

SOME NEGLECTED ASPECTS OF AGAMEMNON'S DILEMMA

INTERPRETATION of the *Agamemnon* in general and of its first choral sequence in particular has tended to proceed on two assumptions: first, that Aeschylus could have given an answer (not necessarily a simple answer) to the question, 'Was Agamemnon free to choose whether or not to sacrifice his daughter?'; and secondly, that he composed the play in such a way that if we try hard enough we can discover his answer. I submit in this paper an interpretation which replaces both these assumptions with an alternative trio of hypotheses for which, I think, a case can be made: first, that Aeschylus was well aware that in real life we cannot know the extent to which an agent was able to choose whether or not to commit a particular act; secondly, that in *Ag.* 104–257 he has portrayed realistically the manner in which people respond to the commission of an extraordinary and disagreeable act by a respected agent; and thirdly, that the aspect of Agamemnon's predicament which made the most powerful impression on Aeschylus and his audience is an aspect to which modern interpreters of the play have seldom alluded even by implication. I would not be so rash as to assert that Aeschylus never concerned himself with the question of responsibility, nor that his concepts of justice and retribution are of small interest, but I am not satisfied that 'with all the powers of his mind', as Professor Lesky puts it,¹ 'he wrestled with the problem arising from the conflict between human existence and divine rule', nor do I take the view that a dramatist passionately involved in metaphysics and theology is a wiser and greater man than one who devotes the powers of his mind to concrete problems of poetic and theatrical technique. The scale of values adopted by interpreters of early Greek tragedy has certainly been affected, and has perhaps been somewhat distorted, by the dominant position of philosophy in European culture and education.

It is normal and salutary practice in discussing Aeschylean morality and theology to issue a warning against the anachronistic importation of Christian ideas into the fifth century B.C. This warning could profitably be extended, strengthened and made more specific, and in the category 'Christian' we should include not only peculiarly Christian ideas but also some modern ideas which have been widely adopted by Christians, others which may be reflexes of Christianity,² and traditional ingredients of Christianity which have roots in the Hellenistic or even in the Classical period.

In the first place, people who believe both that God is just, with an inclination to mercy, and also that many of us are destined to eternal pain have a strong motive for insisting, irrespective of such empirical evidence as might be thought relevant, that somehow or other each of us is truly responsible for his own moral choices and deserving of punishment for wrong choice. In Aeschylus's time, however, the notion of judgment and differential treatment after death was no more than one among several *λόγοι* on the subject of the afterlife (*Supp.* 230 f.),³ so that there was no eschatological compulsion to take up a firm position on the question of free will, either on the popular or on the philosophical level. Even in the late fourth century, funeral speeches, where Christian analogy might have led

¹ *JHS* lxxxvi (1966) 85.

² It is difficult to imagine, for instance, that the cry 'We are all to blame!' (*sc.* for everything), popularised by Ugo Betti, could have been echoed so widely and so often in any culture which had not inherited an oppressive sense of human worthlessness and guilt, even though many of those who have recourse to it most readily have no intention of contrasting man with a transcendent deity.

³ In tragedy generally, as in oratory throughout the fourth century, death is regarded as the end of suffering even (e.g. *Lys.* vi 20) for an impious man whose suffering is inflicted by angry gods. Perhaps Plato's Cephalus does not speak for everyone in saying (*Rep.* 330DE) that when a man is old and near to death he is tormented by the fear that the stories he laughed at when he was young may be true after all.

us to expect a fervent expression of faith, treat the notion of a sentient afterlife as no more than plausible and generally acceptable (Dem. lx 33 f., Hyper. vi 43). Abundant epitaphs (notably of the third century B.C.) which allude to 'the place of the pious' coexist with many which seem to preclude differentiation between the good and the bad or explicitly treat the survival of a sentient soul as a mere hypothesis; cf. the death-bed agnosticism of the pious Cyrus in Xen. *Cyr.* viii 7.19–22.

Secondly, Christian treatment of faith as a virtue has generally encouraged people to declare themselves 'sure' or 'convinced' on many moral questions, both general and particular, which do not in fact offer grounds for being sure. The Greek seems on the whole⁴ to have had a better grasp of the relation between belief and evidence and to have been less reluctant to keep alternatives open, except (see below) when personally involved in immediate conflict with an adversary and thus under the necessity of *using* one alternative to the exclusion of others.

Thirdly, and most important, the Christian distinction between God and Caesar and Christian insistence on the magnitude of the moral claims of each of us upon his fellows provide a foundation for a concern that no individual should be unjustly punished, written off as irredeemable or sacrificed as a means to an end. While the influence of explicitly Christian ethics has declined in the present century, that concern has been intensified, in those Western societies which have escaped totalitarianism, by liberal assertion of the individual's rights against the state, neo-liberal compassion (sometimes 'justice' to its proponents and 'sentimentality' to its opponents, neither very accurately), and a spectacular growth in scientific knowledge of the determinants of behaviour. One consequence of this is an anxiety that a man who commits a wrongful act while in a psychotic or neurotic condition should not be treated as if he had committed it in furtherance of a sane and rational intention. The Classical Greek offers a strong contrast with Christian and modern attitudes alike. He tended to 'nationalise' his gods to such an extent that (at least in public utterance) the application of 'pious'/'impious' converged upon that of 'patriotic'/'unpatriotic'. Furthermore, to him the question raised by wrongdoing was not so much, 'How can this *person* be dealt with fairly?' as 'What reaction to this *situation* will safeguard the interests of the community?' Many of his moral judgments imply that he regarded the state not as a roof over the head of a big family of individuals expressing and fulfilling themselves each in his own way, but as an organisation—like a regiment or a firm—in which the individual has a function to perform; and in organisations, now as then, negligence may be held as culpable as treachery and promotion or honour depends more on results than on good disposition. Attic law on involuntary homicide made no provision for what English law calls 'diminished responsibility', and there is no sign in the Classical period that anyone thought it should. When the chorus in *Ag.* 1407 ff. contemplate the possibility that Clytaemnestra has been rendered insane by something that she has eaten or drunk, they still assume that she will be outlawed and cursed. A Greek orator often calls his opponent 'demented', 'crazy', and the like, but not in extenuation, for his purpose is rather to suggest that mercy could only have undesirable consequences. The same view could be taken of ineradicable defects of character: cf. Dem. xxv 33, 'Who would not, as far as he possibly could, avoid (*sc.* τὸν ἀπονενοημένον) and put out of the way (*ἐκποδῶν*) the man afflicted by this vice (*sc.* ἀπόνοια), so as not to encounter it even by accident?' and Dem. xx 140, παντάπασι φύσεως κακίας σημείον ἔστιν ὁ φθόνος, καὶ οὐκ ἔχει πρόφασιν δι' ἣν ἂν τύχοι συγγνώμης ὁ τοῦτο πεπονθώς. It was perfectly possible to argue, with a hypothetical reference, that action proceeding from ignorance (e.g. Dem. xix 98–101) or from an ungovernable temperament (e.g. Dem. xxi 186) should receive lenient treatment, but 'bad or mad?' and 'wicked or sick?' are disjunctions which the Greek would not have found it easy to discuss at all without first formulating the issue in many more words than we require to make it

⁴ Soph. *El.* 400 (Chrysothemis) πατήρ δὲ τούτων, οἶδα, συγγνώμην ἔχει is unusual; contrast *ibid.* 355 f. (*Electra*).

intelligible in English.⁵ If the orators are not felt to be satisfactory evidence for the attitudes of the mid-fifth century,⁶ we may recall how readily the dramatists use νόσος and νοσεῖν to denote not only sickness and madness but intransigence, error, vice, misfortune, failure and poverty. When an actual conflict arose between fairness to an individual and what were conceived to be the best interests of the community, the latter prevailed, and punishment intended as an exemplary deterrent was deliberately inflicted on men 'forced' into misdemeanour by their circumstances (Aeschines i 87 f., Dem. xxiv 123). In Lys. xiii 52, where the issue is one of duress or rational error, it is argued that in the case of an act which has really serious consequences for the community no attention should be paid to the agent's plea that he acted ἀκων; the truth or falsity of the plea is to be treated as immaterial, presumably so that anyone contemplating such an act in future may know in advance that if he is caught there is no possible way out for him.

When we theorise about criminal responsibility or about free will and determinism, it is quite easy for us to construct a hypothetical case of such a kind that we can judge the agent guilty or guiltless. We can do this by being careful not to go on feeding ingredients into the construction beyond a point at which definite judgment is still possible. Equally, we can take a real case of which we have personal knowledge and pass judgment on the agent's responsibility after we have withdrawn our attention from all those elements in the case which make a clear decision difficult. In the one case we facilitate decision by refraining from addition, in the other we facilitate it by subtraction. If, however, we honestly attempt to take into account every consideration which is relevant to a case involving a person whom we know well, we can never find it easy, and usually find it impossible, to decide whether he could or could not have acted otherwise. If we happen to be people empowered to give judicial or disciplinary decisions, or when we serve as jurors, we are always put into the position of basing our verdicts on a fraction of the relevant evidence; the rules of the courts, combined with the need to finish one case and pass on to the next, see to that. The law, in fact, must pretend that firm and correct answers to a question of responsibility can be given, and it is hard to see how any system of law could operate on any other basis. Equally, an organisation cannot afford, in most cases, to take into account the problematic aspects of responsibility. When it is not our job to punish, reward or return a verdict, we are free to stop pretending and admit that we do not really know the answer.

The considerations listed above suggest that Aeschylus and his contemporaries were even less constrained to pretend, since the hypotheses, beliefs, attitudes and traditions which can make a decision on responsibility so painful for many of us did not exist in sufficient strength to make difficulties for them. It is moreover questionable whether Aeschylus had ever heard, read or even imagined any argument or problem of a kind which philosophers, ancient or modern, would regard as proper to moral philosophy. If by chance he had, it is unlikely that it had anything to do with free will and determinism, in view of the failure even of the powerful philosophical minds of the following century to comprehend the true nature and dimensions of that problem. Yet Aeschylus will have observed that some actions seem to be more easily explicable and predictable than others; he will also have observed that the view we express about the responsibility for a given act depends above all on whether we are attacking or defending. The classic example of a disagreement on responsibility is to be found in Euripides' *Troades*, where Helen (945–950) exculpates her flight and adultery by the trite (*cf.* Ar. *Nu.* 1079–1082) claim that she was a victim of the

⁵ Note especially Dem. xix 267, 'Those responsible for this felt no shame . . . οὕτως ἐκφρονας . . . καὶ παρατλήγας τὸ δωροδοκεῖν ποιεῖ', where insanity (i.e. an abnormal shamelessness and recklessness) is treated as a *consequence* of wrongdoing.

⁶ No comprehensive affirmation or denial of its relevance is rational. It will be found on reflection that circumstances can arise in which the application of fourth-century evidence to a fifth-century problem is argument *a fortiori*.

irresistible Aphrodite, while Hecuba (987–993) angrily rejects this excuse, putting the blame on Helen's own lust and greed. To adopt Aristotelian terminology (*Eth. Nic.* 1113b31), Helen locates the ἀρχή of her adultery outside herself, and Hecuba insists on re-locating it within her. Pasiphae in Euripides' *Cretes* refuses absolutely to accept responsibility for her love of a bull (*fr.* 82 [Austin] 9 f. νῦν δ', ἐκ θεοῦ γὰρ προσβολῆς ἐμηνάμην, / ἀλγῶ μὲν, ἐστὶ δ' οὐχ ἐκούσιον κακόν, 29 f. κἀγὼ μὲν ἢ τεκοῦσα κοῦδὲν αἰτία / ἔκρυψα πηληγὴν δαίμονος θεήλατον), but Minos in his anger behaves (44 ff.) as if he had not even heard her argument. In *Ag.* 1475 ff., 1497 ff., Clytaemnestra, exploiting the chorus's apostrophe (1468 ff.) to the 'δαίμων of the Tantalidai', attributes the murder of Agamemnon to that supernatural power, of which she was only the tool; whereupon the chorus are at once provoked into repudiation of her claim (1505 f.), and then as promptly go into reverse with the admission (1507 f.) πατρόθεν δὲ συλλήπτωρ γένοιτ' ἂν ἀλάστωρ. Confronted by Orestes in *Cho.* 910, Clytaemnestra pleads that a μοῖρα was παραίτια of Agamemnon's death, to which Orestes retorts that her death too is apportioned by a μοῖρα. They are not arguing about philosophical or legal theory. Aeschylus represents Clytaemnestra as clutching in turn, like anyone else (real or fictional) in a desperate predicament, at every imaginable means of putting off her own death, while Orestes brushes aside anything which might frustrate the act to which he is impelled—as he has told us (*Cho.* 298–305)—by a powerful combination of fear, hatred and shame.

Between declared adversaries, the issue is simple: what I did right is to my credit, and what I did wrong was not my fault; what you did wrong was your fault, and what you did right was no doing of yours (*cf.* Agamemnon to Achilles, *Il.* i 117 f.). Complexity is introduced by pre-existing loyalties and obligations. Kallistratos, the speaker of *Dem.* xlvi, attacks Olympiodoros in terms familiar to us in fourth-century oratory (52 ἀδικεῖ . . . διέφθαρται . . . παραφρονεῖ, 56 οὐ μόνον ἄδικος, ἀλλὰ καὶ μελαγχολῶν δοκῶν), but feels obliged to temper his onslaught with embarrassment (52) and charity (58, *cf.* 3) because Olympiodoros is his brother-in-law (1 f.). Where the speaker is not a contestant but only indirectly involved, reluctance to over-simplify the issue and take sides on the allocation of responsibility is the product not only of conflict between emotional reaction and the claims of partisanship, but also of maturity, experience and intelligent reflection. Since the chorus of *Ag.* are old men, loyal to their king but no more disposed than most Greeks to servility or to the suppression of normal human reactions, and reflection on antecedent events is a common formal function of a Greek chorus, we might expect to find their treatment of the sacrifice of Iphigenia characterised by caution, doubt and ambivalence in everything that concerns the responsibility for it as an *act*, contrasting with unambiguous revulsion against it as an *event*. It seems to me that this expectation is entirely fulfilled.

One of the most striking aspects of the chorus's narrative is its indirectness. The chorus do not at any point commit themselves to the assertions that Artemis was offended, that Artemis caused the bad weather which prevented the fleet from sailing, that Artemis demanded the sacrifice of Iphigenia, or that Artemis caused the bad weather to cease when the sacrifice had been performed. Instead, they say:

131–157: Calchas interpreted the omen of the eagles and the hare as signifying that Artemis might be hostile to the expedition and might prevent it from sailing. (His actual utterance is reported, 126–155).

184–198: Bad weather prevented the fleet from sailing.

198–204: Calchas declared that Artemis should be propitiated by sacrificing Iphigenia: μῆχαρ . . . μάντις ἔκλαγξεν προφέρων Ἄρτεμιν (199–202).

205–227: Agamemnon was in a quandary (again, his actual utterance is reported, 206–217); but eventually ἔτλα δ' οὖν θυτῆρ γενέσθαι θυγατρός (224 f.).

228–247: Iphigenia was sacrificed.

Three omissions from this narrative are noteworthy. We are not told why Artemis was

angry; there is no hint at any form of the alternative legend (known to Hesiod, *fr.* 23a.21 ff., 23b Merkelbach-West) that Artemis miraculously rescued Iphigenia; and we are not told that when the sacrifice had been performed the weather cleared. It may reasonably be felt that the third of these items hardly constitutes an important omission, because the Greeks did, after all, proceed to besiege Troy. I suggest, however, that it acquires some significance in the light of what the chorus do say (see below) at the point where they might have said, 'And so the wind abated . . .'. If the chorus had spoken directly of a clearing of the weather after the sacrifice, they would have taken a step towards giving us the impression that they are satisfied of the necessity of the sacrifice. Such an impression would have been greatly strengthened if they had committed themselves to an explanation of Artemis's anger or reported any singular circumstances which would hint at the substitution of an *εἶδωλον* for the girl whose throat was apparently cut. But such commitment is precisely what they avoid; for in their narrative, as in real life, the figure of the seer stands all the time between laymen and the mysterious intentions of the gods, and they cannot know whether his interpretation of events was correct or not.

It does not seem to me very likely, despite the temperamental instability and arbitrariness of deities in legend, that we are meant to believe that because a certain event in the animal world was distasteful to Artemis she therefore vented her anger on the humans whose enterprise, through no fault of theirs, was symbolised by that event. Those who do believe this speak from a position of strength, because they have the text on their side and do not have to reconstruct any *ὑπόνοια*. Yet we must remember that some measure of protest against the theological implications of much inherited legend had already been voiced by the time of the *Oresteia*, and I doubt whether Aeschylus's audience would have had any difficulty in seeing a mantic reasoning underlying Calchas's interpretation: 'This is an event which has an ominous character relevant to our enterprise. It is *also* an event which is distasteful to Artemis. I infer from *that* aspect of the event that *if* any deity is going to thwart our enterprise (131 *οἶον μὴ τις κτλ*), it will be Artemis'. Speculation on *why* Artemis should want to thwart their purpose is irrelevant to that line of reasoning, and in any case unprofitable, since divine motives are commonly not ascertainable.⁷ When the bad weather came, Agamemnon did not oppose (as he might have done) any judgment of his own to that of his seers (186 *μάντιν οὔτινα ψέγων*). The 'remedy' prescribed by Calchas was effected. The words uttered by the chorus at the conclusion of the narrative, *τέχναί δὲ Κάλχαντος οὐκ ἄκραντοι* (249), have four distinguishable implications: (i) Calchas said that Iphigenia must be killed, and killed she was; (ii) Calchas said that the bad weather would then stop, and stop it did; (iii) Calchas said that Troy would fall, and we may therefore still hope for its fall; (iv) Calchas uttered obscure but undoubtedly menacing words (151–155) about consequences of the sacrifice, and we cannot but fear that they will be fulfilled.⁸

By passing immediately from affirmation of the skill of Calchas to 'learning by suffering' (249 f. *δίκαι δὲ τοῖς μὲν παθοῦσιν μαθεῖν ἐπιρρέπει*), thence to the reflection that to guess at

⁷ In saying this I do not mean to deny that Aeschylus and his audience may well have had in mind a good reason why Artemis should have acted as an enemy to Agamemnon: Hugh Lloyd-Jones, *CQ* N.S. xii (1962) 190, points out that in Homer Artemis, like Apollo and their mother Leto, is an ally of Troy (*Il.* xx 39 f., 67–72, xxi 470–513); cf. B. Daube, *Zu dem Rechtsproblem in Aischylos' Agamemnon* (Zürich and Leipzig, 1939), 149 f.—who, however, will not accept partisan deities in Aeschylus. The objection of R. D. Dawe (*Erans* lxiv [1966] 14), that this role of Artemis is insufficiently conspicuous in Homer, is far from cogent, since different people

recall different details. One would not have thought, for example, that Menelaus would have been remembered as *μαλθακός ἀιχημητής*, a sneer rhetorically applied to him on one occasion (*Il.* xvii 588) by Apollo for the purpose of rousing Hector; but Pl. *Smp.* 174c—a passage criticised by Ath. 178a–e—indicates that he was so remembered, and that is a datum relevant to *Ag.* 122 f.

⁸ On the menacing character of seers' utterances and the predominantly pessimistic reactions to them cf. (with reference to *Ag.*) H. Klees, *Die Eigenart des griechischen Glaubens an Orakel und Seher* (Stuttgart, n.d.), 88 f.

the future is not only useless but an anticipation of grief (250–252 τὸ μέλλον δ' ἐπεὶ γένοιτ' ἂν κλύοις· πρὸ χαιρέτω· ἴσον δὲ τῷ προστένειν), and eventually to an expression of hope that all may be well (255 πέλοιτο δ' οὖν τὰπὶ τοῦτοισιν εὖ πράξις), the chorus sound again a sequence of notes which we first heard in 121 αἴλιον αἴλιον εἶπέ, τὸ δ' εὖ νικάτω, after their description of the eagles' devouring of the hare: the event has a menacing aspect, which makes them fear future evil, but they hope and wish for future good (as one does), and they are acutely aware that they cannot know in prospect whether good or evil will prevail. The refrain αἴλιον κτλ is repeated (139) after Calchas has proclaimed his fear of Artemis's hostility, and again (159) after his enigmatic reference to an enduring μῆνις. Agamemnon too hopes (217 εὖ γὰρ εἴη)⁹, but does not know, that the consequences of obeying Calchas will be good. The chorus's famous affirmation of the power of Zeus (160–183) arises out of the conflict between hope and fear voiced in the refrain of 159.¹⁰ The 'burden of care' is only to be 'cast from the mind' (165 f.) by recognition that it is not we who decide the outcome of events, but Zeus; I take the mood of these words to be essentially one of resignation, as in 250–252, and if the chorus feel a 'relief' in contemplating the power of Zeus, it is the feeling of liberation which comes from mature acknowledgement of the limitation of one's own powers, not the euphoria induced by trust in an infinitely good deity. Naturally, we want Zeus to be inflexibly just and stern when it is we who are injured and aggrieved, but in other circumstances, particularly when we are on the same side as the person on whom the execution of justice may fall, we should feel easier in mind if Zeus were not so just.¹¹ καὶ παρ' ἄκοντας ἦλθε σωφρονεῖν (180 f.) is a statement of fact, not of faith, and can be uttered by a person of any religion or of none; χάρις βίαιος (182) is a grim oxymoron emphasising the difference between χάρις from man to man and the corresponding transaction from god to man. Of course the 'learning by suffering' which Zeus has decreed (177 f.) has its positive side, especially if the sufferer survives (cf. Croesus to Cyrus in Hdt. i 207.1 τὰ δέ μοι παθήματα ἔοντα ἀχάρητα μαθήματα γέγονε), and in any case we can learn from the sufferings of others. But its negative side, stemming from Hom. *Il.* xvii 32, xx 198 ῥεχθέν δέ τε νήπιος ἔγνω, Hes. *Op.* 218 παθὼν δέ τε νήπιος ἔγνω, is much more relevant to the story of divination, hidden gods and human dilemmas; Zeus has so constructed the universe (denying man prescience as he once denied him fire) that we *cannot* understand whether we are taking the right course of action *until* we have experienced the consequences of that course.

I am not for a moment suggesting that Aeschylus was a rationalist who wished to discredit seers, or that he intended us to imagine the Argive elders as having progressed to the sceptical view expressed by the messenger in Eur. *Hel.* 744–757 (applauded by the chorus, 758–760), let alone the cynicism of Eur. *Iph. Aul.* 518–521. I suggest simply that Aeschylus was an observant, well-informed and reflective Greek who realised the magnitude of the predicament in which commanders of armies sometimes found themselves. An unusual event occurs, probably ominous but not immediately intelligible; or natural forces—wind, an eclipse, an earthquake—suggest that a supernatural being is communicating some uncertain intention. The commander may be no better equipped to decide on the action

⁹ These words have been called 'cynical', 'sceptical' and 'despairing'; they are in fact a cliché (cf. Fraenkel *ad loc.*) naturally uttered by a Greek embarking on an unwelcome means to a desired end.

¹⁰ Fraenkel (113) speaks of a 'sharp break' between 159 and 160, and in justifying this break (114) he treats the chorus as having reached 'a point of utter ἀμηχανία'. Dawe (art. cit., 2 f.) is right to question the appropriateness of this hyperbole, but goes to the other extreme in saying, 'There is *nothing* in the preceding verses which can be made to yield any point

of attachment to the Hymn to Zeus' (my italics). 159, prompted by the menacing obscurity of Calchas's concluding utterance, is a very good point of attachment to a pair of stanzas which say in effect, 'Zeus will decide, anyway, and it is pointless to speculate in advance'.

¹¹ Rightly emphasised by A. J. Beattie, *CQ N.S.* v (1955) 15. In Eur. *Phoen.* 154 f. the Paidagogos says of Polyneikes' army σὺν δίκῃ δ' ἤκουσι γῆν / δ καὶ δέδοικα μὴ σκοπῶσ' ὀρθῶς θεοί.

appropriate to these intimations than he is to set a fracture or paint a shield. He must go to his experts, the seers, and when he has listened to their interpretations he must decide whether to trust them and act on their advice, risking disaster if they turn out to be mistaken, or to defy and overrule them, trusting in his own judgment and risking punishment from gods and men if the seers prove to have understood the divine intention correctly. Hector in Eur. *Rhesus* 63–69, describing wryly and with a touch of sarcasm how he yielded to his seers against his own sound military judgment, is modelled equally on the Hector of *Il.* xii 195–250, who scorns Poulydamas's scruples over a strange omen, and on scores of commanders in the Classical period. The issue could be of great moment, as the Athenians learned to their cost in August 413, when the seers' interpretation of the eclipse of the moon imposed a fatal delay on the departure from Syracuse; in criticising Nicias for acceding to the superstitious fears of his men Thucydides (vii 50.4) may imply that Demosthenes, left to himself, would have stood up for a more practical view. A seer, after all, did not normally (there are exceptions) claim to operate solely or primarily by divine inspiration; he exercised a *τέχνη*. A certain Polemainetos, a seer of the generation after Aeschylus, bequeathed his books on divination to his friend Thrasyllus, who was thereby enabled to earn a good living as a seer himself (Isoc. xix 5–7, *cf.* 45). Xenophon, who was no sceptic, represents Cambyses as teaching his son Cyrus (*Cyr.* i 6.2) the essentials of divination so that he may interpret signs when no professional is available and may not be at the mercy of seers (*ἐπι μάντεσι*) should they wish to mislead him. Wherever arts and skills are exercised, error and fraud are possible, and to suppose error or fraud is a natural reaction to a distasteful divination. Oedipus, infuriated by Tiresias, accuses the old man of venality and deliberate falsehood (*Soph. Oed. Tyr.* 378–389). The chorus, with less reason to be angry but much reason to be worried, take refuge in the reflection that one cannot know whether a seer is right: 499–503, *ἀνδρῶν δ' ὅτι μάντις πλεόν ἢ γὰρ φέρεται, / κρίσις οὐκ ἔστιν ἀληθής· / σοφία δ' ἂν σοφίαν / παραμείψειεν ἀνῆρ*. To a Greek there was no impiety in recognising the lessons of experience and the limitations of certainty. After all, when Odysseus in *Il.* ii 284 ff. urges the Greeks to stay at Troy and reminds them of the omen of the snake and the sparrows, although he ends his recital with the robust declaration, 'all that will be fulfilled' (330), he begins it with 'stay for a while, that we may learn *whether or not Calchas's prophecy is true*' (299 f.). In these circumstances, are we to believe that Aeschylus means the chorus to take it for granted, without question, either that Calchas's interpretation of the will of Artemis was correct or that it was incorrect, and is it mere chance that for some reason he composed the lyrics in terms (186, 201, 248–250) which point to the opposite intention?¹²

Agamemnon, as reported by the chorus, regarded the army's demand for the sacrifice of his daughter as *θέμις* (214–217; it is misleading to say 'the chorus call the sacrifice *θέμις*', let alone, 'Aeschylus calls the sacrifice *θέμις*').¹³ Agamemnon was quite right; it was

¹² N. G. L. Hammond (*JHS* lxxxv [1965] 47) makes the important point that Agamemnon's dilemma 'is very familiar to those who are engaged in a war and exercise command', but whereas he formulates the crucial question as, 'Is one to stop or is one to take an action which will involve the death of innocent persons?', I would put more emphasis on (i) the relation between commander and seer, to which, perhaps, a partial modern parallel might be afforded by uncertainties over the interpretation of meteorological and intelligence reports, and (ii) the notorious fact that when we are responsible for the safety of others we commit cruelties which we would not commit purely in our own interests. Dawe's criticism (art. cit., 19) of Hammond seems, if I have understood it aright, to suggest that we should try to

forget that fighting in battles was one of the experiences which formed the author of the *Oresteia* and that personal acquaintance with commanders who had taken difficult decisions is likely to have been another. Why we should even permit ourselves to forget such a thing, I am not clear.

¹³ Even if *περιόργω* <σφ'> is a mistaken emendation of *περιόργως* in 216, the connection of thought between 212 f. and 214 ff. and the order of phrases point to the army, not to Agamemnon, as the subject of *ἐπιθυμῆν*; *cf.* the discussion by Dawe, art. cit., 16–18. I cannot agree with Lesky (82) that Agamemnon himself comes to feel a 'passionate desire' for the sacrifice; I dare say he passionately desires the end to which the sacrifice appears to be a means, but that is a very different matter. The analogies between

undoubtedly *θέμις* for an army embarked on an enterprise which it felt to be just to demand the life of someone else's daughter in obedience to the prescription of an eminent seer. That the enterprise itself was righteous the chorus do assert: the abduction of Helen was a gross offence against Zeus Xenios (61, *cf.* 362 ff., 748), so that the Greek expedition had the goodwill of Zeus. This does not mean that the chorus are inhibited from observing that the effort to punish Troy has already inflicted on the Greeks loss and suffering out of all proportion to the recovery of one man's wife (62, 225, *cf.* 448); enforcement of law, human or divine, not uncommonly produces a situation more heavily fraught with suffering than anything that can be confidently attributed to the original infringement of law. Again, reference to Zeus Xenios in no way implies that Zeus must necessarily have approved every act performed in furtherance of the expedition. The expedition was the instrument which he used for the chastisement of Troy; it also proves to have afforded an opportunity to create circumstances setting in motion a train of events which give effect to the curse uttered by Thyestes. Similarly in Isaiah x 5 ff. the Assyrians are treated as an instrument employed by God for the chastisement of Israel, but not as themselves enjoying God's favour, for they are destined to eventual punishment and destruction when they have served their purpose. Gods, like men, often use the tools most readily available.

The stanza 218–227, *ἐπεὶ δ' ἀνάγκας ἔδν λέπαδνον*, so far from making a statement about Agamemnon's responsibility, precludes even the raising of a genuine question about it. *δδναι* can be used both of deliberate and voluntary movement (e.g. Aesch. *fr.* 461 M, Soph. *Ant.* 1217, of entering a cave) and of totally involuntary movement (e.g. *Ag.* 1011 f. *οὐκ ἔδν πρόπας δόμος*, where the preceding nautical imagery suggests the translation 'sink'). The 'yoke-strap of *ἀνάγκη*' is a variant of the common image 'yoke of *ἀνάγκη*', suggested by the fact that oxen and horses go under the yoke not because they want to but because man forces them to (*cf.* Pi. *P.* iv 234 f. *βοέους δήσαις ἀνάγκα|ἔντεσιω αὐχένας*). *ἀνάγκη* is applicable to any physical, legal or moral force to which resistance is shameful, painful, perilous or for any other reason difficult. If the force is exercised by a deity upon a mortal, difficulty amounts to impossibility; this impossibility may be recognised by anyone who has decided that the force is divine, but the decision must precede the judgment that resistance is actually impossible.¹⁴ Many *ἀνάγκαι* are resistible in principle: shame and fear (Pl. *Ep.* 337A), which we can sometimes overcome; lust (Pl. *Rep.* 458D), against which shame can sometimes be deployed effectively; the power of alcohol (Ba. *fr.* 20B.6 f. *γλυκεῖ' ἀνάγκα . . . κυλίκων*), to which few of us surrender our will in its entirety; or the moral and social obligation to maintain our parents (Is. viii 32, with the implication that it 'necessarily follows' as a matter of logic), which ungrateful children evade. The Spartan envoys at the Persian king's court successfully resisted, by refusing to prostrate themselves, the *ἀνάγκη* brought to bear on them by his bodyguard (Hdt. vii 136.1). [Xen.] *Cyn.* x 14 prescribes the 'only way out' (*ἀπαλλαγὴ . . . μία μόνη*) for a hunter caught in a nasty *ἀνάγκη* ('predicament'), on the ground with an angry boar over him. Agamemnon's predicament was that only five courses of action (nine, if we include as an option with four of them the despatch of Iphigenia to a safe refuge) were open to him, all disagreeable or perilous: suicide; flight; disbanding the expedition; waiting obstinately to see if Calchas would be proved wrong by the return of good weather; and obedience to Calchas. In Eur. *Phoen.* 896–985 Creon, faced by Tiresias with a demand for the sacrifice of his son Menoikeus, is torn by the fury, grief and despair which we can imagine also in Agamemnon, and he puts *Ag.* 205–27 and *ScT* 653–719, to which Lesky (84) draws attention, are indeed interesting; but so are the great differences between the situation of Eteocles, who has good reasons for hating Polynices and a real need to kill him, and that of Agamemnon, who has had no occasion to feel anything but affection for his daughter.

¹⁴ I do not understand how Denniston and Page (xxiv n. 4) find it possible to say, 'the word means "necessity", "compulsion", *always*' (my italics) 'with a connotation of *inevitability*' (their italics). Apart from the instances quoted above, *cf.* *Pers.* 587, quoted below (p. 67).

his son's preservation first; his plans are frustrated by the boy's own patriotism and courage, and we may in any case feel that the ground has been cut from under his feet by one powerful retort of Tiresias (922), ἀπόλωλεν ἀλήθει' ἐπεὶ σὺ δυστυχεῖς; Agamemnon took the course which most people with Greek values and presuppositions would have felt bound to regard as dictated by honour, justice, piety and the overriding obligation to subordinate one's own life and the lives of one's dependants to the common good.¹⁵ We must remember not only Euripides' treatment of the sacrifice of Chthonia by Erechtheus (especially *fr.* 50 [Austin] 14–21, 37–39) but the use which Lycurgus (*Leocr.* 98–101) makes of the story in addressing a jury. It is not very important whether we refer Agamemnon's 'yoke-strap of compulsion' to the forces which determined the particular course on which he eventually embarked or to the predicament which so limited the range of possible courses.¹⁶ It is, in my submission, important that neither he nor anyone else could be certain—as certain as one would wish to be before killing one's own child—that his seer had interpreted the will of the gods correctly, and this dimension of his dilemma seems to me emphasised by the terms in which the chorus tell the story.

The chorus use very harsh words (219–223) in describing how Agamemnon accepted the sacrifice as the right alternative. They react in this way because the cutting of a girl's throat as if she were a sheep constitutes a pitiable and repulsive event; whether it is necessary or unnecessary, commanded by a god or the product of human malice or perversity, makes no difference to the emotional reaction of the chorus (or of any other reasonable person) to such a sight or story.¹⁷

They describe by implication Agamemnon's state of mind as αἰσχρόμητις τάλαινα παρακοπά (222 f.) because anything against which one feels a revulsion, aesthetic, moral or empathetic, is αἰσχρός, and because Greek emotive language (*cf.* p. 59 above) was normally indifferent to any distinction between a cruel, wicked or reckless act committed by a manifestly insane person and a comparable act committed by those whose behaviour did not otherwise afford comprehensive evidence of insanity. They also call Agamemnon's state of mind 'impious, impure, unholy' (219 f. *δυσσεβῆ . . . ἀναγνον ἀνίερον*) because Greek emotive language exploited to the full the assumption that what is offensive to the speaker, or to man in general, is also offensive to the gods; this is evident from (*inter alia*) the widespread use of θεοῖς ἐχθρός as a general term of abuse and disapproval (*cf.* Philoctetes' addressing of Odysseus as ὦ θεοῖς ἔχθιστε in *Soph. Phil.* 1031), the readiness of the orators to apply ἀσεβής, *δυσσεβής* or ἀνόσιος indiscriminately to conduct of which they disapprove (*cf.* Lycurg. *Leocr.* 93, where εὐσεβεῖς is the antonym of *κακοῦργοι*), and the comic use of (e.g.) *ιέρουλος* as a term of abuse in cases which have nothing to do with the literal meaning of the word.¹⁸ This consideration may be helpful in respect of another Aeschylean passage

¹⁵ H. D. F. Kitto, *Form and Meaning in Drama* (London, 1959), 5, calls the sacrifice 'assuredly . . . a price which a man of courage and sense would refuse to pay'. It is perfectly possible to pass an adverse moral judgment on Agamemnon by some modern standard, but I feel pretty sure that many an Athenian in Agamemnon's place would have thought that courage and sense demanded the sacrifice; in Clytaemnestra's place, he would have thought the opposite; and in the chorus's, he would have *felt* as they do and would have changed his *opinion* frequently about the claims of courage and sense.

¹⁶ The phrasing of the sentence strongly suggests the former, and editors have normally taken it so.

¹⁷ Lesky (82) remarks, 'I must object to the attempt to disparage these words of the chorus as a personal opinion or even a misunderstanding on its part'.

For my part, I must object to the implications of the word 'disparage', to the suggestion that a value-judgment is something other than a 'personal opinion' and to the treatment of 'misunderstanding' as a meaningful word in the discussion of this particular passage.

¹⁸ *Cf.* Alexis *fr.* 15, where one character remarks successively οὐδὲν ἀσεβεῖς οὐδέπω and ἀγνεύεις ἐτι while another checks through the items of a shopping-account. The important boundary in the usage of words which carry, or can be made to carry, an emotive charge does not lie between the serious and the humorous but between the technical, informative or objective (philosophy, science, exegesis, jurisprudence) and the artistic, manipulative or subjective (poetry, drama, oratory, conversation).

which does not seem to have received a satisfactory interpretation in terms of religion and law,¹⁹ *Suppl.* 9 f. γάμον Αἰγύπτου παίδων ἀσεβῆ τ' ὀνοταζόμεναι <διάνοιαν suppl. Weil>. Whether Aeschylus or any of his contemporaries could have demonstrated to the satisfaction of a level-headed ἐξηγητής that it was *impious* of a commander to sacrifice his daughter when told by his seer that Artemis demanded it, I greatly doubt.²⁰ Did the contemporaries of Euripides think that it was impious of Erechtheus to sacrifice Chthonia? It is a singular fact—especially singular if we have Aristophanes' *Frogs* fresh in our minds—that Euripides transfers the sacrifice and self-sacrifice of princes and princesses to the plane of rhetoric, whereas Aeschylus brings us down to earth and makes us feel what such a thing is really like. Since his chorus are not giving a considered judgment as theologians, philosophers or legal consultants, but discharging their emotions in words, the question, 'But was it really *impious*?' is perhaps inappropriate.

My emphasis on the representational and strictly dramatic aspects of *Ag.* 104–257, at the expense of its speculative and theological aspects, impinges on the difficult question of positive characterisation in choruses. That the Eumenides and the panic-stricken women of *ScT* 78–180 coexist in the same dramatic corpus as choral stanzas which could be uttered by people of either sex and any age, status or nationality suffices to show that distinctiveness of choral characterisation is a matter of degree, and that questions about this aspect of the chorus in any given play are not answerable by recourse to interpretative dogma.²¹ There is no lack of parallels for a choral utterance which reveals and expresses an irrational frame of mind. In *Ag.* 1132 f. the chorus's rhetorical question, 'What message of good comes to men from oracles?' carries the implication that oracles and inspired utterance *always* foretell evil; the implication is false, but emotion notoriously prefers 'always' and 'never' to a judicious 'sometimes'. In *Ag.* 757 f. δίχα δ' ἄλλων μονόφρων εἰμί carries the suggestion that the belief that only impiety, not innocent prosperity and good fortune, provokes divine punishment is novel, or at least rare; this suggestion is not borne out by the available evidence, but contrasting a view explicitly with another and asserting its originality is one mode of emphasis. The chorus of Persian elders in *Pers.* 584–590 τοὶ δ' ἀνὰ γᾶν Ἀσίαν δὴν / οὐκέτι περσονομοῦνται, / οὐκέτι δασμοφοροῦσιν / δεσποσύνοισιν ἀνάγκαις offers a related phenomenon. Conceivably the retreat of Xerxes was followed by widespread revolt in the Persian empire; or possibly Aeschylus at the time of writing believed, for one reason or another, that the empire was or had lately been in revolt; but since the epitome of Ctesias has nothing to say about this, and there is no Oriental documentary or archaeological evidence to suggest it, I would suppose that Aeschylus made his chorus utter a gloomy generalisation about revolt simply because that is what they would be likely to say in their situation.²²

If, however, we are seeking a really substantial parallel for interpretation of *Ag.* 104–257 in representational terms, we must consider *Ag.* 355–488, where—as seems obvious to me,

¹⁹ Cf. A. F. Garvie, *Aeschylus' Supplikes: Play and Trilogy* (Cambridge, 1969), 215 ff.

²⁰ Cf. F. Schwenn, *Die Menschenopfer bei den Griechen und Römern* (Giessen, 1915), 121–40, on the part played in Attic and other Greek myths by human sacrifice, especially the sacrifice of a princess, on the command of an oracle. D. Kaufman-Bühler, *Begriff und Funktion der Dike in den Tragödien des Aischylos* (Bonn, 1955), 63, 72 f., 78 f., maintains that the sacrifice of Iphigenia is an offence against divine Dike, and that Artemis cannot have required it; this amounts to saying that Calchas was wrong, but Kaufman-Bühler does not follow up the dramatic implications of that. The same criticism may be

made of Wilamowitz, *Aischylos: Interpretationen* (Berlin, 1914), 166, upon whose conviction that Aeschylus is rejecting legends about deities demanding human sacrifice Kaufman-Bühler's fuller exposition is based.

²¹ Fraenkel (248), criticising interpretations of 475–87 (see p. 68 below), will not allow a chorus to 'function as an ordinary character'. Ctr. R. P. Winnington-Ingram, *CQ* N.S. iv (1954) 25 f., on elements of consistency in the characterisation of the chorus of *Ag.*

²² The use of Ἀσία, Ἀσίς and cognate words in the *Persae* makes it very unlikely that 584 ff. refer to the Aegean coast of Asia Minor.

and quite out of the question to many others—a sequence of reactions of an irrational but entirely familiar type is portrayed realistically.

355–402: Troy has fallen, and her fall is just punishment for the sin of Paris.

403–428: Helen's flight inflicted great sorrow on Menelaus.

429–458: And the war has inflicted great suffering on the Greeks, so that there is resentment against the Atridae.

459–474: And victory may incur divine hostility.

475–487: Perhaps it is not true—who knows?—that Troy has fallen.

If we speak of a 'sequence of thought' here, we must make it plain that we do not mean a *logical* process of inference from premisses to conclusion.²³ It would be nonsensical to argue: '(a) Troy has fallen. (b) I am apprehensive about what will follow its fall. (c) *Therefore* perhaps it has not fallen'. But the narrative statement, 'They believed that Troy has fallen; then they reflected on some possible consequences of its fall; *therefore* they doubted whether it had fallen', would describe a particular case of a common *causal* process,²⁴ and it is this case which Aeschylus has put before us in dramatic terms. Fraenkel (246–249), admitting that anyone in the situation of the Argive elders 'will naturally be the prey of contradictory emotions', regarded Aeschylus as bringing one element of that emotional complex into exceptional—and, he seems to imply, unrealistic—prominence in order to create a dramatic contrast between the return of doubts and the arrival of the herald who confirms the news of the fall of Troy. Denniston and Page treat this contrast as the least unsatisfactory explanation so far proposed, but are even less inclined than Fraenkel to compromise with what he called Hermann's 'expedient of a subtle psychological speculation' (247; cf. *ibid.*, 'flimsy psychological speculation', which seems to refer to Wilamowitz and Kranz as well as to Hermann).²⁵ The rhetoric of 'expedient' and 'flimsy' is too crude to do much harm, but that 'subtle' and 'speculation' should be used rhetorically as derogatory terms is more to be regretted, for the interpretation of Greek poetry cannot easily dispense either with subtlety or with speculation. The derogatory use of 'psychological' is more serious, and it would be a pity if we allowed ourselves as a matter of course to be provoked by the mere mention of psychology into adverse reactions which would have surprised the Victorians.²⁶ The situation is curiously confused by the willingness of those who profess mistrust of psychology to propose interpretations which do not seem to differ in kind from what they criticise in others, e.g. Fraenkel (145) on what he regards as a contradiction between *Ag.* 249–254 and 255–257: 'The behaviour of the Chorus here is just as full of contradictions and just as natural as under certain conditions the behaviour of men at their prayers often is . . .'.²⁷

²³ Wilamowitz, *Griechische Verskunst* (Berlin, 1921), 185 f., reconstructs what could be called a rational process, in so far as it ostensibly leads to a conclusion that the gods *cannot* have allowed Agamemnon to capture Troy ('*iustitiam divinam eis ipsis, qui poenas demeruerunt, triumphum concessisse quis potest credere?*'), but an infusion of irrationality is needed (cf. Fraenkel, 247) to justify '*qui poenas demeruerunt*'.

²⁴ It may often be observed that when a participant in a discussion begins with 'I say that, because . . .', he proceeds sometimes to give the grounds on which his conclusion is based, but at other times to make a purely autobiographical statement. Denniston and Page describe 475 ff. as an 'unmotivated rejection of the theme on which the whole of [the chorus's] song was founded'. This is fair so long as 'unmotivated' is taken in the limited sense 'logically unfounded', but

the *cause* of the chorus's rejection of the news has in fact been fully presented to us in the course of the song.

²⁵ Hermann in his note on 454, of which Fraenkel quotes only the first half, suggested that the chorus's deep mistrust of Clytaemnestra conflicts with, and eventually prevails over, their joy in victory. W. Kranz, *Stasimon* (Berlin, 1923), 159 f., offers an interpretation which has certain affinities with Hermann's, Wilamowitz's (see n. 23 above) and that which I have suggested, but also stresses the dramatic contrast with the arrival of the herald. Fraenkel eventually (248 f.) comes very near to admitting what he began by rejecting.

²⁶ Cf. (e.g.) George Eliot's letters to John Blackwood, February 29, 1860, and July 9, 1860.

Most people would probably agree without more ado that no interpretation of a Greek text is likely to be right, except by a fluke, if it depends on the assumption that the author consciously adhered to a psychological theory which, so far as our evidence goes, contradicts such psychological theories as were held in antiquity, especially if it is a theory dependent on modern experimentation which for technical reasons was not within the capacity of the ancients. Everyone, on the other hand, would agree that some intellectual and emotional processes seem to be universally distributed throughout known human cultures. Different cultures have adopted different theories about such processes, and they have differed in the assurance with which they regard their own theories as simple common sense dictated by nature and shared by all good and sensible people; our own traditional culture has failed as much as any to recognise the extent to which what it calls common sense is a set of beliefs, assumptions and denials founded on a highly selective treatment of experience, and we have always to reckon with the possibility that the Greeks took for granted as self-evident some psychodynamic principles which occasion surprise when they surface after being submerged for a couple of millennia. No one, however, can fairly be called a psychologist unless he thinks both rationally and systematically on the subject of thought and feeling; Plato and Aristotle were psychologists in so far as they theorised explicitly on that subject, while Aeschylus, so far as our evidence goes, was not. But that is not to say that Aeschylus did not observe accurately, or that the theory implicit in the dramatic representation which he founded on observation was inferior to anybody's explicit theory. The article to which H. J. Rose gave the unfortunate title 'Aeschylus the Psychologist' (*SO* xxxii [1956] 1 ff.) would more properly have been entitled, 'Realism' (or 'Realistic Characterisation', or 'Realistic Representation') 'in Aeschylus'.

This leads us into a second reason which sometimes makes an interpreter of Aeschylus shy of saying anything which others may dismiss as an excursion into psychology: the fear that he may be assumed to have committed himself to an unfashionable extent to the view that Aeschylus intended to create characters which would be at the very least self-consistent and even on occasion unique but totally convincing individuals, and the further fear that he may compound his offence by noticing occasions on which choruses behave like recognisable individuals. I do not think that anyone should be in a hurry to take up a dogmatic position on these questions; there is nothing like enough agreement on which elements in a given play amount to a significant degree of consistency in characterisation and which do not.²⁷ When, if ever, there is a greater measure of agreement, we shall be in a better position to consider how far, and in what circumstances, characterisation is sacrificed to other dramatic purposes.²⁸ In the meantime, it may be useful to see how many passages in Greek drama are explicable without residue as realistic portrayal of irrational processes, familiar to us from introspection and observation, working upon matter furnished by Greek beliefs and values and expressing themselves in Greek terms.

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²⁷ For example, the description of Agamemnon as *μάντιν οὐτινα ψέγων* (186) and his reply to Clytemnestra in 934, *εἴπερ τις εἰδώς γ' εὖ τόδ' ἐξεῖπεν τέλος*, create a consistency in the character of Agamemnon. About the fact of consistency, there can be no argument; it is simply there, under our eyes; the argument can only be on whether the consistency is due to mere coincidence or to the poet's design. Of course, if R. Merkelbach (in *Studien zur Textge-*

schichte und Textkritik [Cologne, 1959], 168 ff.) is right in his rearrangement of lines between 932 and 945, *cadit quaestio*.

²⁸ I find myself in essential agreement with the argument of Mrs P. E. Easterling (in a paper read to the Classical Association in April, 1972) that dramatic effect is diminished to the extent to which the characters whose interaction constitutes the effect are deficient in credibility and intelligibility.