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# ANCIENT ETHICS, THE HEROIC CODE, AND THE MORALITY OF SOPHOCLES' *AJAX*

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While modern ethical philosophy has tended to proceed in an impersonal manner by addressing moral problems from a deontological or consequentialist (or broadly utilitarian) standpoint, ancient ethics was based on character and the development of a virtuous disposition. For Plato at *Republic* 441d–444e, for example, the ideal was a *psuche* that balanced the three functions of reason, *thumos*, and appetite and from which virtuous actions would flow automatically, while for Aristotle in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (e.g. 2.1, 6.2, 6.5, 6.13) the object was to develop, in part through the exercise of practical intelligence (*phronesis*), an increasingly refined disposition (*hexis*) to perform virtuous acts. The focus was on the virtuous intention rather than on the moral quality of the result – a point brought out with striking clarity in the Stoic idea that virtue consisted as it were in the correct aim, whereas the actual hitting of the target was morally irrelevant.[1]

The focus of heroic morality was likewise on the virtuous disposition, and courage in particular, the principal touchstone of the aristocratic warrior's character. Of course there is no systematic exposition of the heroic ethic, so we have to infer it from the statements of Homeric characters. But heroic courage differs from say an Aristotelian perfected virtue in that it is not fully internalized in the individual. Odysseus, for example, in a celebrated passage in the *Iliad* (11.401–10), has to refer to a rule about courage. Certainly he has no further doubts once he has reviewed the rule, but the mere fact that he needs to refer to a rule puts him at one remove, at least, from someone for whom doubt does not arise in the first place. Courage is, in any case, a singularly demanding virtue. It is hard to imagine it performed joyously or pleasurably, unlike the other virtues, because the situations which call for it are intrinsically productive of fear. Indeed Aristotle himself recognizes the anomalous nature of this virtue in this respect (*N.E.* 1117a 29–b 22, especially 1117b 15).

[1] Cicero, *De Fin.* 3. 22.

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Now in Plato and Aristotle the virtues harmonize with the needs of society, and so the warrior's courage is clearly regarded as a key virtue in Plato's ideal state as in Homeric societies because it facilitates the defence of the community. This is why heroic warriors are honoured. However, there is always a danger that the warrior will turn against his own community if he considers himself wrongfully dishonoured, as do Homer's Achilles and Sophocles' Ajax. It is inconceivable that the virtuous person as delineated by Plato, Aristotle or the Stoics would turn against the community. This is because for them virtue is attractive because it is *kalon*, i.e. intrinsically beautiful and noble. Plato's just man in the *Republic* (who possesses all the virtues) enjoys a balanced, harmonious *psuche*; he would not wish to exchange it for the disordered, troubled mind of the unjust (and cowardly) man. But for the heroic warrior, virtue (in this case courage) is not its own reward, or at least not entirely so. This is because, while the hero values courage as a fine thing in itself, his possession of it falls into radical instability if it is not recognized by others in the form of honour. We shall find that this is precisely the flaw in Ajax's morality and that it results in a commitment to image and a limited form of self-realization which merely masquerades as a moral position.

Here a distinction drawn by Aristotle is helpful. Aristotle refers to the courage of the Homeric warrior (citing the examples of Diomedes and Hector) but assigns it to an inferior type which he terms *politike andreia* (*N.E.* 1116a 17). Now the reader's first impression is that this form of courage is inspired not by its intrinsic nobility but by legal penalties for cowardice (inapplicable surely to Homer's heroes), fear of reproach (*oneidos*), and desire for honours (*timas*) (*N.E.* 1116a 18) – and indeed Aristotle cites Hector's fear of Polydamas' reproach at *Iliad* 22.100. But Aristotle then surprisingly allows true courage to be inspired by concern for reputation as well as for its intrinsic fineness.[2] It would seem then that it fits Ajax quite well. The love of virtue for its intrinsic nobility is there, but also what seems to be an indissoluble link with honour. However, in an earlier passage Aristotle is quite unequivocal:

> Honour [*time*] is too superficial [*epipolaioteron*] to be the good we are seeking. Honour depends more on those who bestow it than on the one who receives it, and we sense that the good is a personal possession [*oikeion*] which is virtually inalienable [*dusaphaireton*]. Again, it is apparent that people seek honour in order to think themselves virtuous

[2] *N.E.* 1117a 16: to be brave is *kalon*; not to be so is *aischron* (i.e. shameful).

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[*agathous*]. At any rate, it is by intelligent men [*phronimon*] with whom they are acquainted that they seek to be honoured – and for their virtue [*arete*]. It is clear then that virtue rates above honour in the minds of such people.

(*N.E.* 1095b 23–30)

Aristotle however is too much of a Greek not to equivocate at some point on the importance of honour in the context of the virtues, and the *megalopsuchos* not only is entitled to claim honour but is more or less obliged to do so, and that in a rather self-conscious way; it is his reward for virtue and the greatest of external goods (*N.E.* 1123b 2, 1123b 11, 1123b 20). Aristotle would have been scandalized by the view that honour was not worth extending a finger for.[3] The ultimate reference point is in danger of being (for the likes of Hector and Ajax) not what is right but what is in accordance with the person that I conceive myself to be. One thinks of the modern, often amoral obsession with self-realization.

The relation of honour to courage aside, we tend to find in the heroic warrior a disproportionate emphasis on courage as opposed to the other virtues. This is true of a regular hero like Homer's Hector. But it seems that it is a view of which his society approved. Hector's role is to defend his family and city, and one would imagine that he would be seen as virtuous insofar as his actions were in harmony with that role. But at Homer *Il.* 6.406–46 and 22.33–92, when first his wife and later his parents beg him to remain alive in order to protect them rather than expose himself to almost certain death, his commitment is unequivocally to act in such a way as to win honour, and that means to show no hint of cowardice. He is therefore prepared to die and be no longer useful to his family or city in order to safeguard his honour. Clearly neither Hector nor the ethic to which he adheres take care to balance the claims of the virtues one against another.

So Ajax, like Achilles before him, turns on his society when he feels that it has insufficiently honoured him. When he fails to secure the armour of Achilles he attempts to kill the Atreidae and Odysseus. This action might appear to be culturally validated by the supposedly moral injunction to harm your enemies, a rule derived from the obsession with honour and self-image, but Ajax's response is clearly anti-social in the extreme and therefore not a virtuous act in the philosophers' sense. In any case no society could afford a policy of no holds barred when it came to harming enemies.

[3] Attributed to Zeno and Chrysippus as a hard-line Stoic attitude at Cic., *De Fin.* 3.57.

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But Athena frustrates his murderous intentions and Ajax emerges completely humiliated. What then is he to do? First of all, as a heroic warrior he naturally considers his self-concept, but, like the philosophers, he then goes on to ask himself how he is to live henceforth.

When he returns to sanity, Ajax first defines himself as he was before his humiliation and in a sense eternally is (in his own view at least): the greatest Greek to have come to Troy (421–6) – for he does not here recognize Achilles' superiority. This is his true self, but he is now subjected to insult (*hubris*, see 367) and feels utterly humiliated and even unworthy (398–400). In such a situation one might reassess one's self-concept downward. Ajax however is sure that he behaved correctly, that he was simply the victim of the madness imposed by the goddess and that his original plan to kill his enemies was morally proper (447–55). So he has nothing to chastise himself for. As he says to his son, be in other ways like your father but luckier (550–1). So it is, theoretically at least, open to Ajax to ignore the views of his peers and to insist that he is the man he always was and that the night raid is irrelevant to his moral worth.[4] He could, in Aristotle's terms cited above, prefer virtue to honour. But few people even in modern Western culture could confidently adopt such a view. This is because of the phenomenon of 'agent regret'[5] – an inability to divorce ourselves entirely from a consequence for which we are not strictly responsible but in which we are closely involved, such as driving the train that kills a person who jumps out in front of it. Still less in the heroic culture, where results count for more than motives, can Ajax distance himself from his humiliation and presumed reduction in moral worth either in his own eyes or in those of his peers. Here it must not be thought that his self-view is merely a reflection of what others think. Rather he projects onto others what he believes about himself. As Bernard Williams observes, 'some kinds of behaviour are admired, others accepted, others despised, and it is those attitudes that are internalised, not simply the prospect of hostile reactions. If that were not so, there would be . . . no shame *culture*, no shared ethical attitudes at all.'[6]

Ajax then will be concerned to restore his ideal value (his honour or *time*) in his own eyes and in the eyes of those whom he respects as his

[4] On Ajax's inherent valour and its descent from Telamon see S. N. Lawall, 'Sophocles' Ajax: *aristos* after Achilles', *CJ* 54 (1959), 290–4, at 292.

[5] See B. Williams, *Moral Luck* (Cambridge, 1981), Ch.2.

[6] B.Williams, *Shame and Necessity* (Berkeley, 1993), 83f. For an excellent critique of the absurdities to be found in the more extreme exponents of the idea of a shame culture see D. L. Cairns, *Aidos* (Oxford, 1993), 39–44.

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peers. Unfortunately, however, the group of those whom he respects has shrunk to include only his father[7] – whom in a way he has internalized as an ideal self – since esteem before his social inferiors is of lesser importance and his heroic peers are all presumed to be his enemies to whom he owes nothing and whom he has ceased to respect.[8] We note here the dangerously constricted social context which provides the domain of his moral endeavour.

So he must prove his worth to his father and to himself.[9] But how? His humiliation was due to an error of judgment (as was Hector's at *Iliad* 22.104); the error, however, was not his fault – it was inspired by Athena. One might suppose then that what is required is restitution in the area of failure. But there is no failure, in his view, as we have seen; or at least not a culpable failure. What do you do then when your self-image has been lowered through no fault of your own? You raise it again by an outstanding feat in the area in which you perform best. So Ajax turns, like Hector, to an act of courage, for that is the supreme virtue and his particular forte. Moreover, he needs courage now not merely to feature in a gesture to be made by seeking out a situation which requires him to be brave, but in order to deal with his present situation which is unliveable. Thus he requires the courage to end his life.

Now for Aristotle the central component in a moral decision (and one that unifies all the virtues) is *phronesis*.[10] The Aristotelian moral agent must exercise *phronesis* for '[t]he virtuous person is not just the person who does in fact do the morally right thing, or even does it stably and reliably. She is the person who *understands* the principles on which she acts, and thus can explain and defend her actions.'[11] Ajax, however, deliberates quite briefly: it is immediately obvious to him that a life of dishonour (which is indeed the likely consequence) is unliveable, so that the intellectual component of the virtue is in his view

[7] 'Ajax looks on Telamon as an equal': J. R. March, 'Sophocles' *Ajax*: the death and burial of a hero', *BICS* 38 (1991–3), 1–36, at 13.

[8] He sees himself as hated by the army (458), apart from his own followers (565–71), and he duly curses it (843f.). In deliberating on possible courses of action his intention is to avoid gratifying the Atreidae (466–70), and his shield is bequeathed to his son while his armour is to be buried with him (572–7).

[9] When Ajax considers what to do he imagines his father's reaction to his return (462ff.) See Williams (n. 6), 85: 'Not only is his language full of the most basic images of shame, of sight and nudity, but it expresses directly a reciprocal relation between what he and his father could not bear. But ... it is not the mere idea of his father's pain that governs the decision, nor the fact that it is, uniquely, his father. Ajax is identified with the standards of excellence represented by his father's honours.... He has no way of living that anyone he respects would respect – which means that he cannot live with any self-respect.'

[10] *N.E.* 6.13; J. Annas, *The Morality of Happiness* (Oxford, 1993), 73.

[11] Ibid., 67 (author's emphasis).

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unproblematical: obviously he must die; it remains only to prepare himself emotionally. Certainly Ajax reflects on what he should do, but he has only one moral criterion and this is stark and straightforward. He overrides huge considerations such as exercising virtue within the socio-political context of the state and respecting the human condition (the Stoic injunction to live in accordance with natural law). In the Aristotelian context, '[t]he demands of bravery cannot be correctly judged without judging them against the demands of the other virtues'.[12]

> To be truly courageous, one must have a global grasp of what courage requires;...this will be incomplete until it contains grasp of what justice and the other virtues require, but still there is a viewpoint from which considerations of what courage requires comes *first*, and this is courage.[13]

> The virtuous person makes the right judgement because his feelings and emotions guide him the right way and make him sensitive to the right factors, and because he is able intelligently to discern what in the situation is the morally salient factor. Intelligence, *phronesis*, requires that in the agent the affective and the intellectual aspects of virtue have developed in a mutually reinforcing way.[14]

But Ajax is not free to deliberate alone. Tecmessa in her appeal to him (485–524) has often been compared to Andromache appealing to Hector at *Iliad* 6.405–39, but, unlike Hector's wife, she presents a reasoned moral case. Andromache begged Hector to pity her and the child, defenceless without him. As it stands, this might be taken equally as a purely emotional appeal, an outpouring of anxieties unaccompanied by moral reflection on Hector's appropriate course of action in a full moral context, or as an implicit moral view that gives priority to the family over personal honour. She asks him to remain on the wall and to focus his troops on a mostly defensive role. But Hector replies that he must not play the coward (*Il.* 6.440–6), a position which Andromache can produce no argument to counter.

Tecmessa offers more of a structured argument. First of all, she has developed for herself a philosophy of life in adversity which is diametrically opposed to that of Ajax. It is a philosophy of adaptability and it is by no means ignoble, but possessed of a certain dignity. Tecmessa speaks with the authority of one who has experienced the worst of reversals – from freedom and wealth to the most extreme form of bodily enslavement – and has not only come to accept her condition but has even

[12] Ibid., 76.
[13] Ibid., 82.
[14] Ibid., 89.

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decided to love the man to whom she is now forcibly bound and who was largely instrumental in her reversal. She lovingly embraces an enemy. She is not so naïve, of course, as to propose this to Ajax as a philosophy of life that he might himself wish to adopt, but perhaps she hopes to curb to some extent his extreme inflexibility. In referring to her fate and her response to it she underscores her complete dependence on Ajax and how she deserves a return (*charis*: also a heroic concept) from him since she has entered into her new role with such gratuitous generosity (520–4).[15]

It is interesting that her case implies that the noble nature should requite a favour bestowed by a slave, and indeed she seems in some measure to transcend that status through her response, and of course by her bold assumption of matrimonial prerogatives. Indeed, Ajax himself seems to treat her with the respect due to a wife (which of course is perfectly compatible with telling her that obedience rather than advice is required from her: 527–8). She appeals to the shame which Hector was afraid of incurring: that, as a slave, people would scorn Andromache as bereft of Hector (and himself as dead and unable to defend her) (*Il.* 6.450–65). He would be disturbed not just because he could not help but because he would be seen to be unable to help. If Ajax kills himself he will be wilfully creating the situation that Hector dreaded.

Ajax himself is in fact moved by Tecmessa's appeal, but it cannot persuade him to abandon his resolve. Certainly he is reminded of his obligations, which he passes on to Teucer, and he is apparently impressed by Tecmessa's story with its emphasis on radical change. But when he considers the implications of that idea, his resolve is only confirmed.[16] This

[15] Tecmessa is 'defining the noble man as one who is responsive to kindness and affection': G. Zanker, 'Sophocles' *Ajax* and the heroic values of the *Iliad*', *CQ* 42 (1992), 20–5, at 23.

[16] Ajax is moved by Tecmessa's appeal. He feels his new compassion for her undermining his resolve to kill himself, but the compassion is 'rejected by his deepest instincts': B. M. W. Knox, 'The *Ajax* of Sophocles', in *Word and Action. Essays on the Ancient Theater* (Baltimore and London, 1979), 138. He expresses some pity for Tecmessa and his son in the Trugrede but this does not determine his action. Ajax 'has no sense of responsibility to anyone or anything except his own heroic conception of himself and the need to live up to the great reputation of his father before him': ibid., 145. 'Ajax recognizes the principle of mutability in the world and will have none of it': R. P. Winnington-Ingram, *Sophocles: An Interpretation* (Cambridge, 1980), 54. 'Despite the outwardly stern inflexibility which he displayed in the last scene, Ajax has been moved to pity; and he remarks on the fact that his feelings are not exempt from the universal pattern of change with surprise and some indignation: he refers to his earlier inflexibility with a mocking irony, and to his weakening with contemptuous sarcasm (650–2). But the implications of that contempt show that he rejects the weakening he describes; his feelings have been stirred, but his will is unmoved': M. Heath, *The Poetics of Greek Tragedy* (London, 1987), 186. Ajax is affected by Tecmessa, but 'his confession that he has been moved is unwilling and contemptuous': G. M. Kirkwood, *A Study of Sophoclean Drama* (Ithaca, 1958), 103. M. Simpson, 'Sophocles' Ajax:

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is all explicit in the deception speech but already implicit in his instructions about the future of his son who is to repay his father's *trophe* to his parents (567–71).

Ajax passes on moral obligations to his kin through his mode of giving instructions to others and thus forcing them to become his obedient agents. His independence is complemented by his regarding others (even Athena) (112f.) as instruments of his will without their own moral life – like slaves. He does not believe in exchange of moral arguments or moral negotiation: he is surprised that Tecmessa's arguments have had an effect on him, since he sees himself, positively, as inflexible. The world is thus divided into Ajax himself and his enemies, since his *philoi* (friends and especially kin) are extensions of himself, or at least of his will. This means that his father in particular is the ideal Ajax who won honour in proportion to his intrinsic deserts and his son is to become another of the same breed. Naturally his commitment to both must be absolute, but only in their idealized forms. It is as if he is retreating into a narrower world populated only by himself. The 'self-destruction of Ajax is the concluding act of the stripping of the relations by which his self was defined.'[17] He ignores the fact that Telamon and Eurysaces are also people in their own right and more than past and future embodiments of the heroic ideal. Telamon is an old man who will miss his son as much as he will not want him back a coward and who will take some comfort in the young Eurysaces, particularly in the matter of the repayment of Ajax' *trophe* in the form in which the old usually receive it; and Eurysaces himself is still an impressionable child who needs to enjoy his innocence (558–9). Insofar as his father and his son are more than embodiments of the heroic ethos, Ajax must have a moral obligation to them.

But Ajax sees himself not only in relation to his *philoi* but also to society and to the wider universe wherein he comes to recognize – in the Deception Speech (646ff.) – a pattern of change in which he is naturally but reluctantly involved. His ultimate concern is truth to his own nature as defined within this larger whole. But he does not see right (or moral) action as accommodation to these conditions in which one

his madness and transformation', *Arethusa* 2 (1969), 88–103, and March (n. 7), 19–21, however, believe that Ajax is deeply affected by Tecmessa's arguments and integrates them into his intended suicide, the ground for which has now changed. 'Tecmessa has compelled him to abandon his earlier reason for suicide and to seek a higher justification for it which he articulates in the speech at 646ff.': Simpson, 94. As Ajax 'understands the pattern of change in the universe, it dictates not that he change his nature, but rather that he remove himself': ibid., 98.

[17] S. Goldhill, *Reading Greek Tragedy* (Cambridge, 1986), 87.

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is inevitably caught (i.e. the idea that ethics is grounded partly in human biological realities – an ancient view), or at least he does not *accept* this as the ethical course *for himself*. This is partly because he has developed a whole ethical way of life without realizing the pervasiveness of change. He ought now perhaps to see that his ethic is flawed, but he prefers to remain with a moral outlook to which he is accustomed, which he admires, and which is part and parcel of his self-concept, and to follow it through to its logical conclusion, which is suicide, for this is the only way he can face the facts and remain true to himself.

Moreover, his reality is somewhat different from that of other people because he has to reckon with the personal and lethal hostility of a goddess. To be sure, Athena has to be seen in part as an aspect of our common world which Ajax rejects, namely the fact that our achievements are in part the product of (to use a modern metaphor) mysterious and unconscious forces which he wrongly and egotistically believes detract from his personal glory. Though unaware of the conditions referred to by Calchas, namely that the goddess' anger will last only one day, Ajax actually chooses to act out the logic of her time-limited hostility by committing suicide immediately. Athena would never have become a negative condition of his life had he subscribed to a broader ethic. The spirit of Ajax's suicide is well summarized by Scodel: 'Ajax sees his death as a reconciliation with the gods, and the reconciliation is successful. It is not an atonement, and Ajax is not penitent: his suicide is what he chooses, and it also serves the gods' hostility.'[18]

In the deception speech then Ajax comes to think of the wider context of action. Right action for him is not primarily to discharge one's duties to other people (although he cannot completely ignore that social context) but to live up to an ideal of himself which is, I submit, not particularly moral, though it masquerades as moral. Ajax is very like the highly self-conscious *megalopsuchos* in Aristotle, the 'great-minded' man who 'has to have this thought, that he merits greater honour and

[18] R. Scodel, *Sophocles* (Boston, 1984), 20. C. Meier, *The Political Art of Greek Tragedy* (trans. A. Webber) (Cambridge, 1993), 178, goes too far in declaring that Ajax 'sacrifices himself. Only by doing this can he demonstrate the newly learnt prudence that is so pleasing to the gods. He thus heals the great rift that he caused in the order of the world.' Kirkwood (n. 16), 47, rightly observes that 'Ajax dies bitter, unforgiving, unrepentant'. A. F. Garvie, *Sophocles Ajax* (Warminster, 1998), states ad 646–92 that Ajax, 'while acknowledging the claims of *sophrosyne*, cannot bring himself emotionally to accept it in his own case. . . . But we should not underestimate the attractiveness of *sophrosyne* which Ajax clearly sees. The whole speech shows us Ajax resisting and overcoming what is now his strongest temptation'. But is it a temptation? There seems to be no struggle. The world is thus and some can conform, but he is unable and unwilling to conform. His moral act must be to be true to himself and to his inflexible standards.

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respect than others do; and this makes exceptional virtue into something self-centred.... For virtue involves a concern to do the right thing because it is the right thing; and to be the kind of person who does that – not to do the right thing because one is a person who is outstanding at doing the right thing and thereby worthy of greater respect than others.'[19] The warrior's courage is a virtue because it protects society from its enemies. Ajax's courage, however, is primarily self-related, though he feeds off others rather inconsistently for self-validation. For this reason Ajax is not an existentialist.[20] Christopher Gill rightly insists that characters like Homer's Achilles and Sophocles' Ajax are not lonely social outsiders, but engaged with their societies' standards even if alienated by special circumstances such as the confiscation of Briseis or the Judgment of Arms.

> What are sometimes taken as acts or statements of radical self-assertion or individualism are better understood as exemplary gestures, designed to dramatize what they [the likes of Achilles and Ajax] see as fundamental breaches in these norms. These exemplary gestures imply, at least, a special degree of reflectiveness about the proper form and goals of a human life.[21]

I would, however, qualify Gill's idea in two ways: firstly, while it is true that Ajax's suicide is an exemplary gesture (e.g. 470–2), more importantly it is what he sees as the only way of restoring and preserving his virtuous nobility (473–80); and, secondly, the gestural aspect is addressed to his (partly internalized) father and to himself rather than to the society which he has rejected and which has rejected him (458). Ajax is only an outsider because in his view society has failed him on its own terms, the terms which he himself accepts. However, his own and his warrior culture's concept of right action is to do what is in his own interest, as the attempted murders so vividly demonstrated.[22] He

[19] Annas (n. 10), 118.

[20] One thinks of the Sartrean Orestes in *Les Mouches* whose ethic is required to be authentically his own. His philosophy forbids him to do something because some external authority says he should, though the problem then is to avoid simply reacting against authority which is equally derivative and inauthentic. Ajax looks like an existentialist in his moral alienation from his society and peers and yet the standard he lives by is theirs and not his own and seems strange when he is no longer supposedly interested in gaining their approval or belonging to their group.

[21] C. Gill, *Personality in Greek Epic, Tragedy, and Philosophy* (Oxford, 1996), 21. He observes at 59, in a statement that could be applied to Ajax's deliberations, that 'the deliberative monologues [in Homer] represent an (exceptional) internalization of the interpersonal discourse which is central to the modes of living presented in the poem and which constitutes the standard context of deliberation'.

[22] Sophocles does not raise the issue of the morality of the attempted killings until near the end, and even then it is downplayed when Teucer claims that it is irrelevant since the killings did not after all take place (1127); and Athena's punishment of Ajax is for arrogance towards herself. It is

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is virtuous in order to think well of himself and to have that reflected in the opinions of others he can respect. Moreover, his self-concept as respectable involves not only being virtuous but not suffering humiliation.[23]

It is perfectly possible, though extremely paradoxical, to publish a moral truth about oneself by means of an immoral act – unless one takes the view that to have one virtue is to have them all. One could demonstrate that one is not afraid of death by committing suicide and leaving one's dependants exposed to extreme danger. And this is essentially Tecmessa's objection. A display of one's moral nature, qua display, is not a moral act but an act of self-interest, and it is not a moral act to seek to ensure that the world has a good opinion of you, for morality involves concern in thought or deed for the needs of others.

I have then impugned the moral basis of Ajax's decision to kill himself. Nevertheless, there is a good deal of truth in Garvie's claim that 'we want Ajax to remain true to himself, and suicide seems indeed to be the only solution'.[24] Or at least we want this as spectators naturally empathizing with the protagonist.[25] It does not follow, however, that our moral judgment will concur with this emotional commitment. Tecmessa urges legitimate moral considerations which relate to Ajax's importance to all his dependants. And yet the play itself really offers 'no practicable or honourable alternative' to suicide:[26] Ajax does not have the option to carry on from where he left off before the night raid. No one in the play explicitly explores the implications of his not committing suicide (or at least not fully) – not even Ajax himself in the deception speech. Tecmessa and the chorus in their opposition to his suicide fail to suggest on what terms he might live on. Ajax himself in the same speech sees accommodation as a general acceptance of change and the authority of the gods and the hated Atreidae, but in realistic terms, as far as these apply, no such accommodation would be possible. We cannot believe that Ajax will yield, so we are not, as spectators, interested

sometimes maintained that because the culture advocated harming enemies, Ajax was in his rights, but it is absurd to maintain that there were no holds barred in this. Heath (n. 16), 173, cites Athena's failure to condemn morally Achilles' impulse to kill Agamemnon at *Iliad* 1.188-218, but here again the poet does not wish strongly to make a moral point. His audience can decide.

[23] Ajax 'has no sense of responsibility to anyone or anything except his own heroic conception of himself and the need to live up to the great reputation of his father before him': Knox (n. 16), 145.

[24] Garvie (n. 18), ad 545–82.

[25] On the tension between empathy and moral judgment in tragedy see C. Gill, 'The Character-Personality Distinction', in C. B. R. Pelling (ed.), *Characterization and Individuality in Greek Literature* (Oxford, 1990), passim.

[26] Heath (n. 16), 183.

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in exploring what would happen in detail in accordance with that impossible scenario.

None of the characters really condemns the suicide as morally wrong after the event though they do lament the loss of the great man. The audience are invited to view the act from a dual moral perspective – that of the world of the play and that of Ajax. According to Knox in his landmark article,[27] the world of the play is not heroic pure and simple, for a heroic age

> has passed away, to be succeeded by one in which action is replaced by argument, stubbornness by compromise, defiance by acceptance. The heroic self-assertion of an Achilles, an Ajax, will never be seen again; the best this new world has to offer is the humane and compromising temper of Odysseus, the worst the ruthless and cynical cruelty of the Atridae. But nothing like the greatness of the man who lies there dead.

But Knox is equating the heroic age with the exceptional behaviour of Achilles and Ajax,[28] whereas the more cooperative qualities he claims have taken its place are actually the regular order of things in the heroic world: Achilles and Ajax are the exceptions that prove the rule. Heath's reflections on the Atridae are much nearer the mark: Agamemnon and Menelaus

> are non-heroic, quite simply as weak and dishonourable men. If there is any ethical polarity to be found in this play, it is to be found here: not in a contrast between old and new, but within the old, between the admirable and the contemptible.[29]

Moreover, as Blundell observes, Ajax neglects a fundamental part of his own code: 'the support and protection of dependent *philoi*'.[30] Cairns also insists that the values of the play are not post-heroic:

> we are faced with a recurrent contrast between individualistic values ... and values which, while still traditional, none the less emphasize more social, humane, and other-regarding aspects of the complex of honour. The effect is that of the placing of the individualistic values, the more obvious aspects of the code of honour, in their wider context, of the delineation of the limits of self-assertion at the point at which self-assertion itself becomes a violation of the code. It is salutary to note that Sophocles does not in any way have to innovate to create this effect; he simply sets the parts of the traditional complex in the context of the whole.[31]

[27] Knox (n. 16), 126.

[28] Achilles and Ajax are both extreme exponents of the code with no mitigation. Compare the former's very personal hatred of Hector: Winnington-Ingram (n. 16), 19.

[29] Heath (n. 16), 204.

[30] M. W. Blundell, *Helping Friends and Harming Enemies* (Cambridge, 1989), 86.

[31] Cairns (n. 6), 240f.

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Nevertheless, although the play is set in the heroic world, the extreme behaviour of Ajax operates as a *reductio ad absurdum* of certain aspects of the code and thereby points to its flawed premises. This point is well brought out by Sorum:

> The hero must aim to be best, to obtain the greatest possible prestige, and thus differentiate himself from the group. It is only within the community, however, that prestige can be won or recognized,[32]

but

> Ajax's exclusion from the community negates his potential to function as a hero, and yet his ethic remains Homeric. From this conflict emerges a criticism of the ideal, for, as the principles of heroism are carried to their logical conclusions, the balance is destroyed between the individual and social aspects of the hero's role.[33]

This contradiction implicit in heroic morality carries a lesson for the fifth-century audience to whom the play is addressed despite its being set in the heroic world: 'The emphasis on the warrior's function and relationship to his society in the play elucidates the inappropriateness of heroic individualism to the fifth century.'[34] This is clear in the way that Ajax neglects the needs of his various dependants, including his immediate family and his troops (the chorus).[35] To sum up, Ajax is an extreme exponent of the heroic code. This code is self-consistently the cultural context of the play, and yet values common to the code and to Sophocles' contemporaries are juxtaposed with (negative) values exclusive to the code in such a way as to foster unease with it.

Insofar as we identify emotionally with Ajax's moral code we can only approve of his suicide as an act of courage appropriate to his value system; but beyond that we also feel that, given his ethic (which we are induced to respect while rejecting it), he has got himself into a corner from which he cannot honourably escape in any other way. Morally we could have wished that he had never had the personality he did or adopted the stark morality that was associated with it. It is all very well our lauding Tecmessa's attitude of resignation, but somehow we would feel that attitude to be inappropriate for Ajax – we cannot

[32] C. E. Sorum, 'Sophocles' *Ajax* in context', *CW* 79 (1986), 361–77, at 362.

[33] Ibid.

[34] Ibid. For the relevance of the play's heroic ethos to the fifth-century audience see Zanker (n. 15), passim.

[35] The chorus need protection and have nothing to gain from the Trojan expedition. 'The job of the hero is created by these very people, the weak and defenceless, who followed their leader to Troy. Ajax, however, came in search of fame and wealth. When Ajax commits suicide, the sailors lose their protection and become victims of heroic morality': Sorum (n. 32), 366.

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conceive of him doing it with honour or grace, given his background and heroic commitments. Nor is it easy to see how he could by staying alive have effectively discharged his moral obligation to protect his *philoi* – though this is not an issue which he or the play raises. Theseus, by contrast, in Euripides' *Heracles* persuades his great friend to stay alive on the ground that his life is not really untenable: the pollution is not insurmountable, his self-concept as the benefactor of humanity is still valid, and the endurance required is part of that self-concept (Eur., *Her.* 1227–54, 1322–5).

But the key for Euripides' hero is also the self-concept rather than the virtuous life. Ajax's self-concept could not survive his situation, whereas Heracles' is based on services to humans and on a capacity to endure, although a new type of endurance will be required. Ajax's courage however was never impugned. His situation is untenable because, being completely alienated from his peers, he has no social context for brave acts. One final supremely brave act is his only possible move.

We have considered Ajax's decision in a generalized ancient ethical context, but we have not yet considered it in terms of ancient attitudes to suicide as such. The traditional point of departure for this topic is a passage in the *Phaedo* (61b–62d) in which Socrates disapproves of suicide except when the gods send some compulsion, as in Socrates' present situation in which he is required to drink the hemlock. Suicide in general was disapproved of on the grounds that we owe our lives in service to the state (which entails the gods through state cult). Aristotle condemns suicide as the coward's escape from 'poverty, (disappointed) love, or pain or distress (*ti luperon*)' (*N.E.* 1116a 12). For the Stoics, suicide was permissible only if embarked on by the wise man after careful rational deliberation and only on behalf of country or friends or on account of intolerable pain or incurable disease.[36] Clearly then Ajax cannot qualify on any of these counts. However, since Stoic sages were few and far between, most of humanity would have to rely on a divine sign to indicate that their time had come.[37] Now Ajax rightly believes that the goddess Athena wants him dead, and in dying his intention is in part to submit to her will in that respect. In general, the philosophers' attitude to suicide reflects the ancient Greek focus on self-realization, for it seems that the decision to live or die is a matter between oneself and the gods or the immanent

[36] Diogenes Laertius 7.130. On suicide in Stoicism see, e.g., J. M. Rist, *Stoic Philosophy* (Cambridge, 1969), 233–55.

[37] On the divine call to suicide in Stoicism see Rist (n. 36), 242–5.

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reason in the cosmos. It would not have occurred to them to put the principal focus on the likely consequences for the family of the intending suicide. Nor would it have occurred to them to identify a psychopathology of suicide.[38]

What Ajax performs, at least from the perspective of later systematic ancient ethical philosophy is a kind of spurious moral gesture. An interesting parallel is provided by an example from the later Stoic Epictetus:[39] an Olympic warrior who chooses to die rather than undergo medical treatment involving the removal of his genitals. Epictetus comments that he acted *kata prosopon*, that is, in accordance with his role or character or image. The purpose of this and of Ajax's gesture is to present himself, in what he sees as a favourable light, as a man with the courage of his convictions, or perhaps rather as a man who is theatrically true to his role. And he succeeds in this. Unfortunately the convictions themselves are flawed and the 'courage' itself called into question in respect of both its intellectual and emotional components. Moreover, Ajax's act is performed not merely in disregard but in deliberate defiance of the two principal contexts of moral action as seen by ancient philosophy: the state and nature. First of all the state: Ajax alienates himself from all of his peers except for his father and his son (who are really projections of himself), so that his supposedly moral act is performed in a cultural vacuum and really for his own exclusive benefit even though, paradoxically, it is grounded in the values of the society he has now rejected. Secondly, nature. Ancient ethical theories are developed with a respect for the natural restrictions on human activity. Nature might be conceived in a cosmic sense (the Stoic injunction was to live in accord with nature in this larger sense, that is with the deep rational purpose of the universe as they saw it) or it might be conceived in the sense of human nature. And Ajax clearly rejects the human condition when he refuses to live in an impermanent universe and in an impermanent society. And yet Ajax within his own cultural terms cannot reject his society even in death. For an effective suicide he must win renown (but from whom?) and pass over to Hades. For this he requires 'nature' (the gods invoked in his final speech) and humans to bury him.[40] Ironically

[38] For this approach see B. Seidensticker, 'Die Wahl des Todes bei Sophokles', in *Entretiens Fondation Hardt* 29 (Vandoeuvres-Geneva, 1982), 105–44; 127–41. While Ajax evinces some of the 'irrational' symptoms of modern suicides, there is, as we have seen, a clear enough logic in his arguments once we accept his premises.

[39] 1.2.25ff: cited by Rist (n. 36), 252.

[40] Meier (n. 18), 173f. 'While it is true that Ajax' *arete* must depend on what he has done, in the last resort it depends also on what he is, and on its recognition by other people. Even if Teucer

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he is buried solely on the pleas of an arch enemy (Odysseus) who only performs this role because his morality is one of 'generalised mutuality',[41] radically different from his own morality, and his posthumous honour comes again from Odysseus by whom he would not have cared to be honoured.

## EDITORIAL NOTES

Ian McAuslan is stepping down after twenty-eight years editorial service to Greece & Rome and New Surveys in the Classics. Ian's contribution to the flourishing of the Association's publications has been immense, and his wise guidance will be much missed. We are very grateful to him. Dr John Taylor is to succeed Ian as Editor with responsibility for New Surveys.

Richard Hunter
Chair, Classical Association Journals Board

The editors would like to express their sincere and warm gratitude to Stephen Halliwell, whose other commitments are, with this issue, bringing to an end a long and greatly valued role as Greek Literature reviewer for this journal. Over the course of nineteen consecutive issues of the journal, spanning almost a decade, Stephen has brought a combination of wide-ranging erudition and good humour to his insightful reviews of a staggering total of 244 books, much to the benefit of our readers. We are delighted to announce that Malcolm Heath of the University of Leeds will be Stephen's successor.

should succeed in burying him against the order of the generals, his status will remain unrecognised': Garvie (n. 18), 235f.

[41] Meier (n. 18), 174. 'It is ironical that that Ajax will secure his burial only because Agamemnon will accept the obligation which Ajax had rejected for himself': Garvie (n. 18), ad 1353. 'Odysseus is prepared to do for Ajax what Ajax declined to do (522) even for Tecmessa, and what Agamemnon's failure to do was lamented by Teucer (1266–7)': ibid., ad 1354–6. '...Odysseus' generosity represents the crowning form of *eugeneia* in the *Ajax* ... it is Odysseus' combination of the sense of justice and the conditioning factor of emotional responses like pity which finally succeeds in resolving the quarrel over Achilles' armour in the last stages': Zanker (n. 15), 25.

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