



The Deep Current of Heraclitus in Aeschylus' Oresteia

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At first glance, the picture of justice found in the *Oresteia* appears very different from that found in Heraclitus. And indeed, at the surface level there are a number of things which are distinctly un-Heraclitean. However, I believe that a close reading reveals more similarities than differences; and that there is a deep undercurrent of the Heraclitean world view running throughout the trilogy. In order to demonstrate this, I will first describe those ways in which the views of justice in Aeschylus' *Oresteia* and in Heraclitus appear dissimilar. Then I will examine how these dissimilarities are problematized by other information in the *Oresteia*; information which expresses views of justice very akin to Heraclitus. Of course, how similar or dissimilar they are will depend not only on one's reading of the *Oresteia*, but also on how one interprets Heraclitus. Therefore, when I identify a way in which justice in the *Oresteia* seems different from that in Heraclitus, I will also identify the interpretation of Heraclitus with which I am contrasting it. Defending my interpretation of Heraclitean justice as such is beyond the scope of this essay. However I will always refer to the particular fragments on which I am basing my interpretation, and I think that the views I will attribute to him are fairly non-controversial. It will be my contention that, after a thorough examination of both the apparent discrepancies and the similarities, the nature of justice portrayed in the *Oresteia* will appear more deeply Heraclitean than otherwise. I will not argue, however, that there are therefore no differences at all between Aeschylus and Heraclitus on the issue of justice. Clearly there are some real ones and I will point out any differences which I feel remain despite the many deep similarities.

It is definitely possible to find views of justice in the *Oresteia* which appear to be very different from what we see in the fragments of Heraclitus. I will identify and describe what I think are the four major differences which one notices on an initial reading of the trilogy. These differences are with respect to **1)** the apparent linear movement and progress in the *Oresteia*. **2)** the necessity of conflict and its relationship to justice and harmony **3)** the origin/creation of justice and **4)** the implications for justice of the fundamental unity of nature.

1. Linear movement/Progress

While the fragments of Heraclitus suggest a view of justice which is eternal and unchanging, the *Oresteia* seems to present the appearance of linear progress:

For Heraclitus, there can be no progress; the ordering of things is the same for all beings and for all of time. There is constant flux, but this is within a larger unity which is itself eternal and immutable. "The ordering, the same for all, no god nor man has made, but it ever was and is and will be: fire everliving, kindled in measures and in measures going out" (Charles H. Kahn. *The Art & Thought of Heraclitus*. Cambridge: 1979. XXXVII). Thus justice, for Heraclitus, is not something which can be achieved, but is ever-present; it is the state of things at all times, although men are usually blind to this fact. "[[For god all things are fair and good and just, but men have taken some things as unjust, others as just]]" (Kahn. LXVIII).

This contrasts with the movement we see in the *Oresteia*, from a disordered state of violence and revenge in the *Agamemnon*, to the enlightened achievement of justice and harmony at the end of *The Eumenides*. On a very overt level, the trilogy begins with violence and ends with peace. The characters have finally broken away from the spiral of revenge which seemed endless and inescapable. Thus there does seem to be progress and linear movement which breaks away from the past in a definitive way. Progress and linear movement seem very un-Heraclitian ("[[The beginning and the end are shared in the circumference of a circle.]]") (Kahn. XCIX).

2. Necessity of Conflict and relationship to Justice/Harmony

In *The Eumenides*, justice appears to be what puts an end to conflict, while for Heraclitus, conflict *is* justice:

To Heraclitus, conflict is a necessary part of existence; indeed it is a condition of existence. Thus justice is not opposed to conflict. Conflict is itself just and harmony grows out of conflict:

[[The counter-thrust brings together, and from tones at variance comes perfect attunement, and all things come to pass through conflict.]] (Kahn. LXXV)

[[Homer was wrong when he said 'Would that Conflict might vanish from among gods and men!' (Iliad XVIII.107). For there would be no attunement without high and low notes nor any animals without male and female, both of which are opposites.] (Kahn. LXXXI)

One must realize that war is shared and Conflict is Justice, and that all things come to pass (and are ordained?) in accordance with conflict. (Kahn. LXXXII)

In the *Oresteia*, however, conflict is what justice aims to eliminate. Conflict is the problem and justice is the answer. Justice and conflict are fundamentally opposing

forces and only the achievement of justice can bring harmony.

3. Nature of justice

While for Heraclitus justice is everywhere, all the time, in the *Oresteia*, justice is imposed upon nature and is created by men:

For Heraclitus, justice is inherent in nature, not created by god or man, and merely requiring man's recognition and obedience. "Speaking with understanding, they must hold fast to what is shared by all, as a city holds to its law, and even more firmly. For all human laws are nourished by a divine one. It prevails as it will and suffices for all and is more than enough" (Kahn. XXX).

However, in the *Oresteia*, although the gods do intervene, it seems that humans play an important role in the creation and administration of justice. Justice appears, in *The Eumenides*, to be embedded in a mortal, democratic process. It is not achieved through understanding of the divine law, it is decided by 'a fair ballot' (Aeschylus, 163) and a tribunal of citizens.

4. Fundamental Unity of Nature

According to Heraclitus, the fundamental nature of the universe is unity and oneness; in the *Oresteia*, unity does not exist and must be created, imposed:

For Heraclitus, harmony and justice grow out of conflict and the natural tension of opposites, but the essential nature of things is unity and oneness.

Graspings: wholes and not wholes, convergent divergent, consonant dissonant, from all things one and from one thing all. (Kahn. CXXIV)

The wise is one alone, unwilling and willing to be spoken of by the name of Zeus. (Kahn. CXVIII)

It is wise, listening not to me but to the report, to agree that all things are one. (Kahn. XXXVI)

In the *Oresteia*, however, there is no sense of unity being the essential nature of things. There is definitely the tension of opposites, but it seems rather that conflict is natural and unity can only be imposed upon it with difficulty and deliberate effort. Hence, in the trilogy, it is justice which creates unity; unity is not the prior and fundamental nature of the universe.

Problems with these four major apparent differences:

1. The overt linear structure of the *Oresteia* conceals a deeper circularity. Linear movement seems to dominate the *Oresteia*, only if we ignore some of the finer details of the action. Initially we see that there are three plays. At the beginning, the

characters seemed trapped in a futile cycle of revenge and bloodshed. By the end, a solution has been found. A new system of justice has been set up (democratic tribunals). But viewed more closely, we see that while, on the human level some forward movement may have been made, this has only been accomplished insofar as the power structure of the immortals has been retained. The anger of the Furies in *The Eumenides* is precisely at the notion of a linear movement being made away from them and their traditional power. They are enraged at the thought of being swept aside by insolent younger gods like Apollo. The reconciliation made by Athene is based upon her assurance that this linear movement is in fact not occurring; that the Furies' place and power is forever guaranteed. Apollo represents the threat of linear movement and change in this play, but he is not wholly victorious in the end. His power is circumscribed and balanced against that of the Furies. Here we can begin to see the harmony achieved at the end of *The Eumenides* as a result of the tension of opposites: Apollo and the Furies, male and female, young and ancient, beautiful and hideous, rational and irrational. Viewed this way, we can see that it is not linearity, but circularity and the movement of opposites in constant tension, which prevails in the trilogy.

Furthermore, progress, if it is seen as the achievement of peace, is not really made in the *Oresteia*. In fact, what seems at the end of *The Eumenides* like peace, has only been achieved by accommodating and making a place for continued conflict. It is rather the case that conflict has been *regulated* in certain ways. The Furies vow to protect Athens from civil war and the bloodshed caused by revenge. But violence is not thus eradicated, it is just pushed outwards. Athene entreats the Furies not to "engraft among my citizens that spirit of war that turns their battle fury inward on themselves" (Aeschylus. 165). But rather to "let our wars range outward hard against the man who has fallen horribly in love with high renown" (Aeschylus. 165). Justice is not simply a matter of love and peace replacing conflict and hate, but of loving and hating in the right ways: "Let love be their common will; let them hate with a single heart. Much wrong in the world is thereby healed" (Aeschylus. 169). I think it is very telling that Aeschylus describes justice among men as hating with a single heart; a kind of conflict within unity which is evocative of Heraclitus.

2. Closely examined, justice in the *Oresteia* does not really mean an end to conflict at all. Throughout the trilogy statements are made about the necessity of conflict:

Zeus, who guided men to think,
Who has laid it down that wisdom
Comes alone through suffering. (Aeschylus 40)

Justice so moves that those only learn
who suffer; (Aeschylus. 42)

The tension of opposites and the reliance of one opposite on the other for its existence is also reiterated through the plays.

Pour vinegar and oil into the selfsame bowl,
You could not say they mix in friendship, but fight on. (Aeschylus. 45)

This pleasure is not unworthy of the grief that gave it. (Aeschylus. 45)

You were taken with that sickness, then, that brings delight. (Aeschylus. 51)

From high good fortune in the blood
Blossoms the quenchless agony. (Aeschylus. 58)

...my pain grown into love... (Aeschylus. 81)

Thus

I advise my citizens to govern and to grace,
and not to cast fear utterly from your city. What
man who fears nothing at all is ever righteous? Such be your just terrors...
(Aeschylus. 160)

It is also apparent that justice and conflict are not incompatible with each other. I think one can say that conflict is always present in the trilogy, and that justice, for Aeschylus is not antithetical to conflict and does not involve its elimination. They are certainly made to coexist through the diplomacy of Athene in *The Eumenides*. I think it is further suggested that one opposite could not exist without the other. There can be no justice in a city where there is no fear — and so ‘just terrors’ are required. And, as I mentioned above, the necessity of violence also seems to be recognized; the just city is not the peaceable city — it merely directs its violence outwards in wars or against criminals in regulated ways. Thus I think it is the case that some very Heraclitian ideas regarding the necessity of conflict are latent in the *Oresteia*.

3. The portrayal of justice as the result of democratic decision-making by humans is problematized by the fact that Athene presides over, and indeed initiates, the whole process. The fact that she has the deciding vote also really seems to undermine the idea that this decision was a mortal one. It seems more like men were just participating in a process created and overseen by the gods. The tribunal which votes is never heard from and it is Athene’s voice which narrates the whole procedure. The actual voting citizens of Athens are very much in the background. In fact, everyone human is in the background in *The Eumenides*; even Orestes seems to become a minor character in the decision regarding his life. It seems that justice is really a matter for the gods, and the important decisions are their jurisdiction. Even Athene emphasizes how she is the loyal representative of Zeus in these matters ("I am always for the male with all my heart, and strongly on my father’s side." [Aeschylus. 161]). The real evidence was not presented by any humans involved in the trial, rather the deciding

factor was "the luminous evidence of Zeus" who "spoke the oracle" and "ordered Orestes so to act and not be hurt" (Aeschylus. 163). Hence, justice appears less and less to be the result of a human, let alone a democratic process, and more like the participation of the gods in the maintenance of some eternal laws:

The thunderbolt pilots all things (Heraclitus. CXX).

Speaking with understanding they must hold fast to what is shared by all, as a city holds to its law, and even more firmly. For all human laws are nourished by a divine one. It prevails as it will and suffices for all and is more than enough (Heraclitus. XXX).

4. Of all the claims of differences between Aeschylus and Heraclitus on the matter of justice, I think this is the one most weighted on the side of difference. There is very little in the *Oresteia* which suggests a Heraclitean recognition of unity as the fundamental nature of all things. I think it is clear that Aeschylus expresses the existence of the tension between opposites, even the necessity of that tension and the intimate connection of conflict and justice. But he does not seem to express an essential unity in the universe, unless that unity is implied in the tension of opposites itself. (Insofar as opposites rely on each other for their very existence, they are inseparable. This inseparability could be seen, I suppose, as a kind of unity. Thus one could say that the tension of opposites apparent in the *Oresteia* is an expression of unity.)

However, I can find one interesting passage in the text where direct reference is made to a unity, or "the all". This is expressed by the Furies when they say:

All for all I say to you:
bow before the altar of right.
You shall not
Eye advantage, and heel
It over with foot of force.
Vengeance will be upon you.
The all is bigger than you.
Let man see this and take care...
(Aeschylus. 153-4)

I think this is suggestive of a Heraclitean belief in the participation of everything in a unity; in the necessity of obeying the divine law. Thus it is possible that there is some expression of a belief in a unity shared by all in the *Oresteia*, albeit not a particularly overt one.

Concluding Remarks

An initial examination of the *Oresteia* gives one the impression of a view of justice very different from that which we find in the fragments of Heraclitus. Justice seems to be

the advance of progress, that which moves one forward out of irrational and endless spirals of revenge. It is the solution to conflict and the end of strife. It is also the result of a human, democratic process; not being the natural state of things, it can only be imposed upon life with effort. Thus it is justice which creates unity.

However, we have come to see now that while such an interpretation can be found in the *Oresteia*, it is found on a superficial level, while a deeper current of Heraclitean influence runs underneath. On this deeper level, the *Oresteia* is a story about the inevitability of conflict and its inviolability as a divine law of existence. We see the effort to break free from this ancient law in Apollo's hatred of the Furies; he would move ahead, usurp their power and break the tension of opposites. Ultimately, however, the tension is renegotiated and maintained. Neither the power of Apollo nor that of the Furies can be denied. Similarly, Athens is saved from the scourge of revenge and civil war, but conflict is not eliminated. Justice does not appear as the cure for conflict or violence; they also have their place. A balance is thus achieved through the negotiation of Athene, but it is not an easy balance; it is a harmony born of the tension of opposing forces. It is furthermore not a harmony created by man; rather it is man's participation in an eternal order. The unity achieved at the end of the trilogy is not a new unity; it is merely man's understanding of a divine law which has always and will always exist.

One might object, however, "Why do you say that these Heraclitean ideas form, or exist on, a *deeper* level? Is it not the case that there are just two ways of interpreting the text, neither of which can be considered prior to, or more fundamental, than the other?" I think it is definitely the case that (what I will call here for brevity) the justice/progress interpretation is the more overt. It is on the surface in that it is found partly in the mechanical structure of the narrative (the forward movement of progress from the first play through the last) and in that Athene explicitly describes justice as democratic and created by man. On the other hand, the Heraclitian views which are expressed take place behind the obvious action of the plays, which is why they are less noticeable at first. Though many Heraclitian ideas are voiced directly by characters, they are dispersed through the plays in a way which seems less systematic, less deliberate than the justice/progress interpretation. Perhaps we tend to notice that interpretation first partly because we expect to find a systematic and non-ambiguous presentation of the major theme of a work. On the other hand, I admit that I may be privileging the other interpretation because of an inclination to believe that the truth is always hidden; that it is the sub-stratum, not that which the eye sees first. Perhaps I find Heraclitus in the *Oresteia* because I already believe that "Nature loves to hide" (Kahn. X) and "The hidden attunement is better than the obvious one" (Kahn. LXXX). But alternatively, one could respond — that is why Heraclitean ideas are not overt in the *Oresteia*: it wouldn't be Heraclitean!

Ultimately one could point to the tension between the two interpretations itself — two very opposing ones — and find even that Heraclitian. Perhaps Aeschylus was a very clever Heraclitean indeed and not only included such ideas in the plays, but knowingly

created an interpretive meta-level of Heraclitean discourse as well. At any rate, the tension between these two interpretations of the trilogy is there to be noticed.

To sum up, I think that the Heraclitean interpretation of justice in the *Oresteia* is the deeper and more profound one, because it seems to permeate and encompass the plays in a way which the justice/progress model does not, because it is the nature of Heraclitean meanings to be hidden, and because the existence of two distinct and opposing possible interpretations within the larger unity of the *Oresteia* is itself an expression of a Heraclitean tension—within-unity. Perhaps we can attribute to an understanding that "from tones at variance comes perfect attunement" (Kahn. LXXV) the great overall harmony of this masterpiece by Aeschylus.

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