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**Crisis and Philosophy: Aeschylus  
and Euripides on Orestes' Crimes**

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## **Crisis and Philosophy: Aeschylus and Euripides on Orestes' Crimes**

*Abstract : Since the XIX century, a pleiad of philosophers and historians support the idea that Greek philosophy, usually reported to have started with the presocratics, lays its basis in a previous moment: the Greek myths – systematized by Homer and Hesiod – and the Greek arts, in particular the lyric and tragedy literature. According to this, it is important to retrieve philosophical elements even before the pre-Socratics to understand the genesis of specific concepts in Philosophy of Law. Besides, assuming that the Western's core values are inherited from Ancient Greece, it is essential to recuperate the basis of our own justice idea, through the Greek myths and tragedy literature. As a case study, this paper aims on the comparison of two key-works, each one representing a phase of the Greek tragedy: The Oresteia, by Aeschylus, and Orestes, by Euripides. Both contain the same story, telling how the Greeks understood the necessity of solving their conflicts not by blood revenge, but through a political way, and also the political drama. Although, in Aeschylus's one, men still leashed by their fate, while the gods play a major role, in order to punish human pride (hybris). In a different way, on Euripides's work men face their own loneliness, in a world fulfilled with gods, each one demanding divergent actions. That represents a necessary moment to the flourishing freedom and human subjectivity, and, once the exterior divinity is unable to resolve human problems, men will need to discover their interior divinity: that is how the Philosophy emerges.*

*Keywords: Philosophy of History; Greek Tragedy; Mythos and Logos; Moral Responsibility.*

### **I. Introduction**

Philosophy is considered to be founded by Thales of Miletus, followed by the pre-Socratics philosophers. Those philosophers – the Ionians, Eleatics, Pythagoreans among others, included Thales – have undoubtedly turned their world's comprehension and their own language usage, from a mythological to a logical perspective. The universe (*kosmos*) was explained not by the *mythos*, but instead through the *logos*. And it is amazing that we, living two and a half thousand years later, are able to recognize our cores values and ideas in their

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debates and discussions, especially considering in this early philosophical horizon the brilliant contributions of the so called *anthropological turn*, conducted by the Sophists and Socrates. Thereafter the logical (*logos*) is divided into *physis* and *nomos*: namely the nature's world, demanding *explanations*, and human's culture world, to be *comprehended* and constructed.

To understand how the philosophy emerged is not easy at all. Paradoxically a common answer to this question – gave even in philosophical courses – is that by a conjoined sum of factors, e.g. the cultural and commercial flourishing in Ancient Greece during that period and the liberty to travel and to discuss (a “freedom of speech”), among others, a *miracle* suddenly happened, and that miracle was the philosophy! Of course it is just a simple answer to a complex question, which hides a broad range of problems, particularly the non-existence of a trustable historical and philosophical data source.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, but this approach is certainly non-philosophical.

If the beginning and the core of our philosophy lays its basis in Greece, the occidental law was born in Rome. As far as we know it was in Rome that a separation of moral and juridical took place and became clear. The law phenomenon has achieved a great autonomous life from religion and moral. All this means not only that the *Science of Law*<sup>2</sup> develops itself there, but also that the principles and the content of our Law (and not only our Private Law) was constructed over there.<sup>3</sup> But in philosophical and historical terms, Rome has inherited the *reason (ratio)* from the Greek *logic (logos)*, and its Law was then built on the Hellenistic-stoics foundations. Considering this, we can honestly ask: in which measure the Romans gave us our Law? Which are the Greek contributions?

The genesis' problem – or *arche*, as it is called by the Greeks – of the Philosophy of Law leads to obscure situations every time when it ought to be precisely determined, temporally or historically.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless the inner difficulties cannot be an excuse for this important search not to be done. Since the 19<sup>th</sup> century when G. W. F. Hegel proposed a new approach with his dialectical philosophy, appropriated to understand both, the logical and the historical, and moreover the development of the logical through history, there is a new possibility of

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<sup>1</sup> V. Hermann Diels. *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker: Griechisch und Deutsch*, 1960; Kathlenn Freeman, *Ancilla to the pre-socratic philosophers: a complete translation of the Fragments in Diels, Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*, 1956; Gerd Bornheim, *Os filósofos pré-socráticos*, 1972.

<sup>2</sup> Science here is understood as the classical roman definition, according to Celsus: *Ius est ars boni et aequi*.

<sup>3</sup> See Joaquim Carlos Salgado, *A Idéia de Justiça no Mundo Contemporâneo: fundamentação e aplicação do direito como maximum ético*, 2006.

<sup>4</sup> Felipe Magalhães Bambirra, *Estado, Direito e Justiça na Aurora do Homem Ocidental*. Dissertação de Mestrado em Direito, 2010.

understanding this question: the unfolding of the consciousness and the knowledge as a process along the time.<sup>5</sup>

If it this so, then neither the Philosophy had its strictly beginning with Thales nor the *Science of Law* was simply invented by the Romans. There is a historical and logical process that went beyond that genial Thales' phrase – “all is water”<sup>6</sup> – which is both an unifying principle of all reality – and the dialectical understood of the unity in the multiplicity and the multiplicity in the unity – and a reality's explanation founded in reality itself. In order to comprehend how the Greeks achieved such a high level of rationality, Hegel starts his explanation – in his *Philosophy of History*<sup>7</sup> – with the Chinese civilization, and goes across the Hindu and the Persians to, finally, reach the Greece.

Even in Ancient Greece a long logic-historical process developed and, before the birth of philosophy, men advanced into a more complex, sophisticated and coherent world view, which can be perceived in arts: painting, sculptures and literature.<sup>8</sup>

Assuming those propositions, it will be our objective in this paper to show how this rational consciousness is reflected in two great tragic works, the *Oresteia*<sup>9</sup>, of Aeschylus, and the *Orestes*<sup>10</sup>, of Euripides. They tell us the same history, but from a very distinguished perspective. Due to the time they were wrote, the historical context, the political and artistic stream they were inserted, those works are testimony of the profound changes that happened in the Greek mentality, especially due to philosophical advances. As the tragedies were written to be played to the general public, and also they had an important role in Greek democracy and society, they function as a mirror of the Greek way of thinking. Besides highlighting this philosophical issue, represented specially in how the tragedies were constructed, the role of the gods in the drama and how the characters feel and confront their fate, those two works have a great interest for the comprehension of both Justice and Law, because they tells us about the several crimes, committed by Orestes and his sanguinary lineage. Therefore, relevant points arise about this matter, from causality conceptions to the

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<sup>5</sup> G. W. F. Hegel, *Fenomenologia do Espírito*, 2007; G. W. F. Hegel, *Enciclopédia das Ciências Filosóficas (em compêndio: 1830)*, 2005; Adriaan Theodor Peperzak, *Modern Freedom: Hegel's Legal, Moral, and Political Philosophy (Studies in German Idealism)*, 2001.

<sup>6</sup> Constantine J. Vamvacas, *The Founders of Western Thought – Presocratic: A diachronic parallelism between Presocratic thought and Philosophy and the Natural Sciences*, 2001, 29-33; W. K. A. Guthrie, *History of Greek Philosophy: The earlier presocratics and the Pythagoreans. V. I*, 1962, 54-58; Giovanni Reale, *Corpo, alma e saúde: o conceito de homem de Homero a Platão*, 2002, 123-124.

<sup>7</sup> G. W. F. Hegel, *Filosofia da História*, 1999.

<sup>8</sup> Nuno Manuel Morgadinho dos Santos Coelho, *Direito, Filosofia e a Humanidade como Tarefa*, 2009 (Tese de Livre Docência apresentada perante a Faculdade de Direito da Universidade de São Paulo - USP), 122-123.

<sup>9</sup> Aeschylus, *The Eumenides* (ed. by Jaa Torrano), 2004.

<sup>10</sup> Euripides, *Orestes*, in: *Euripides*, ed. Arthur S. Way, 1958.

need of ending the blood revenge and the problem of a direct democracy, as the citizen could be conducted in its judgments by the heat of the moment.

In the following topic, a comparison between the two works will be made, the third topic will cover the content about Law, Justice and the emerging philosophy, emphasizing what is more relevant, and finally, in the conclusion our objectives and its answers will be summarized.

## II. The Works

Aeschylus was born in 525/524 BC, probably in Eleusis, son of Euphorion, a member of the *Eupatridae* – literally “good fathered” – a group of noble families which ascended back to the mythic hero Theseus in the region of Attica. His first dramatic production is dated of 499 BC, on the 70<sup>th</sup> Olympiad, when it is said that he disputed an *agon* against Pratinas and Choirilos, two older tragic authors. In 490 BC, Aeschylus fought at the battle of Marathon against the Persians, one of the events which defined his age<sup>11</sup>, and that was of great importance in his life.<sup>12</sup> In Aeschylus’ work, the tragic art preserves at the highest degree in the tradition of Greek drama its original function of religious cult. The choir still has a certain prominence over the individual characters and its role is decisive to the outcome of the play<sup>13</sup>, remembering the ancient form of the *dithyramb*, the original hymn in honor to Dionysus sung by a choir of men and women, from which tragedy arose according to Aristotle.<sup>14</sup>

The *Oresteia* was performed in Athens in 458 BC, when Aeschylus won for the thirteenth and last time the first prize on the tragic competition. This work is a tragic trilogy, composed by the plays *Agamemnon*, *Choephoroi* (or *Libation-Bearers*) and *Eumenides* (or *The Furies*). Besides its artistic and ethical importance, the *Orestia* is also of great philological interest for the studies of the antique culture: it is the only complete trilogy that remained until our days.<sup>15</sup> It was also followed by a satirical drama called *Proteus*, of which remained some fragments.

Euripides, on the other side, was born in 485/484 BC in Salamis, possibly during the battle fought against the Persians in this island. He was the son of Mnesarchides, which is said

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<sup>11</sup> This influence can be seen in his play *The Persians*, performed in 472 BC, which is the only play in greek theater to deal with a contemporary historical event.

<sup>12</sup> The famous inscription on Aeschylus’ gravestone stated that the poet wanted to be remembered not by his deeds as a tragic writer, but by his military achievements at the battle of Marathon. Pausanias, *Description of Greece* (ed. by W. H. S. Jones), 1918, I, xiv. 5, 72-75.

<sup>13</sup> E.g. the role of choir of Furies in the *Eumenides*.

<sup>14</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics* (ed by Stephen Halliwell), 1995, 1449a, 40-44. See Sir A. Pickard-Cambridge, *Dithyramb: Tragedy and Comedy*, 1962.

<sup>15</sup> Originally, Greek tragic drama was always presented in the form of a trilogy, which was followed by a satirical drama.

to have been a very wealthy man. However, there are several accounts in ancient *testimonia* affirming that Euripides did not come – as Aeschylus and Sophocles – from a noble family, but, on the contrary, that actually his parents were greengrocers.<sup>16</sup> His dramatic production began at 455 BC, but only in 441 BC he won his first prize in the tragic *agon*.

Euripides grew up during a time of crisis of the Greek *polis* moral support. By the time of his youth, the Sophistic was already a strong movement in Athens. In fact, it is probable that Euripides himself took classes with great sophists, such as Prodicus and Protagoras. Therefore, a generally accepted prejudice of the posterior criticism has taken Euripides as a symbolical figure of the Sophistic tendencies of the Greek *Aufklärung* in the domain of arts. Although this view is quite exaggerate, then Euripides also wrote a play such as the *Bacchae*, which is the best example in theater of the cult to Dionysus, it is true that in a general degree his work is immersed in a “rationalistic” view of the world, a kind of secular understanding of reality that finds its parallel in the moral relativism of the sophists. This results, of course, in a problematic relation to the moral and religious Greek traditions. But rather as a simple option of the author for a crude view of reality, the work of Euripides should be seen as a diagnosis of his own time. It is the symptom of a general “crisis of meaning” in culture that took place in the Athens of the 5th century BC<sup>17</sup>, derived of the questioning of the moral fundamentals of the Greek culture.<sup>18</sup>

Maybe because of that, unlike Aeschylus, who fought in battles against the Persians, or Sophocles, who served one time as *hellenotamias* – the treasurer of Athens – and also as *strategos* – a kind of military general in ancient Athens –, there are no accounts of any political activity of Euripides during his life in Athens. His relationship to the political life and tradition of the *polis* seemed quite problematic. This can also be seen in his depiction of the gods in the tragedy. While in Aeschylus the gods are a recurrent theme in the speech of the characters, having a great deal of influence over their decisions, in Euripides it seems that they have just a formal place in the tragic world constructed by him, and that men are full responsible for their own acts. The contrast of Aeschylus’ piety (*sebas*) concerning the gods and Euripides’ “rationalistic” view of life was also noticed by antique authors. The play *Frogs* by Aristophanes, which relates us a contest between Aeschylus and Euripides proposed by Dionysus himself in order to elect the best tragic author, deals with this fundamental difference in the world views of both authors and its relation to the function of poetry and the

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<sup>16</sup> Aristophanes, *The Acharnians* (ed. by Benjamin Bickley Rogers), 1982, 48-49 [477-479].

<sup>17</sup> See Karl Reinhardt, Die Sinneskrise bei Euripides, in: *Tradition und Geist: Gesammelte Essays zur Dichtung*, 1960, 227-256.

<sup>18</sup> Henrique C. de Lima Vaz, *Escritos de Filosofia II: Ética e Cultura*, 2004, 45-47.

education of men at the *polis*.<sup>19</sup> In a famous passage of the play, when the poets pray to the gods before speaking their verses, Euripides breaks off with the tradition, invoking his own “private Gods”:

[Dionysus]: Now, both say a prayer before speaking your verses.

[Aeschylus]: Demeter, nourisher of my mind, grant that I be worthy of thy mysteries!

[Dionysus]: Now you too take and offer incense.

[Euripides]: Fine, but I have other gods I pray to.

[Dionysus]: Your own private ones, newly minted?

[Euripides]: Yes, indeed.

[Dionysus]: Well, pray away to these private Gods.

[Euripides]: O air, my sustenance, and pivot of my tongue, and intelligence, and olfactory nostrils, may I stoutly refute whatever words I seize!”<sup>20</sup>

This is of course a joke made by Aristophanes, but it reveals how the contemporary Athens viewed the works of Euripides, especially in comparison to the theater of Aeschylus, which represented the core of the Greek traditions.

The play *Orestes* was presented in 408 BC, when Euripides was already an elder author close to the end of his career. The play counts among others from his last phase, such as *Iphigenia at Aulis* and the enigmatic *Bacchae*. It has, of course, a close relation with other plays related to the house of the Atreidae, the descendent of Atreus, which are bounded by the crimes committed in the past of the family. The other plays of Euripides that deal with this theme are the two *Iphigenias* – *in Tauris* and *at Aulis* – and the *Electra*.

In fact, both plays which interest us here – the *Eumenides* and the *Orestes* – deal primarily with the cycle of the house of the Atreidae, that is, the events which occurred after the Trojan War, when Agamemnon returned to his reign in Argos. It is generally assumed that Agamemnon’s journey back home – which the Greeks called *nostos* – was quite simple in comparison to other journeys, such as that of Odysseus. However, Agamemnon didn’t act with prudence at his return, and came right back home, without knowing what he would find in Argos after ten years of war.

The first play of the *Oresteia*, called *Agamemnon*, begins with the arrival of the hero at home. During his long absence, his wife, Clytemnestra, the sister of Helen and daughter of Tyndareus, entered in an adulterous relationship with Aegisthus, a cousin of Agamemnon, and made with him a plan to murder the king and steal the power over Argos. When

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<sup>19</sup> Aristophanes, *The Frogs* (ed. by Benjamin Bickley Rogers), 1979, 388-393 [1005-1036].

<sup>20</sup> See Aristophanes (note 19), 376-377 [883-894].



Agamemnon arrives in Argos, Clytemnestra receives him playing the loving, waiting wife. She convinces him to enter the palace and take his arms off, and succeeds in killing the hero while he was unarmed taking a bath. Aegisthus becomes then the king of Argos, and Orestes, son of Agamemnon, is sent out of the city, while Electra, his sister, is kept in Argos as a servant.

Here the *Agamemnon* comes to an end. The second play of trilogy, the *Choephoroi*, starts with the return of Orestes to Argos. He arrives disguised in the grave of his father, accompanied by his friend Pylades, the son of the king of Phocis, and makes a pray to Hermes in order to help him accomplish his objective: to seek vengeance, by killing the murderers of his father – Clytemnestra and Aegisthus. Orestes discovers then that his sister, Electra, was also near the grave pouring libations to her father in the company of a choir of servant women (the *choephoroi* – “libation bearers”). Despite not having at first recognized Orestes, Electra quickly notices his footprints, and they get together aiming to revenge their father’s blood. After conceiving a plan, Orestes and Pylades go to the palace and announce themselves as travelers from Phocis. They also lie, telling that Orestes was dead. Delighted by the news, Clytemnestra sends a servant to summon Aegisthus. When he arrives, Orestes reveals himself and kills the murderer of his father. Hearing the shouting of a servant, Clytemnestra finds the body of Aegisthus on the ground, killed by Orestes. An *agon* takes place between Clytemnestra and Orestes, and she tries to convince him not to kill her. Orestes faces here an impossible decision: in order to revenge his father, he would have to kill his own mother. On one hand, Orestes knew the gravity of a blood crime, that is, a crime involving people of the same family and blood. On the other hand, he had a religious duty with Apollo, because of an oracle sent by the god in Delphi to which Orestes took an oath.<sup>21</sup> Orestes decides then to follow the oracle and to kill Clytemnestra. Right after that, the murderer appear alone to the audience. He shows the corpses of his own mother and her lover. The Erinyes – horrible women-like figures, netherworld goddesses of avenge – appear then to him, and begin to haunt and torture him. Orestes goes away in absolute madness, and the play finishes with the choir saying that the tragic events of the house of the Atreidae no longer had an end.

Euripides retold this same episode, but with some modifications. The play is now called, instead of *Coephoroi*, *Electra*. The sister of Orestes plays a greater role in it, especially concerning the murder of Clytemnestra. This time, Orestes doesn’t have the same active role as in Aeschylus’ play, but, instead, it is Electra the one to plan the murder and to assume responsibility for it. In Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon*, Electra does not participate in the murder,

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<sup>21</sup> This is remembered by his friend Pylades. Aeschylus, *The Oresteian Trilogy: The Choephoroi* (ed. by Philip Vellacott), 1956, 136 [900-902].

and just helps to plan it. In the *Electra*, when, after the murder, Orestes cries for having killed his own mother, Electra answers him: “Too many tears, my brother, and I am the cause. Unhappy, that I came to fiery rage against this woman, who was my mother!”<sup>22</sup> After that, Orestes relates that at the moment of execution, afraid to commit the murder, he threw his cloak over his eyes. Electra then assumes responsibility for the crime, by saying: “And I urged you on and put my hand to the sword together with you.”<sup>23</sup> Euripides manages then to solve the problems raised by the murder recurring to a *deus ex machina*: the Dioscuri, Castor and Polydeuces, brothers of Helen of Troy appear at the stage. They tell Electra and Orestes that their mother received just punishment but that their matricide was still a shameful act, and they instruct both on what they must do to atone and purge their souls of the crime.

The third and last play of the trilogy, the *Eumenides*, starts with a crazy Orestes, being pursued by the horrible Erinyes. Orestes run away of Argos in order to avoid the Erinyes and tries to find a refuge in Delphi, but Apollo, unable to save him from the wrath of the Furies, sends him to Athens under the protection of Hermes. When Orestes arrives there, he takes a statue of Athena and supplicates for her protection. Despite the claims of the Erinyes saying that neither Apollo nor Athena could save Orestes, the goddess of Athens decides to help the son of Agamemnon. She intervenes in order to form a jury to judge her supplicant. This jury would be composed by the citizens of the city of Athens. Apollo would act as attorney for Orestes, while the Erinyes would act as advocates for the dead Clytemnestra. Athena uses the opportunity to instruct the people of Athens about the formation of this tribunal. She creates a law, stating that each time the result of a jury is a tie, the defendant should be absolved. During the trial, Apollo convinces Athena that, in a marriage, the man is more important than the woman, by pointing out that Athena was born only of Zeus and without a mother. Athena votes last and casts her vote for acquittal. The result is a tie, and Orestes is, in accordance to the law early instituted, absolved. Orestes go back home and becomes the king of Argos. The Erinyes, on the other side, are transformed by Athena in protectors of the city of Athens, and should henceforth be called Eumenides – “the kindly ones” – and honored by the people of Athens. Athena also institutionalizes the tribunal of Athens, called Areopagus, establishing its rules and giving to it the power to judge to the Athenians.

Euripides, rethinking this episode, wrote another play about the events that occurred to Orestes after the murder of Clytemnestra. This play is the *Orestes*, which, as have been said, was performed in 408 BC in Athens, therefore fifty years after Aeschylus’ *Oresteia*. It begins with Electra’s monologue before the Palace of Argos, which outlines the basic plot and events

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<sup>22</sup> Euripides, *Electra* (ed. by Arthur S. Way), 1912, 105 [1183-1184].

<sup>23</sup> See Euripides (note 22), 107 [1224-1225].

that have led up to this point from *Electra*. She reports that six days earlier Orestes killed Clytemnestra in order to avenge his father, Agamemnon, but since then he was being haunted by the Eumenides because of his mother's blood. Following that, Helen arrives, aiming to make an offering at her sister's grave. When Orestes wakes up, it is visible that he is still under a state of mental illness. After a brief talk to Electra, he has another fit of madness. Electra stays by his side, taking care of him. Menelaus arrives at the Palace and starts to discuss with Orestes the murder and the resulting madness. Euripides criticizes here Apollo's oracle, by saying that Phoebus showed "a strange ignorance of what is fair and right."<sup>24</sup> Nevertheless, Menelaus seems to want to intervene in favor of Orestes, because the citizens of Argos would judge him, Electra and Pylades, Orestes' friend, for the murder of Clytemnestra. It is important to notice that in Euripides' play Orestes doesn't run right away from Argos and, unlike Aeschylus' *Eumenides*, there is already a constituted tribunal, responsible to judge the crimes committed by him. However, right after that, Tyndareus, Orestes's grandfather and the father of Clytemnestra, arrives at the place and criticizes Orestes severely. The judgment against him would be merciless. Orestes supplicates to Menelaus to stay on his side, but his uncle is afraid to compromise his tenuous power among the Greeks, who blame him and his wife for the Trojan War. Menelaus leaves the place, and Pylades arrives. The friends begin to formulate an argument. However, their execution is certain, and together with Electra, they plan revenge against Menelaus for having abandoned them. They want to kill Helen and her daughter, Hermione. Menelaus then enters leading to a standoff between him and Orestes, Electra, and Pylades, who have successfully captured Hermione. Just as more bloodshed is about to occur, Apollo appears on the stage, as a *deus ex machina*, and sets everything back in order, explaining that Orestes should leave Argos, then Apollo himself forced him to murder his mother, and to go to Athens, in order to be judge at the Areopagus. Menelaus should return to Sparta. In addition, Pylades would marry Electra and Orestes would marry Hermione. Finally, he tells the mortals to go away and "honor Peace, the fairest of goddess."<sup>25</sup> By recurring to a *deus ex machina*, Euripides manages to solve the impasses of the play, just as he did on the *Electra*.

### III. Justice, Law, Revenge and Peace

In both works a central point is: a) the end of blood revenge – *lex talionis*, or the crude retributive justice: eye for an eye... – and b) the end of the misfortunes suffered by the House

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<sup>24</sup> Euripides, *Orestes* (ed. by Arthur S. Way), 1912, 159-60 [417].

<sup>25</sup> See Euripides (note 24), 276-7 [1684].

of Atreus. Repeating the old disgraces of his family or, better, inheriting it, Orestes had his father killed by his mother and her lover, and as retribution, assassinated both.

To Aeschylus and Euripides, Apollo, the god – or, at least, his oracle –, is as guilty as Orestes, because it was Apollo's wish that Clytaemnestra died. Orestes was just an instrument in the hands of to the god, fate and destiny. That arise the question of *culpability*.

In Aeschylus' work Orestes is very conscious of that fate and Apollo's wishes, and uses it as an argument in his plea to Athena: "[Orestes:] co-author of this [assassinate of Clytaemnestra] is Lóxias, who predicted needling pains in heart if I did nothing to the culprits"<sup>26</sup>. Until the ending of the play, in Euripides' drama, Orestes doesn't really know if, in fact, was Apollo who demanded the matricide, or if he, blind by the hate, had a hallucination.<sup>27</sup> In deep suffering after his mother's dead, he is not even sure if his disease was caused by the Erinyes or he just suffers for what he did. Considering the absence of the gods in Euripides' play, when Orestes faces his enemies, he did appeals rhetorically to the god's argument<sup>28</sup>, but also he faces Tyndareos pointing that, as father of Clytaemnestra, he is the guilty one:

"[Orestes:] What ought I to have done? Let plea face plea: my sire begat, thy child but gave me birth – The field that from the sower received the seed; Without the father, might no offspring be. I reasoned then – better defend my source of life, than her that did but foster me. Thy daughter – I take shame to call her mother – in lawless and in wanton dalliance sought to a lover; – mine own shame I speak in telling hers, yet will I utter it: – Aegisthus was that secret paramour. I slew him and my mother on one altar – sinning, yet taking vengeance for my sire. (...) Thou, ancient, in begetting a vile daughter, didst ruin me; for, through her recklessness unfathered, I became a matricide."<sup>29</sup>

The idea of culpability in Ancient Greece totally transcends the individual sphere or the personality – both concepts are certainly inadequate to that time, as the Greeks were still submerged in which Hegel calls "the beautiful ethical totality", in which the citizens cannot conceive an opposition between the *polis* and themselves.<sup>30</sup> The various examples are clear. Orestes and his sister, Electra, received the curse and the guilty for previously violations of

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<sup>26</sup> See Aeschylus (note 9), 109 [465-467].

<sup>27</sup> See Euripides (note 24), 133 [1666-70]: "Hail, Prophet Loxias, to thine oracles! No lying prophet wert thou then, but true. And yet a fear crept o'er me, lest I heard, Seeming to hear thy voice, a Fury-fiend".

<sup>28</sup> See Euripides (note 24), 72 [592-7]. In the beginning, Electra [27-30] and Helena [74-5] too say that Apollo is guilty: "[Helena:] I come, as unpolluted by thy speech, since upon Phoebus all thy sin I lay", [See Euripides (note 24), 131].

<sup>29</sup> See Euripides (note 24), 173-5 [551-63; 585-9]. At that time it is believed that the man created the germen of the baby, and the woman just involves and nourishes it. In the Aeschylus' work there is a similar passage. Apollo tells that the son is not generated by the mother, who hosts and preserves the germen, generated by the man, See Aeschylus (note 9), 120-1 [657-61].

<sup>30</sup> See G. W. F. Hegel (note 7), 201-2.

the gods' and humans' law made by his grandfather, father of Agamemnon, Atreus. The god Apollo itself, as argued by Orestes, is also to be blamed. And finally, Tyndareos, father of Clytaemnestra, is guilty for giving birth to such a cruel and criminal woman.

Nevertheless there is a significant transformation in the last work of Euripides. Orestes doesn't really know if his acts were commanded by Apollo or by himself. Because of this, he not only blames Apollo and his mother, but also her father, Tyndareos, as the responsible ancestor for her violence. The culpability and responsibility is no more a long conversation between the gods, as in Aeschylus' work, in which Apollo and the Erinyes disputed over Orestes' destiny, mediated by Athena, while he just could watch, passively. The discussion about the consequences of Orestes crime turned into a matter of how to convince the citizens of the justice of his acts. Besides, he no longer waits for his destiny. Instead, he, his friend Pylades and Electra made an intelligent plan, in order to revenge Menelaus' lack of support: kill Helena, his beloved wife, and threat Hermione, his daughter. In doing so, as Menelaus is a weak man, it would be possible to lead him, the king, to convince de multitude, which hate Helena, and then maybe that could save the matricides.

It is possible to note a huge modification of the terms in which culpability is discussed. Not among the gods, not ruled by them, but as a human affair. An improvement such as that, although this is still a rudimental notion compared to our conceptions of culpability and responsibility, will emerge with Roman law.

As well, it can be noticed by the end of both stories that an important meaning relies on the *end of blood revenge*. Whether by Athena's intervention and Orestes' judgment at the Areopagus or by Apollo's appearance in Euripides' story, giving a solution to the fate's bound webs<sup>31</sup>, this tragedy is undoubtedly about men releasing themselves of their destiny, and the necessary end of the revenge. Notwithstanding the destiny question still implicit in those works, there are solid arguments to discredit the private revenge in Euripides' one:

“[Tyndareus:] Debate of wisdom – what is that to him? If right and wrong be manifest to tall, what man was ever more unwise than this, he who on justice never turned an eye, nor to the common law of Greeks appealed? When Agamemnon yielded up the ghost, his head in sunder by my daughter cleft, - a deed most foul, which ne'er will I commend, - he ought to have impleaded her for blood in lawful vengeance, and cast forth the home, so from disaster had won wisdom's fame, had held by law and by the fear of God. But now,

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<sup>31</sup> At this point, to the reader or the audience, Orestes have just killed Menelaus' wife (Helena), and is about to kill their daughter, Hermione. At the same time, Orestes give the order to Electra to burn the palace, if Menelaus doesn't ask the citizen for their acquittal.

he but partakes his mother's curse; for, rightfully accounting her as vile, viler himself is made by matricide."<sup>32</sup>

It is a strong argument, and Tyndareus continues reasoning:

"[Tyndareus:] But this, Meneaus, will I ask of thee:- if of his wedded wife this man were slain and his son in revenge his mother slay, and his son blood with blood requite thereafter, where shall the limit of the horror lie? Well did our ancient fathers thus ordain: Whoso was stained with blood, they suffered not to come before their eyes, to cross their path – 'by exile justify, not blood for blood.' Else one had aye been liable to death still taking the last blood-guilt on his hand."<sup>33</sup>

Considering that in Aeschylus' work the tension is established between a confrontation of Apollo and the Erinyes, the first one representing the new gods and a new mentality, and the second ones the antique and old gods, all the debate goes around Apollo's need of justice, consisting in the revenge of the Agamemnon, and the Erinyes' need of revenge for the matricide. Although the gods trust in Athena, she is not comfortable by simply deciding the case. She calls then a pair number of judges, leaving to her only a casting vote, made at the same time of them – in other words, without knowledge of the scrutiny.<sup>34</sup> At the end, Athena had to negotiate with the Erinyes, because they were not satisfied with that conclusion: they lose because of Athena's casting vote. The Erinyes did a long lamentation, and threat to abandon the land, leaving it at its own fortune. At first they did not listen to Athena, but then the goddess made an offer impossible to refuse: the Erinyes, hated by gods and mortals, would become beloved goddess. The consequence of that would be the reconciliation of both, the elder and the Olympic gods.

Finally, it is possible to oversee how the *crisis of democracy* had affected Euripides' tragedy. Different of Aeschylus, who lived during the apogee of Greece, Euripides witnessed the democracy's crisis, caused by multiple reasons, which combined, represented the end of that famous political prosperity. Orestes' trial, according to Aeschylus' *Eumenides*, was very simple and had no greater trouble. In Areopagus, Erinyes presented their claim, Orestes defended himself and, then, Apollo helped him with his testimony. But the citizen plays another role in Euripides.

Early in the story's beginning Orestes is already a prisoner of his own compatriots, as the citizen had sieged Orestes, and they're vigilant, letting him no chance to scape. But the

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<sup>32</sup> See Euripides (note 24), 168-9 [491-506].

<sup>33</sup> See Euripides (note 24), 168-9 [507-518].

<sup>34</sup> See Aeschylus (note 9), 109 [470-490].

tension upsurge in two distinct moments: when Tyndareus claims that Orestes did not follow the laws of the *polis* and killed his mother, and when Orestes, walking on the streets of the *polis* with Pylades, faces the multitude and has a discussion with the people, an event told to us by another character, the messenger.

The first appointed moment, the plea with Tyndareus, is very ironic. Tyndareus contradicts himself: first he claims that Orestes, killing his mother, didn't observe the laws of Athens. Then he tells Orestes that he must be killed by lapidation for what he had done – but that is not what the law prescribes about blood revenge, as Tyndareus did say before. This particular case shows in abstract how the argumentation can not only be fallible, but dishonest too, leading the *demos* to do what seems more seductive. A problem of democracy already shows its face.

Orestes' fear comes into reality as he faces the multitude. Despite the fact of some good men taking part in the defense of Orestes, he was condemned to die by lapidation. However, somehow he was able to convince the people to let he takes his own life by committing suicide. Four orators and Orestes made their speech, representing different personality kinds. The first one was Talthybius, a friend not of men but of power, described by the messenger as follow:

“Talthybius thereupon Rose, helper of thy sire when Troy was sacked. He spake – subservient ever to the strong – Half-heartedly, extolling high thy sire, but praising not thy brother; intertwined fair words and foul – that he laid down a law right ill for parents: so was glancing still with flattering eye upon Aegisthus' friends. Such is the herald tribe: lightly they skip to fortune's minions' side: their friend is he who in a state hath power and beareth rule!”<sup>35</sup>

The next one was prince Diomedes, a fair man who followed the law: “Next after him prince Diomedes spake. Thee nor thy brother would he have them slay, but exile you, of reverence to the Gods.”<sup>36</sup>

Then, a clearly dishonest citizen rose up, who in fact was not an Argive citizen, but the kind of man who disgraced democracy:

“one of tongue unbridled, stout in impudence, an Argive, yet no Argive, thrust on us, in bluster and coarse-grained fluency confident, still plausible to trap the folk in mischief: for when an evil heart with winning tongue persuades the crowd, ill is it for the state: whoso with understanding counsel well profit the state – ere long, if not straightway. Thus ought we on each leader of men to look, and so esteem: for both be in like

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<sup>35</sup> See Euripides (note 24), 204-205 [888-896].

<sup>36</sup> See Euripides (note 24), 204-205 [898-906].

case, the orator, and the man in office set. Thee and Orestes he bade stone to death. By Tyndareus still prompted him the words that best told, as he labored for you doom.”<sup>37</sup>

Finally spoke a simple but honest man, an example of someone who does not lose dignity at any price: the ideal of a good-hearted man:

“To plead against him then another rose, no dainty presence, but a manful man, in town and market-circle seldom found, a yeoman – such as are the land’s one stay, - yet shrewd in grapple of words, when this he would; a stainless man, who lived a blameless life. He moved that they should crown Agamemnon’s son Orestes, since he dared avenge his sire, slaying the wicked and the godless wife who sapped our strength: - none would take shield on arm, or would forsake his home to march to war, if men’s house-warders be seduced the while by stayers at home, and couches be defiled. To honest men he seemed to speak right well; and none spake after.”<sup>38</sup>

As no one spoke after, Orestes made his own speech:

“Twas in your cause, no less than in my sire’s, I slew my mother; for, if their lords’ blood shall bring no guilt on wives, make haste to die; else must ye live in thralldom to your wives, and so transgress against all rightfulness. For now the traitress to my father’s couch is dead: but if ye shall indeed slay me, Law is annulled: better men died straightway; since for no crime shall wives lack daring now.”<sup>39</sup>

According to the messenger’s opinion, Orestes spoke well, but the mob did not listen to him, and by making a huge effort, “hapless Orestes scarce could gain the boon by stoning not to die. By his own hand he pledged him to leave life on this same day with thee [Elektra].”<sup>40</sup>

This picture of democracy could only be drawn in Euripides’ time, as the real Athenian democracy was facing all sorts of relativistic rhetorical interventions, which led, just nine years after this play, to Socrates’ death condemnation. Another difference between Aeschylus’ and Euripides’ works is the representation of *Dike*’s victory at the end of the first tragedy, and *Irene*’s victory at the end of the second. *Dike* is the goddess of justice and its representation on Earth, while *Irene* is the goddess of peace, which was very important at that historical moment. Neither *Dike* is among the characters in the work of Euripides, nor *Irene* figures in Aeschylus’ one.

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<sup>37</sup> See Euripides (note 24), 204-207 [893-916].

<sup>38</sup> See Euripides (note 24), 206-207 [917-931].

<sup>39</sup> See Euripides (note 24), 208-209 [934-942].

<sup>40</sup> See Euripides (note 24), 208-209 [947-949].



#### **IV. Conclusion**

Greek culture is the foundation of our western civilization, and it is of fundamental importance that we understand its historical and logical process or, in other words, our own development. As we assumed, philosophy cannot be understood simply as a point in time, but as an unfolding of the consciousness of reality. The *mythos* is a part of that process that cannot be rejected, and the two analyzed works show how the logical thinking appears in the arts. Instead of being works about gods, they are dramas about human beings; a decreasingly supernatural intervention in human life is observed; men's attempt to solve their own problems, by their own means; there is an inquietude, due to the inequality of politics; by the end, the most valuable need is the need of peace; evidently, it is an extraordinary rationalization of the causality/imputability, accompanied by the end of blood revenge and immanence of culpability.

Our own dilemmas are not too far from those, besides the gap of two thousand and four hundred years separating us from the Greeks. Violence is still a part of our society, and day by day we discover and identify new kinds of its manifestation.<sup>41</sup> Religions are very important to the majority of men, but also a source of discrimination, pre-judgment and even war. Politics, yet more stable and focused on the person's protection, are perceived as not being compatible with ethics, at least in a huge number of countries, where corruption is not really an exception. The 20<sup>th</sup> century was not an example of peace and we hope that the same mistakes are not repeated during this century. The comprehension of the causality and imputability is still a challenging question to philosophy and science, as well as what to do to our penalty and prison system, so inefficient.

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<sup>41</sup> Nowadays we understand the violence created not only by the insults, but also by the silence, not only by actions, but by omissions too.

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