culture is a society in which a person feels guilty because of the things that he does wrong. If he steals, his mind is troubled, even if nobody else knows about it or punishes him. Adkins (especially chapter 3 and 4) speaks of 'quieter-values' in this respect. Thus whereas in Homeric society one could do anything, as long as society did not catch you out, or alternatively, where, if you were caught out, only society would punish you, mainly in terms of shame as sanction; in a guilt culture society transfers its sanction as guardians over conduct, to the gods. This meant in Greece that people started to feel that the gods were watching them all the time. In the early Archaic age religion and ethics merge into an integrated system (Dodds, pp. 31-32). The historical trigger for this was that larger societies started to form in the Archaic age, characterized by political, economical and social strife. The land-owning aristocracy became richer and more powerful while the poor became poorer, until a stage was reached that the poor had to become serfs of the rich, or even sell themselves as slaves. On the other hand the rich often bribed the law-courts:- It is a well-known fact that social or psychological stress causes an upsurge in religion or a change in religion. Dodds p. 32 typifies the Archaic situation in the following general terms: 'Man projects into the cosmos his own nascent demand for social justice; and when from the outer spaces the magnified echo of his own voice returns to him, promising punishment for the guilty, he draws from it courage and reassurance'.

The values involved here are not those of an *overt* battle for survival against hunger (the Spartan boy) or real enemies (the *Iliad*) but of a *covert* battle against one's fellows in your own society. Adkins (pp. 70-79) points out that the needs of society emphasizes the most important virtues. E.g. in certain Greek cities athletic or musical prowess were considered to be higher virtues than the ability to wage war. In the interaction between social friction and ethics one can also perceive, in my opinion, a very curious process through which the values within a society are discovered, viz. by negative discovery. In the differentiated Archaic society people would be harmed by other in several ways - and the sufferers did not like it. When Hesiod loses part of his inheritance because his brother bribed the judges, he discovers that bribery is something ethically 'wrong'. When the poor are oppressed, Hesiod says 'it is wrong to oppress the poor'. I.e. in several spheres of life wrongs are being committed *and identified*. Thus people didn't first say: 'It is good not to steal' - they couldn't. They discovered the principle in the negative way: 'It is wrong to steal'. In this way the type of society which differs from the Homeric clan-society discovered a variety of ethical values or rules.

The transfer of sanction from society to religion and the gods and its later side-effects in the archaic period bears a very striking

similarity to an image used in the *Iliad*, where Zeus weighs the fates of the combatants Achilles and Hector. Solon (fl. 600 B.C.) still thinks along these same lines, but, as Dodds (p. 31) says, he inserts a 'moral link'. Lloyd-Jones (p. 44) summarizes this aspect of Solon's ethics as follows: 'Good or bad fortune from Zeus (i.e. from the scale-idea), Solon believes, depends on innocence or guilt . . . he has no wish for prosperity gained by injustice (the main crisis of his time) for it is bound to bring misfortune. *Arete* is permanent, wealth is not, and no man needs more than he can use. For Solon, *Arete* obviously has an internalized moral element'. Lloyd-Jones also states that according to Wilamowitz, Solon's idea of Righteousness was the same as that of his predecessor Hesiod (800 B.C.). Fact is that both of these two early Archaic authors expected the gods to stand guard over what one would call a conscience of internalized values. But this process was still in its infant stages and Zeus in Hesiod is a harsh, brutal punisher of men. In the *Theogonia* of Hesiod Zeus violently overthrows the rule of his father Kronos. (In Homer also Zeus 'rules according to power rather than according to righteousness' (O.C.D.). However, those very same men also recognized that the 'wicked fourished like a green bay-tree', and Solon is part of a tradition which tries to solve the problem by means of further qualification (Dodds, p. 33). If the guilty himself is not punished, then his descendants would be punished unto the third generation. By this shift morality of the conscience was practically again removed from religion and ethics only remained linked to a religion of despair. But the same idea of good and evil from the gods continue. The problem is that man has no control over affairs, since good moral conduct cannot prevent disasters caused by the guilt of ancestors. So suffering is still outside of human control, and the idea of divine envy (only very faint in Homer) becomes stronger than ever. The idea of good and evil being weighed out by the gods is expressed clearly by Theognis, the most bitter critic of the ethics of his day. He says: 'No man . . . is responsible for his own *ruin* or his own *success*: of both those things the gods are the givers. No man can perform an action and know whether its outcome will be good or bad Humanity in utter blindness follows its futile usages; but the gods bring all to the fulfilment that they have planned' (Dodds p. 30). This phase of Greek ethics and religion is well documented in the Histories of the Early Classical historian Herodotus. The story of Polycrates, the tyrant of Samos, is a good illustration.

Polycrates won all of his several military campaigns and captured many islands and towns. I quote from Herodotus: 'It was not long before the rapid increase of his power became the talk of Ionia and the rest of Greece. All his campaigns were victorious, his every venture a success'. At an early stage in his career he had become a good friend of Amasis, the king of Egypt. But now 'Amasis was fully aware of the remarkable luck which Polycrates enjoyed, and it caused him some uneasiness; accordingly, when he heard of his ever-mounting

tale of successes, he wrote him the following letter, and sent it to Samos: 'Amasis to Polycrates:- It is a pleasure to hear of a friend and ally doing well, but, as I know that the gods are jealous of success, I cannot rejoice at your excessive prosperity'. He then advises Polycrates to throw away his most precious possession in order to avert his success with some sorrow. Polycrates throws his most precious jewelled ring away, far out at sea and returns home to mourn his loss for a few days. But after five or six days a fisherman presents him with a very fine fish. And inside the fish the cooks find the lost ring! When Amasis heard this news 'He forthwith sent a messenger to Samos to say that the pact (of friendship) between Polycrates and himself was at an end. This he did in order that when the (inevitable) calamity (of death) fell upon Polycrates, he might avoid the distress he would have felt, had Polycrates still been his friend'. Eventually Polycrates went to visit Oroetus, a Persian governor of Sardis, where he was treacherously murdered. 'This, then, was the end of the long-continued prosperity of Polycrates: it was just as Amasis, king of Egypt, had previously foretold'. (Translations by de Sélincourt).

A similar view is held by the chorus of old men in the *Agamemnon* of Aeschylus. After Agamemnon had captured Troy in order to get Helen back, Agamemnon's praises are sung in a long ode. But the chorus conclude: 'To be praised exceedingly is dangerous, for a thunderbolt is hurled by the eyes of Zeus. My choice is prosperity without envy: may I neither be a destroyer of cities, nor yet, myself made captive by others, see my life (in ruin). (Fraenkel). (As I shall point out later, this was not also the opinion of the author).

Philosophy

While religion flourished despite its oppressive content, some individualists openly attacked the existing mythical world-view. The Ionian philosophers were the first people in the history of the world to take this bold step. E.g. the philosopher Hecataeus wrote 'The stories of the Greeks appear to me altogether foolish' (Caldwell & Gyles p. 239). Xenophanes aptly pointed out that if horses and oxen were able to portray their own gods, the gods would look like horses and oxen, etc. (Caldwell & Gyles p. 240). Havelock's stress on language-use in the development of Greek ethics has some relevance to Heraclitus. In answer to the popular idea of Theognis that the gods or fate override human conscience and character, he retorted: *éthos anthrópó daimón* - 'Character is man's fate'. In the Classical age the sophists continued the rational approach of the Ionian philosophers, but whereas the latter saw justice more as part of the cosmic make-up, the Sophists were rather simply interested in teaching people how to win their court-cases. Thereby they *both* took a more direct stance against religion and introduced individualism and relativism into ethics.

Protagoras said: "Man is the measure of all things; of things that are, that they are; of things that are not, that they are not". As far as the existence of the gods went, he confessed to be agnostic: It was not within the ability of man as measure of things, to determine whether the gods existed or not. The last and prime exponent of the sofist direction of rationality was Socrates, who linked up with Heraclitus by creating the pun that he had his own daemon, which, I think, has correctly been interpreted by West (p. 185) as wordplay on *daémōn* - 'knowing', i.e. he relied on his own rationality or faculty to reason.

It is quite a question at which stage the Athenian tragedians started employing the insights of the Ionian philosophers. According to general consensus, which seems to me unconvincing, the last of them, viz. Euripides, was the first to do so. All in all, however, the philosophers and sophists helped to take ethics out of the hands of the Archaic gods and caused a shift towards the individual, who had to decide for himself with his own reason, what is right or wrong.

Application of ethics, as semiotic background, to literature

By now we have reached a point where Greek religion and philosophy have become separated to a certain degree. The history of religious ethics had gone through different historical stages and we have seen that to the original *Iliadic* notion of good and bad, several further qualifications have been added. First, Solon and Hesiod added personal guilt, in the modern moral sense. Then Solon added inherited guilt, and in the last phase the element of divine envy became emphasized. Of course religion consists of many more ideas, rites, cults, etc. not discussed here, but the point of importance is that new religious ideas do not generally replace old ideas; they are mostly simply added to the older ideas. Gilbert Murray must be credited for first pointing out this nature of religion, for which reason he calls any religion an 'Inherited Conglomerate' (Dodds, p. 179). I want to stress this point, because when people interpret the Classical tragedies, they approach these works first of all as religious tracts, which they are not, and then they (sometimes) perceive several contradicting religious ideas. As regards Aeschylus, he is commonly understood as being religiously utterly confused, trying to find his way through all the religious stuff, since he lived during the transition from the Archaic to the Classical period. This approach culminated in a remark of Denys Page about Aeschylus which I am sure he has much regretted ever since he expressed it: 'The faculty of acute or profound thought, is not among his gifts' (p. XV). Fortunately a new direction was initiated by Winitz and H D F Kitto, viz. to look for literary contrast. The importance of contrast in literature has been stressed at the beginning of this century by the Prague Linguistic Circle, but probably due to watering-down by the American New Criticism, this insight practically

bypassed Classicist. The principle was best formulated by Sklovskij : 'Juxtaposition on the basis of partial similarity of two otherwise dissimilar notions is *the omnipresent principle of poetic creation*'. (Erlich p. 225). Fortunately the work of the Prague Circle has been rediscovered in the last few years by a linguistic movement in Greek New Testament studies which does Discourse Analysis on N.T. texts.

The basic principle goes back to the Port Royal school of the seventeenth century, viz. that a distinction should be made between the surface structure and deep structure of a text. The incentive for, and borrowing of ideas and terminology from Chomsky, McCawley et al. with their TGG is evident. The results which all this have for Classical texts, is that the key to the solution of the existing literary problems, is that one must look further than the surface structure and its religious or ethical expressions, to the deep structure of ultimate meaning. In Aeschylus at least (and perhaps Sophocles) I have found in my doctoral studies that these two levels are in contrast to each other and not parallel, as general opinion sees it, according to which Aeschylus is famous for his 'double-motivation line', i.e. dramatic action is determined in parallel on both the divine and human levels. One can see here that most Graecists know their New Testament dogmatics better than their literary theory: Paul speaks of the human will to do good being parallel to God's wish that one should do good.

In Aeschylus' treatment of the death of Agamemnon, the epic conquerer of Troy, the chorus is filled with fear as Agamemnon returns home. They rightly fear the treachery of his wife Clytaemestra who now lives with her lover Aegisthus in the palace (and eventually murders Agamemnon). They also fear divine envy of Agamemnon's success in laying waste the city of Troy. They fear a 'family-curse' which runs through all successive generations of the family since the time of its first ancestor. We can see the typical Archaic atmosphere of hostile divine predeterminism. Agamemnon himself is portrayed as a typical *Iliadic* hero, but also having some Archaic superstitious fears. When the Greek fleet was ready to depart from Greece to Troy, the goddess Artemis caused adverse winds, which could only be changed if Agamemnon sacrificed his daughter Iphigeneia. The wording of his tragic decision to sacrifice her is very important: It shows that his prime consideration is that his personal *honour* as a military ally in the whole venture, is at stake. He submits only because he does not want to be branded a *liponaus*, = 'a deserter (of ships)'. At the actual sacrifice he orders Iphigeneia to be gagged lest some ill-omened sound should escape from her lips. Once at Troy, the destruction he causes is utter and complete. Nobody escapes, not even the women or children. Agamemnon never sees anything wrong in these actions - he acts according to *Iliadic* competitive values. But if one

looks carefully and systematically with a literary eye at the drama and the whole trilogy of which it is the first part, one sees in the imagery and in a few outright statements that link up with the imagery, that the text presents Agamemnon as guilty of transgressing quiet values. It is wrong to sacrifice his own child, and it is wrong to get so many 'Trojans and Greeks alike' killed for the sake of an 'adulterous woman'. The latter ethical level is in contrast with, and supplants, the first, *Iliadic* and Archaic impressions of the text. The text actually expresses Solonian justice for transgressing quiet values on the wrongdoer himself. The view of 'some people who say that the gods do not bother to punish people who trample the most sacred values' (Ag 369-72, my own translation) is attacked and replaced by the notion that crime will be punished in the criminal himself. Aeschylus even goes further and links up with the 'pun-method' of Heraclitus. Throughout the drama there is mention of a 'family-curse' i.e. inherited guilt and punishment. But when the solution of all the ethical issues takes place in the scene between the chorus and Clytaemestra, Aeschylus switched around his phraseology to be understood: 'Curselike behaviour of the family' (Ag 1565). This demythologizing of the Archaic curse has never been observed before, because nobody looked for literary contrast of ethical layers in the *Agamemnon*.

To interpret Aeschylus correctly, one must look for the literary technique of contrast, applied to contradicting ethical stages and views.

The saddest misinterpretation of Aeschylus is that of his drama *The Suppliants*.

The Suppliants is generally regarded as the most 'religious' of Aeschylus' tragedies. It is the first part of a trilogy of which the last two dramas are lost. Although reconstruction of the whole plot is difficult, we can nevertheless now be quite sure of the general theme. In the existing first drama fifty girls are fleeing from their cousins, who want to marry them forcibly. The girls seek protection in the democratic city of Argos where Pelosgos is the head of state. The citizens of Argos decide in a democratic way to render assistance, but in the choral songs the maidens address Zeus and ask his aid. Of particular importance is the beginning and end of the third song.

'Lord of lords, most blessed amongst the blessed, *power* most perfect among the perfect, O Zeus, allhappy, hearken to us and from thy offspring ward off in utter abhorrence the lust of men, and in the purple sea whelm their black-benched pest'.

.....
.....
He (Zeus) doth not sit upon his throne by mandate of another and hold his *dominion* beneath a gightier.

None there is who sitteth above him whose *power be holdeth in awe*'.

(Smyth's translation)

The emphasis on Zeus' abilities is summarized as follows by Albin Lesky, the most highly esteemed critic of Greek tragedies: '... we meet ... the god who has become the deepest expression of the poet's religious faith ... We see, as so often with Aeschylus, how in the words of the maidens' prayer the poet's own feeling breaks through'.

'Power' and 'dominion' are used as flattering attributes of Zeus in this address. But in the previous song, similar words are applied to king Pelasgos and to Zeus. Pelasgos is the 'sovereign authority'. He is also threatened by the 'authority' of Zeus who protects the suppliants. But both words denoting 'authority' have this meaning only metaphorically. Literally they denote 'brute force'. The same applies to Zeus' attribute of 'power most perfect' and in the expression 'hold his dominion' in the quoted passage.

In all these expressions the same word-stem is used. It is typical of Aeschylean ambiguity that the literal meaning is part of the hidden artistic theme. Through statistical and other literary analyses pertaining to the main theme of a forced marriage and words denoting force, it eventually appears that the maidens expect from Zeus exactly that which they shun in their suitors, viz. 'brute force'. But Zeus does not intervene with force to save them. Why not? Because they view him as the Hesiodic, i.e. a stern and forcible upholder of justice of the early Archaic period. From the last (lost) drama of the trilogy we fortunately have a fragment which probably is the solution to the whole trilogy: In it Zeus is portrayed as a cosmic force gently persuading mother Earth to marriage, by sending soft, life-generating rain. This portrayal of marriage is in direct contrast to that of the conflict-situation in the first drama. With it, the portrayal of the values which Zeus symbolize at the end, is also the exact opposite of the view that the maidens have of him. By means of this contrast, Aeschylus showed that the values of the maidens were completely wrong. Against the Hesiodic Zeus of *brute force* he poses a Zeus who symbolizes *persuasion* and *democratic* values of the Classical period. This drama is not a religious tract, but universal literature because of its philosophical content: One can only understand it correctly if one sees the ethical contrast.

Mister Vice-Chancellor, I trust that it is now evident that the Department of Classics at the University of the North, is not just there to tell 'funny stories of the Greeks'. On the contrary, we, as members of the department, are constantly working our way into new scientific methods in order to open up to our students the true value of each of the variety of subject-matters that we deal with.

In conclusion, mister Vice-Chancellor, I want to express my sincerest gratitude towards the University of the North and to Council for the honour they have bestowed upon me with my present appointment. Hereby I then gladly accept the chair as professor of Classics at the University of the North.

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