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0521423902 - Helping Friends and Harming Enemies: A Study in Sophocles and Greek Ethics - Mary Whitlock Blundell

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I

Introduction

Let us add to the philosophers a most learned man, and indeed a divine poet: Sophocles.

Cicero, *De Divinatione*

Tragedy and ethics

According to Aristotle, character or *ethos* in tragedy is ‘that which reveals what the moral choice is like’ (*Po.* 50b8f.). Although I did not come to this study by way of Aristotle, this kind of *ethos* is what I wish to explore in Sophocles, by examining five tragedies in which moral choice is central to the course of the drama. These choices are made within the context of traditional Greek morality, which, amongst other things, expected one to help one’s friends and harm one’s enemies (abbreviated hereafter as ‘Help Friends/Harm Enemies’ or ‘Help Friends’ and ‘Harm Enemies’). Closely allied to these principles, as we shall see, is the conception of justice as retaliation. I have chosen to focus my discussion around this nexus of principles, since they provide a pervasive ethical background to most of Greek literature and are of special significance for tragedy. They are also connected with broader ethical questions, such as the nature of pleasure and advantage. In particular, both Help Friends/Harm Enemies and retaliatory justice are rooted in passion, and therefore raise profound questions about the rationality of moral action and the relationship of moral justification to the emotions. In the next chapter I shall outline the salient features of Help Friends/Harm Enemies, in order to illustrate its scope as a moral code and provide a context in which to assess Sophocles’ handling of such issues. I shall go on to argue that they are fundamental to the plays under discussion, not merely as an unthinking reflection of popular attitudes, but

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as an integral part of each drama.¹ First, however, some preliminary questions must be addressed.

To begin with, can we expect an intellectually serious presentation of ethical issues from a dramatist such as Sophocles? Critics have not hesitated to approach Greek tragedy in such a spirit, in the hope of determining the playwrights' moral and religious thought. Although Sophocles has often suffered in comparison to his fellow tragedians in this regard,² he has had his share of such investigations.³ But these discussions tend to be vague and subjective, seeking the 'philosophy of Sophocles' in a very broad sense: a sweeping metaphysical scheme into which all the surviving plays can be fitted.⁴ In their concern to discover the dramatist's own views, none of these writers examines the way in which moral issues are explored within the plays through the ethical language and argument used by the various characters.⁵ Moreover the search for Sophocles' personal world-view or general moral and religious stance must ultimately be a subjective exercise.⁶

¹ So too Winnington-Ingram 312–16 and *passim*, and most recently Goldhill 85–106. Others have noted the importance of the talio and Help Friends/Harm Enemies for Sophocles, usually assuming that he accepted them uncritically (so Hirzel 468f.; Hester, *Friends* 24f.).

² For more or less patronising remarks about Sophocles' intellect, often contrasting him with Aeschylus and Euripides, see e.g. Rohde 431f.; Perrotta 630; Jaeger 266f.; Norwood 177; Jones 167, 171 and cf. 181; Hester, *Unphilosophical* 46f. Many scholars seem to share a tacit assumption that if Sophocles is eulogised sufficiently for his many other excellences, then it is acceptable to neglect or even belittle the intellectual content of his work. Yet it is precisely the inextricable synthesis of thought and artistry in Sophocles which has led, through concentration on the latter, to the obscuring of the former (cf. Bowra 2; Opstelten 2f.; Torrance 270).

³ See e.g. Webster ch. 2; Moore; Kitto, *GT* ch. 6 and *SDP*; Musurillo ch. 11.

⁴ Kitto glosses 'philosopher' as someone with 'coherent thoughts about the universe' (*SDP* 2).

⁵ Moore, despite his title *Sophocles and Arete*, never actually discusses Sophocles' use of the word *arete* (likewise Kieffer and Whitman). Similarly Kitto speaks of *dike* in the most general terms. (For the meaning of these and other transliterated Greek words see the glossary.) Moreover Kitto's *dike* may be an amoral force (*SDP* 47–9, *GT*³ 135f.), and is therefore of little use for resolving problems of human justice. (Some of Kitto's admirers have been less careful to distinguish between human morality and universal *dike*.) For criticism of such approaches see Torrance 271f.; Vickers 23–9.

⁶ Bowra's interpretation depends on his own dubious criteria for determining which passages are being used by Sophocles to 'show us what to think' (11). The same problem arises with Webster ch. 2 and Musurillo ch. 11. Cf. also Opstelten 141–8.

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Such discussions of Sophocles' 'philosophy' usually focus on his view of the gods and their relation to mortals, often succumbing to the anachronistic temptation to tie morality too closely to religion. Much criticism has been coloured by the Judaeo-Christian tradition in which morality (how people relate to each other) and religion (how they relate to their gods) are linked far more consistently than they are in Greek thought. So Bowra tells us of *Electra*, 'The gods and his dead father work with Orestes. They approve, demand and further his vengeance. We need no other proof that Sophocles thinks the vengeance right' (Bowra 226f.). But the role of the gods in human morality (do they enforce it, share it, ignore it?) is a persistent problem for the Greeks, and one which is solved, if at all, in a variety of ways.⁷ The attempt to ascertain Sophocles' religious and metaphysical views is no substitute for examining those questions of human choice and action that constitute the stuff of moral theory.⁸

The last several decades have seen some more promising approaches to the ethical content of Sophocles' plays.⁹ One strand of criticism has studied human morality in Sophocles from the perspective of the protagonist or 'hero' and the choices that he or she faces. 'Human responsibility now fills both foreground and background', declared Whitman in 1951 (Whitman 39). He departed radically from earlier interpretations, announcing a new approach to the Sophoclean hero: 'The real moral nature of his position must be judged only by his own standard as he reveals it in the play, and by the moral choices open to him in the action' (Whitman 16). Yet Whitman did not carry out the careful analysis of Sophocles' handling of ethical issues which this programmatic statement might sug-

⁷ Cf. Kitto, *FMD* 74, *SDP* 44–6; Adkins, *Tragedy* 96f.; Dover 246–61. For the multiplicity of religious attitudes to be found in Sophocles' plays see Kirkwood 269–72. On religious anachronism see the salutary warning of Hester, *Unphilosophical* 41–6.

⁸ The words 'moral' and 'morality' themselves risk anachronism (cf. the unfortunate and by now notorious remark of Adkins 2 that 'we are all Kantians now'). I shall use such language in the broadest sense, for values that provide a guide for conduct in situations affecting the well-being of others, thus imposing constraints on what one may do in pursuit of personal gain (cf. the definitions of Dover 1; Vlastos, *Justice* 301). For a recent discussion of these terms see Williams ch. 1.

⁹ At the same time there has been a growing number of attempts to place the dramatist more adequately within his intellectual milieu. See Webster ch. 1; Finley, *Three* passim; Long; Rose.

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gest. The approach he championed necessarily touches on ethical issues, and may provide considerable insight into the hero's moral psychology, as it has done most notably in the hands of Bernard Knox in his book *The Heroic Temper*. Its focus, however, is the character of the protagonist rather than the ethical concepts articulated through the dramatic characters.

Philosophical writers have also been showing an increasing interest in the moral content of Greek literature. Much discussion has been provoked by Adkins' *Merit and Responsibility*, which uses Greek literature as evidence for the development of ethical concepts before the advent of formal moral philosophy. Adkins distinguishes two sets of values which he calls 'competitive' and 'cooperative' or 'quiet', and argues that the former were traditionally the dominant values of Greek culture, while the task of moral philosophy was to gain acceptance for the latter.¹⁰ There has been considerable criticism both of this basic dichotomy and of its application to particular authors.¹¹ But with respect to fifth-century non-philosophical authors like Sophocles, the most general charge of which Adkins is guilty is question-begging.¹² Adopting a narrowly lexical approach, he assumes that any occurrence of a word such as *agathos* always refers to the 'competitive' values inherited from the Homeric tradition. When such words appear in a context which ties them unequivocally to one of the 'quiet' values, he treats them as exceptions, characterised as 'abortive moralism' (Adkins 246).¹³ But given the acknowledged 'turmoil of values' of the period (Adkins 232), he is not entitled to dismiss such cases in this way. It is this assumption of what he intends to prove which leads him to conclude, for example, that 'Sophocles does not employ *agathos* or *arete* in a quiet moral sense' (Adkins 193). In fact *agathos* and its cognates and synonyms

¹⁰ This is the central thesis of *Merit and Responsibility*, reaffirmed by Adkins in a series of subsequent articles.

¹¹ See Robinson's review in *Philosophy* 37 (1962) 277–9; Long, *Morals*; Lloyd-Jones ch. 1; Creed; Dover, *Evaluation*. For Sophocles see Freis (to whom I am grateful for making her dissertation available to me). For recent contributions to the continuing debate on Homer see Rowe; Morris 115–20.

¹² Cf. Creed 218; Freis 93.

¹³ Similarly in his treatment of Homer any passage that does not fit his scheme is discounted as a 'persuasive definition' (38–40).

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do have significant areas of overlap with the 'quiet' virtues in Sophocles.¹⁴

Another limitation in Adkins' treatment of tragedy is his use of individual scenes or brief passages without considering the overall dramatic context or the place of moral debate in each play as a whole.¹⁵ On *Philoctetes* 119f., for example, he notes that Sophocles is making use of the 'confusion of values' which is 'part of the moral scene at this period' (Adkins 189). Again, he observes that line 1248 'indicates that there has been a change of linguistic habits in at least a section of society' (Adkins 183). But such passages, within the context of the entire drama, may contribute to a more complex exploration of moral issues than Adkins suggests. In a work as wide-ranging as *Merit and Responsibility* it would be impractical to cover complete plays in any depth. But the decision to treat only select passages leads Adkins to represent Sophocles as merely reflecting a contemporary 'confusion of values', without asking whether the dramatist is articulating such confusions into a constructive ethical debate. Despite these shortcomings, however, Adkins has helped to stimulate the currently burgeoning interest in the relationship between Greek literature and moral philosophy.¹⁶

Such interest is entirely appropriate, since the two, until at least the time of Aristotle, are inextricably linked. Homer is the well-spring of all Greek culture, including both tragedy and moral philosophy, and many of the issues that will later come under the scrutiny of ethics receive their first articulation in epic.¹⁷ Poets generally were regarded by the Greeks as repositories of wisdom on all kinds

¹⁴ This is demonstrated by Freis, employing the criteria for synonymy outlined in Dover 62–4.

¹⁵ Cf. Dover, *Evaluation* 36–44. Ironically, Adkins makes the same criticism of Dover's *Greek Popular Morality* (*Problems* 157f.), also with some justification. But Dover is scrupulously careful in his choice of sources and makes little use of tragedy. Pearson's *PE* does look at whole plays, but the treatment of Sophocles is brief and superficial.

¹⁶ Nussbaum, *Consequences* is an explicit reaction to Adkins. On the relationship between literature and ethics see also Schadewaldt 100; Raphael, *Paradox* 71–4, 94–111 and *Literature*; Redfield 80–2; Putnam 488f.; Barbour ch. 7; Nussbaum 12–16. Nussbaum's recent substantial contribution is influenced by the work of Bernard Williams, whose interest in the ethical implications of tragedy goes back many years (cf. *ML* 30 n. 2, *PS* 173).

¹⁷ See especially Lloyd-Jones chs. 1 and 2.

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of matters, especially morality. The conception of the poet as a 'teacher' was applied not only to avowedly didactic poets like Hesiod,¹⁸ but to every kind of poetry, even lyric.¹⁹ Tragedy, like the 'dramatic' portions of epic, was thought to 'teach' through the mouths of its characters. The conventions of old comedy allowed even a comic poet like Aristophanes to claim humorously for his chorus the role of political adviser (e.g. *Frogs* 686–8).

Only gradually does philosophy come to be conceived of as a distinct activity in its own right. Early thinkers as well as rival poets assert their claims in opposition to the received wisdom of the dominant poetic tradition (represented principally by Homer and Hesiod).²⁰ When Socrates quarrels with the poets (Pl. *Ap.* 22abc), and Plato treats them as fundamental enemies of philosophy (*Rep.* 607bc), they are not only reacting against a deeply ingrained traditional attitude, but acknowledging poetry as a serious competitor.²¹ And despite Plato's assault on the poets' claim to knowledge (e.g. *Ion* 536d–42b, *Rep.* 598d–600e), he is not above appealing to their authority, especially Homer's, when it suits him (e.g. *Rep.* 404bc, 407e–408a, 468c–469a; *Leg.* 706d–7a). Many early philosophers (notably Parmenides and Empedocles) wrote in verse, which was not only a memorable form of expression but the most natural way of claiming their place in the tradition, enabling them to dignify their rival brand of wisdom with the cloak of poetic authority.²² Nor did prose writers necessarily eschew the 'literary' qualities of poetry. Heraclitus' ornate and riddling prose and Plato's dialogue form are each in their own way essential to the author's philosophical purpose.

Philosophers, dramatists, rhetoricians and even historians used the dramatic technique of opposing speeches and sometimes dialogue to articulate the moral debates which formed part of their common intellectual inheritance. Any writer could grasp the opportunity to air various sides of an issue in the mouths of different

¹⁸ See Hes. *WD* passim and cf. Solon 4.30 (West); Theogn. 769–72. For a discussion of the purpose of Hesiod's poems see Heath, *Hesiod*.

¹⁹ For the evidence see Heath 39–44. See further below, p. 12–16.

²⁰ Cf. Xenoph. DK 21 B 1.21–3, 10–12, 14–16; Heracl. DK 22 B 57, 104; Solon 29 (West); Plut. *Solon* 29.4f. On rival claims to truth and the question of poetic truth and falsehood see Heath 39f.

²¹ Cf. Havelock, *Preface* 27–31; Raphael, *Paradox* 74–9; Nussbaum 123f.

²² This is especially apparent in Parmenides' proem. See Fränkel, *Parmenides* 1–6.

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speakers. The *agon* ('contest' or 'debate') was a fundamental feature of Athenian life, manifested variously in the assembly and the law-courts, in tragedy, comedy and the philosophical dialogue:

In understanding each of these as a manifestation of the *agon*, we ought to recognize that the categories *political*, *dramatic*, *philosophical* were much more intimately related in the Athenian world than in our own. Politics and philosophy were shaped by dramatic form, the preoccupations of drama were philosophical and political, philosophy had to make its claims in the arena of the political and the dramatic.

(MacIntyre 129)

Drama and dialectic

Many extant Greek tragedies revolve around the questions of human choice and action that provide the raw material of ethics. Hence tragedy frequently dramatises particular cases of the kind of problem that moral philosophy attempts to solve, and in doing so may help to shed light on such issues by placing them in a new perspective.²³ It offers us a concrete, particular and urgent enactment of a crisis, encouraging us to identify with the subjective viewpoint of particular figures, without preventing us from judging them. At the same time it is free to avoid the kind of trivial particular that may blur the dilemmas of real life, thus prompting reflections extending beyond the specific situation. Literature has the capacity to suggest that the persons it portrays exemplify universal human predicaments. In Greek tragedy this capacity owes much to the resources of poetry, most clearly visible in the choral lyrics whose significance often extends well beyond their immediate dramatic reference.²⁴

Many of the ethical issues dramatically presented in tragedy are also important to Plato. Like tragedy, his dialogues scrutinise the nature of justice and revenge, the relationship of the individual to friends, family, state and gods. But the philosophical dialogue typically dramatises not the problem itself but its discussion in theoretical

²³ See especially Raphael, *Literature*.

²⁴ This does not mean, however, that the chorus may not be viewed as a reasonably coherent character. I shall follow Aristotle (*Po.* 5625–7) and recent critics such as Burton and Gardiner in treating them this way. See also Kirkwood 180–6; Vickers 10–17 (who interestingly ascribes to Sophocles' chorus the role of the Socratic victim, and brings out well the thought-provoking quality of Sophoclean ethical debate).

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terms. It must therefore, like non-dramatic philosophical discourse, introduce specific cases into the discussion in order to test the validity of its general claims. Unlike drama, such cases are elaborated only so far as is necessary for their philosophical purpose. Accumulated detail is rarely required, and may either confuse the issue or over-clarify it, 'dissolving' the dilemma so that it is no longer useful.²⁵ Moreover since a dialogue does not enact the problems it aims to solve, it will tend to suffer from a lack of immediacy in comparison with the urgently presented dilemmas of tragedy.

Plato does his best to minimise this disadvantage. In the *Euthyphro* he constructs an elaborate example to test various notions of piety and justice and the relationships between them: Euthyphro is prosecuting his own father for murder because he negligently allowed a labourer, himself an arrested killer, to die (4cd). Plato deliberately 'dissolves' the potential dilemma by accumulating the kind of detail that would make the case seem absolutely clear cut to any ordinary Greek. As a test case it is tailor made for the purpose at hand. But in order to give it serious reality, Plato introduces it not hypothetically, but as the real situation that has generated Socrates' chance meeting with Euthyphro and is soon to be decided in court. Moreover Euthyphro was probably a historical figure, like most of Plato's named characters.²⁶ This use of real persons as participants is an important way in which Plato gives immediacy to his dramatised discussions. Their reality is both reinforced and exploited for philosophical purposes through the requirement that they say only what they really believe (e.g. *Gorg.* 495a, 500b, *Rep.* 350e), which is an essential ingredient of the Socratic method.²⁷

Euthyphro is rather a comic figure (cf. 3c), his case has an artificial air, and he is undertaking no serious personal risk by his extraordinary behaviour. We therefore do not feel the anxious concern for his situation that we do for the great figures of tragedy. His role is more closely analogous to those lesser tragic characters who help to shed light on the protagonist. Plato's tragic hero was, of course, Socrates. The encounter on the courtroom steps has implications

²⁵ The latter observation is drawn from Williams 180.

²⁶ See Burnet 85f. I make no claims about the historicity of Euthyphro's lawsuit. There is no external evidence, and the elaborate detail of the case can be used to argue either way.

²⁷ See Vlastos, *Elenchus* 35–8.

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whose profound seriousness overshadows Euthyphro's mild absurdity. Socrates' impending trial for impiety gives far greater depth and urgency to the question that emerges from the discussion of Euthyphro's case, namely the true nature of piety. This kind of use of the dramatic setting and circumstances is more fully developed by Plato in the *Apology* and *Crito*. In each the dramatic situation arises from certain moral choices made by Socrates prior to the action. Both works reenact such choices and demonstrate their consequences. In both the issue, as so often in tragedy, is one of life or death for the central character, with broader implications for his friends and the community as a whole. The *Crito* even resembles a Sophoclean tragedy in its structure, with the hero resisting persuasion, even from a well-meaning friend, to abandon his principles and save himself.²⁸

Other dialogues do not have this special unity of moral dilemma and dramatic circumstances, nor do they concern specific matters of life or death. But Plato continues to use the figure of Socrates to generate a comparable sense of urgency for the subject of his enquiry. In the *Phaedo* the prison setting and the moving narrative description of Socrates' death both illustrate the practical consequences of his refusal to compromise his principles and give special significance to the discussion of the immortality of the soul. In the *Meno* and especially the *Gorgias* Plato uses Socrates' death to similar effect, by foreshadowing it in the veiled threats of his interlocutors (e.g. *Meno* 94e, *Gorg.* 485e–86d). By such means Plato tries to give philosophical and above all ethical issues an urgency and relevance which a purely theoretical discourse might seem to lack. He exploits dramatic form to convey the vital significance of what he sees as the central question of human life:

And do not take what I say as if I were playing, for you see that the subject of our discussion is – and about what subject should someone with even a little sense be more serious than this? – what way one should live.

(*Gorg.* 500c)²⁹

²⁸ Knox 58 ascribes to Socrates the 'heroic temper' which he sees in the Sophoclean hero. Individual Sophoclean heroes have often been compared to Socrates. The prototype for all of them is Achilles (see especially Wolff 36–40). On Plato and drama see Kuhn (1) 5–11; Egermann 34–48; Tarrant, *Plato*; Friedländer 167; Raphael, *Paradox* 79–89, *Literature* 2–4; Nussbaum, interlude 1.

²⁹ Cf. *Gorg.* 487e; *Lach.* 187e–8a; *Rep.* 352d, 578c, 608b.

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A special virtue of dramatic form is the opportunity it provides for the persuasive presentation of various points of view without obliging the author to commit himself to any of them or provide any systematic answers. In an early aporetic dialogue like the *Euthyphro* it enables Plato to conduct an inconclusive debate while raising many suggestive points in the process. Later he canvassed a range of viewpoints in the mouths of some of his most famous characters, such as Callicles, Protagoras and Thrasymachus. The dramatic form enables him to present such views with uninhibited rhetorical power, giving them full value as dangerous forces to be reckoned with, but without having to subscribe to them himself.

The tension of competing personal perspectives contributes to the authentically dramatic feel of many of the earlier dialogues. But this kind of drama is potentially inimical to constructive dialectical argument. The complacent but well-meaning *Euthyphro* may end up merely bewildered,³⁰ but in many cases the argument degenerates into hostile confrontation. As Socrates himself says in Plato's *Apology*, his conversations earned him 'many most harsh and severe enmities' (23a). If dialectical argument promotes conflict rather than cooperation, it becomes self-defeating. This is vividly illustrated by the sulks and ill-tempered outbursts of a Socratic victim like Thrasymachus, who is beaten in argument but remains far from convinced.³¹ Thrasymachus also illustrates how Plato, like anyone working with dramatic form, can and does use characterisation to direct the audience's sympathies. The skilful delineation of personality may enhance or undermine the credibility of a speaker's arguments, as it does with Thrasymachus and often with Socrates. Or Plato may lead us to a sympathetic understanding of a character's viewpoint while simultaneously exposing its inadequacy (*Crito*, *Protagoras*, *Alcibiades*). These vivid portraits make an intrinsic contribution to a dialectic that exploits not only a speaker's views, but the personality and way of life in which those views are rooted.³² But this dramatic form of dialectic operates in Plato's hands with an inbuilt bias, for he was searching for answers and was fundamentally hostile to ethical plurality and conflict.

³⁰ It is a moot point whether *Euthyphro*'s departure at the end of the dialogue (15e) shows that his encounter with Socrates has taught him to think again about prosecuting his father.

³¹ Cf. Annas 55–7.

³² On the *ad hominem* character of the Socratic method see Kahn; Stokes.