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TAKING GOD SERIOUSLY

The aim of the article is to show some limitations of the cognitivist approach to the motivation of Aeschylean characters.

Almost all extant Aeschylus' tragedies portray man's dependence on a transcendent reality represented by the gods, thus performing the "metatheatrical", cult framework of tragedy. Yet at the moment of making their fundamental decisions, many of Aeschylus' characters do not recognise the real power of the divine will, which can be explained by the fact that the authority of the gods is not perceivable (before the consequences of the decision take place, that is) through the "regular" cognitive apparatus used in physical and social reality. Man's dependence on the gods can be fully recognised only if his profound reflection on his circumstances includes a fundamental human self-reflection against a background of experiencing the divine tremendum. Although imposed by strong external pressure, the fundamental self-reflection and the resulting decision require at least some active involvement on the part of the character, so that they never take place without his participation (a character's reflection, or an exercise of the mind and will, is suggested also by the words used, e. g. A.219 — 221, φρενός δυσσεβῆ τροπαίαν, φρονεῖν μετέγνω; Supp. 407, βαθείας φροντίδος σωτηρίου). It is not possible to acquire a profound knowledge of the human situation unless one is willing to accept one's human limits and, in so doing, activate his religious sources of cognition.

Keywords: Aeschylean Character, Gods, Motivation, Cognitivist Approach, Will, Self-Reflection, Social Self, *tremendum*, Transcendancy, Religious Sources of Cognition

I.

To question the notion of taking God seriously in Aeschylean tragedy looks, *prima facie*, absurd. Greek tragedy was a religious institution: the world of Aeschylean tragedy is full of sanctuaries, oracles, characters pondering on oracles or calling on the gods; indeed, even the gods themselves appear at the end of some tragedies. However, there are heroes who ignore divine commands, and even blasphemous statements expressed in words, deeds or symbolic gestures are not rare.

Let us first clarify what the words “taking God seriously” amount to. The answer is simple: they amount to recognising the beings who orchestrate all the events in the world, react to human actions and prayers, and, above all, punish the mortals’ transgression of divine laws; but who, on the other hand, transcend human understanding. In Greek tragedy, to take God seriously is to have an insight into the limits of one’s own capabilities. Aeschylean characters act piously if and only if they observe their human limits. This is, of course, a well known, traditional view.

However, the dilemmas faced by Aeschylean characters are not as simple as that. No blind believers, they experience doubts and uncertainty. Rather than in not *knowing* God’s will, their difficulty lies in recognising the true (i.e. transcendent) “nature” of God, of divine reality and its power. The dilemmas of Aeschylean characters can only arise because divine power is not as evident at the very moment of decision-making as other relevant facts are, and cannot be perceived in the same way, with the same cognitive apparatus. If we want to understand their dilemmas fully, we must not neglect the vital element of religion: human relationship to the gods. What is the essence of this relationship? What is the genuine experience of transcendence?

Martin Buber finds a model expression of this experience in the words of the chorus in *Agamemnon*:¹

Ζεὺς, ὅστις πότε ἔστιν, εἰ τὸδ' αὐ- τῷ φίλον κεκλημένῳ, τοῦτό νιν προσενέπω οὐκ ἔχω προσεικάσαι πάντ' ἐπισταθμώμενος πλὴν Διός, εἰ τὸ μάταν ἀπὸ φροντίδος ἄχθος χρὴ βαλεῖν ἐτητύμως. ²	160 165
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¹ Cf. Buber, Martin. 1953. *Gottesfinsternis: Betrachtungen zur Beziehung zwischen Religion und Philosophie*. Zürich: Manesse-Verl., chapter I.

² *Whoever Zeus may be,
 if it pleases him by this
 name to be called, by this
 name then I call to him.
 I have weighed this with that,
 and, pondering everything,
 discover nothing now
 but Zeus to cast for good
 the anxious weight of this
 unknowing from my mind.*

Translated by Alan Shapiro and Peter Burian (Shapiro, A. — Burian, P. [transl.]. 2003. *The Oresteia/ Aeschylus*. Oxford: Oxford University Press).

We may add three essential traits of Zeus (which are at the same time characteristic of transcendent reality as formulated by Rudolf Otto):

(a) (absolute) unapproachability,

(b) power,

(c) urgency or energy, a force which is most easily perceived in the “wrath of God”.

It is the observance of these “features” of divine reality that amounts to “taking God seriously” in Aeschylus.³

II.

Some Aeschylean characters overtly deny their dependence on the gods, stressing their own capabilities and power. Their self-confidence sometimes escalates to outright blasphemy. The play *Seven against Thebes* presents several types of this character. The most characteristic figure among them is Capaneus, whose “vaunting speech betokens thoughts too proud for man”⁴ and who, in Scout’s words, vows: “For whether Heaven wills or wills it not, he vows he will make havoc of the city and that even the rival fire of Zeus, though it crash upon the earth in his path, shall not stay his course.”⁵ Capaneus, no philosopher with an atheistic world view, does not deny Zeus’ existence, but his words are nonetheless much more than a mere rhetorical device stressing his own power; they are meant to be understood as blasphemy. They overtly express Capaneus’ ignorance of genuine transcendence. Other Argive chieftains express their disrespect for the gods indirectly: Tydeus reproaches the wise seer Amphiaraus, who differs considerably from all other Argive chieftains (he is described as wise and just man by Eteocles, as well as by Scout).⁶ Three of the aggressors ex-

³ Cf. *Supp.* 87–103. However, the choruses of the tragedies discussed do not show the same respect or unshakeable faith in Zeus throughout the play, or even throughout the same song, cf. especially *Supp.* 154–161, 167–174. This wavering may be, in my opinion, attributed to the elusive “nature” of the gods in Aeschylean tragedy before the dénouement.

⁴ A. *Th.* 425: ὁ κόμπος δ’ οὐ κατ’ ἀνθρωπον φρονει. The English translation of the passages from *Seven against Thebes* is taken from: Smyth, Herbert Weir [transl.]. 1952. *Aeschylus*. Vol. 1. London — Cambridge, Mass.: Heinemann — Harvard Univ. Press (Loeb C. L., reprint).

⁵ A. *Th.* 427–429: θεοῦ τε γὰρ θέλοντος ἐκπέρσειν πόλιν
καὶ μὴ θέλοντός φησιν, οὐδὲ τὴν Διὸς
ἔριν πέδοι σκήψασαν ἐμποδῶν σχεθεῖν.

⁶ A. *Th.* 568–596: ἀνδρα σωφρονέστατον; 598: δικαίον ἀνδρα.

press their disrespectful attitude to the gods through the images depicted on their shields: a man on Eteocles' shield "cries that even Ares could not hurl him from the battlements",⁷ and Hippomedon's shield boasts an image of Typhon,⁸ the antagonist of Zeus,⁹ while the case of Parthenopaeus is more complicated because of different possible readings.¹⁰

III.

There are other, much more complicated cases in Aeschylean tragedy. Perhaps the most difficult to account for is Eteocles, the protagonist of *Seven against Thebes*. This is corroborated by the various interwoven questions crucial to understanding the play as a whole; the interpreters raising them have offered different, sometimes opposing answers.¹¹ While they

⁷ A. Th. 382: θείνει δ' ονειδεῖ μάπτει Οἰκλείδην σοφόν.

⁸ Cf. A. Th. 491–494.

⁹ Cf. A. Th. 491–495. In the *Seven against Thebes*, the antagonism of the upper and the nether gods is crucial to understanding the protagonist's, i.e. Eteocles' case. *Contra*: Winnigton-Ingram, R. P. 1983. *Studies in Aeschylus*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 16–54, 53f.

¹⁰ In his case much depends on how we read the beginning of v. 532: δορός ορ, with most modern editors, Διός. The reading βία Διός almost puts him on a par with Capaneus. West, Martin L. 1990. *Studies in Aeschylus*. Stuttgart: Teubner, 113ff., finds serious objections to both variants. Adopting an old conjecture of Weil's, Ἄρεως, and transferring the punctuation to the end of 531, he reads: Ἄρεως τὸδ' ἀδῶ μητρὸς ἐξ ὀρεσκίου/βλάστημα. But even so the preceding verses (529–30) disclose his blasphemous confidence in his own, human power, placed in sharp contrast to the god's.

¹¹ Such as the psychological integrity of Eteocles' character. Favourable views are held by: Brown, A. L. 1977. "Eteocles and the Chorus in the 'Seven against Thebes'." *Phoenix*, 31, 300–318; Gagarin, M. 1976. *Aeschylean drama*. Berkeley: University of California Press; Foley, H. P. 1993. "The politics of tragic lamentation." In Sommerstein, A. — Halliwell, S. — Henderson, J. — Zimmermann, B. [eds.]. 1993. *Tragedy, comedy and the polis. Papers from the Greek Drama Conference, Nottingham, 18–20 July 1990*. Bari: Levante Ed., 101–143, 134; Long, A. A. 1986. "Pro and contra fratricide — Aeschylus 653–719." In Betts, John H. et al. *Studies in honour of T. B. L. Webster*. Vol. 1. Bristol: Bristol Classical Press, 179–189. An unfavourable stance, by contrast, is adopted by Solmsen, F. 1937. "The Erinys in Aischylos' Septem." *TAPA*, LXVIII, 200–205, 197f.; Lloyd-Jones, H. 1962. "Von Fritz, Antike und moderne Tragödie." *Gnomon*, 34, 737–747, 740ff., and perhaps even in von U. Wilamowitz-Moellendorff's *Aischylos: Interpretationen* (Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, Ulrich von. 1914. *Aischylos: Interpretationen*. Berlin: Weidmann, 56ff.). Other controversial issues include the true motives for Eteocles' decision to engage his brother in battle, and for the resulting fratricide. Interpretations range

cannot be explicitly addressed in the present paper, it should be noted that an examination of Eteocles' attitude to the gods entails a reflection on these problems as well.

Eteocles does not deny the gods' supremacy: in the shield-scene he avers repeatedly that the outcome of the battle is in their hands. In the first scene with the chorus of Theban women, on the other hand, he is portrayed as rebuking them for their *exaggerated devotion* and their *emotionalism*, which could harm the city; he shows them how they should pray, teaching them the right tenor of the prayer: "Do not indulge in lamentations and shrieks and make vow to the gods in the case we win." Briefly: "Make the better prayer: 'May the gods fight on our side!'"¹² As Anthony J. Podlecki remarks, "his approach is full of masculine self-confidence, and in fact even *seems to exclude any real expectation of divine assistance*".¹³ This impression is confirmed by Eteocles' statements in the shield-scene about the outcome of the battle being dependent on the gods: his words about the gods are mere short afterthoughts following extensive descriptions of the Theban warriors' virtues — descriptions inspiring by themselves a great deal of confidence.¹⁴

from an attack by the Erinys (F. Solmsen 1937) and "the effect of the curse working upon him in some kind of mystical co-operation with his own will", as phrased by Golden, L. 1964. *Classical Philology*, 59, 79 (see Wolff, E. 1958. "Die Entscheidung des Eteokles in den *Sieben gegen Theben*." *HSCP*, LXIII, 89–95, and Patzer, H. 1958. "Die dramatische Handlung der *Sieben*." *HSCP*, LXIII, 97–119), to the so-called *Opfertod*, which was the *communis opinio* shared by the older criticism (cf. Fritz, Kurt von. 1962. *Antike und moderne Tragödie*. Berlin: de Gruyter, 193–194; or Pohlenz, Max. 1954. *Die griechische Tragödie*. Bd. I (Hauptw.). Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 94, 95, 96). According to K. von Fritz (1962: 193–226), he acts as he does because he is the man he is. The structure of his personality is discussed by A. A. Long (1986) and Gill, C. 1990. "The Character–Personality Distinction." In Pelling, Christopher [ed.]. *Characterization and Individuality in Greek Literature*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1–31, 24–29; the reasons for his fatalism are examined by R. P. Winnigton-Ingram (1983: 54).

¹² A. Th. 265.

¹³ Podlecki, A. 1993. "Κατ' ἀρχῆς γὰρ φιλαίτιος λεώς: the concept of leadership in Aeschylus." In A. Sommerstein — S. Halliwell — J. Henderson — B. Zimmermann [eds.] (1993: 55–80, 67).

¹⁴ Cf. 414–6; 477–9; 562; 625, as well as two passages of outstanding length, i.e. lines 438–46 and especially 501–3 and 508–20. Their length may be attributed to the fact that Hippomedon is attacking "the port *nigh to Onka Athena*", bearing an image of Typhon upon his shield, which prompts Eteocles to reflect at greater length on divine help. But cf. also the sceptical tone in 517. On the textual problems presented by this passage, cf. Hutchinson, G. O. [ed.]. 1985. *Aeschylus: Septem contra Thebas*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 125–126; cf. also his discussion on the gods in the

One critic has noticed a “striking formal parallelism of the two scenes of Eteocles and the chorus”.¹⁵ I would like to point out another, which, as far as I know, has not been given the attention it deserves. In the first scene the chorus says that the might of god is above all, even above the (military) obedience exalted by Eteocles, and that “often in the midst of his distress it uplifts the helpless, even from cruel woes when clouds are lowering over his *eyes*”.¹⁶ These words suggest that the might of God exceeds human *understanding*, and perhaps also that the gods’ help can only be attained by *devoted* prayer, if at all. Eteocles refuses them, saying that “it is for men to offer sacrifices unto the gods when they make trial of the foe”.¹⁷ In the second scene, he says that his father’s curse haunts his dry eyes that cannot weep. He replies fatalistically to the chorus’ suggestion that “the sable-palled Erinys, Avenging spirit, will quit the house, when the gods receive oblation at thy hands”¹⁸: “The gods have long since ceased their care of us! The service they value at our hands is that we perish. Why then should we any longer fawn upon the doom of death?”¹⁹ Rather than the gods’ existence (or even a divine interest in Oedipus’ house), his words deny their unapproachability, their being beyond human grasp, their genuine transcendence. I cannot believe, as Winnigton-Ingram does in his study, splendid as it is in many respects, that “Eteocles had the deeper insight” and “prayed to the Curse-Erinys along with Zeus and the city gods to save the city”, knowing that his death and the destruction of his race were inevitable; or that “his prayer was answered, paradoxically, by his own *impious* act”.²⁰ All these three conclusions are problematic. Eteocles’ words do not suggest that he knows more about the future than the chorus does, nor is the dénouement of the play a simple confirmation of his insight but at least partly the consequence of his decision on fratricide.²¹ This act, while by no means ensuring a *permanent* solution for Thebes (681–2, 764–5), is undoubtedly an impious one, perceived by the

framework of a give-and-take relationship, that is, the concept of the gods as partners, on pp. 76–77.

15 A. L. Brown (1977: 315).

16 A. *Th.* 226–229.

17 A. *Th.* 230–231.

18 A. *Th.* 700–701.

19 A. *Th.* 702–704.

20 That is, by his fratricide, which destroyed the family and liberated the city from its contagion, cf. R. P. Winnigton-Ingram (1983: 16–54, 54).

21 R. P. Winnigton-Ingram (1983: 49) himself notes “that Aeschylus has given no indication in the text that the fratricidal duel was, as such (and immediately), necessary to the preservation of Thebes.”

chorus not merely as a consequence of Laius' unbelief and Oedipus' curse but as an instance of Eteocles' and Polynices' impiety.²² Even if Eteocles had been goaded to this decision by the Erinys or his father's curse (as admitted by both himself and the chorus), he certainly never resisted it, despite the chorus' insistence (677–680; 686–8; 698; 712, 714, 718). And why? Eteocles does not claim to be unable to resist it; rather, he says that he wants to preserve his military honour. He appears to believe that fratricide, criminal as it is, can help him preserve his military honour (683–5²³), which for *him* — a soldier — outweighs the favour (honour) granted by the gods (716–7). In his last reply, on the other hand, to the chorus' more intimate question whether he really *wants* fratricide (718²⁴), he inconsistently claims to have no other choice, thus shifting all responsibility for his fratricidal decision to the gods (719).²⁵ Rather than converge with the actions of the Olympian and native gods,²⁶ the action of the Erinys (also called Ἄρσ and ἄρτα in this play) paradoxically intensifies Eteocles' rejection of 'female' religiousness and his insistence on a (self-sufficient) heroic military stance. His imagined insight into the gods' intentions blinds him to their genuine transcendence, which may bring a solution even when it is no longer looked for.²⁷

IV.

The choral passage in *Agamemnon* (205–27) which describes the title character's dilemma whether to sacrifice his daughter Iphigenia or not has

²² In addition, the chorus speaks about distrusting one's friends, thus hinting at its own advice that Eteocles should avoid the risk of fratricide (cf. G. O. Hutchinson [ed.] 1985: 193) and trustingly sacrifice to the gods instead. The plural is used here either because Eteocles' mistrust leads to both brothers becoming perpetrators and victims of fratricide, or because the focus is on their shared fate: after all, Polynices does not listen to Amphiaraus' warning (580–6) either (admittedly, though, the latter could hardly qualify as one of his φίλων).

²³ His differentiation between κακὸν and ἀσχερόν is very explicit: εἴπερ κακὸν φέροι τις, ἀσχύνης ἄτερ/ἔστω· μόνον γὰρ κέρδος ἐν τεθηκόσι·

²⁴ ἀλλ' ἀντάδελφον αἶμα δρέψασθαι θέλεις;

²⁵ Refusing to give up his military glory, he begins by rejecting the possibility of avoiding fratricide pointed out by the chorus (although this act would, in the chorus' opinion, please the gods), but then goes on to describe fratricide as a necessity imposed by the gods. It is probably no accident that his reply is framed impersonally, in the general second person, cf. G. O. Hutchinson [ed.] (1985: 160).

²⁶ The problem of Eteocles' attitude to the various deities is, in my opinion, analysed most precisely by A. Podlecki (1993: 71).

²⁷ Cf. A. Th. 226–229.

sparked off one of the best known controversies in the interpretation of Greek tragedy: the issue of free will.²⁸ I believe that the reading crediting Agamemnon with the possibility of choice leads closer to a basic, perhaps even *the* basic question of Aeschylean tragedy (and possibly of Attic tragedy in general): to the question of man's limitation, which is ultimately a question of the relevance of transcendence. It might be paraphrased as: Should God be taken seriously or not? This interpretation is rendered the more plausible if we accept West's emendation of the notoriously problematic passage in lines 215–7:

πανσανέμου γάρ
 θυσίας παρθενίου θ' αἵματος ὄργᾱ
 περιόργως· <ἀπὸ δ'> ἀύδᾱ
 θέμις.²⁹

He, with eager passion, craves a sacrifice
 of maiden blood, to still the winds; but Themis
 forbids.

This reading clearly brings out Agamemnon's ambivalence between his own ambitions and divine law (θέμις), that is, his respect for divine transcendence and his own human limitations.³⁰ In this situation, Agamemnon resembles Eteocles in one respect: they are both overwhelmed by an external force at the moment of their fatal decision-making. In Agamemnon's case, this force is called παρακοπή. It is hardly possible to define the precise "nature" of this force, its connection to the other deities, or its role in the cosmos, but its effects are clear: it emboldens mortals to ignore their limits. And it is in this very ignorance that the impiety of Aeschylean heroes consists. Having made his παρακοπή-influenced decision, Agamemnon "dares anything", according to the chorus: words which actually describe an extreme form of *hybris*.

How exactly does the παρακοπή function? It inspires him with boldness, thereby *persuading* or *advising* (and not forcing) him to commit the crime

²⁸ Cf. Conacher, Desmond J. 1987. *Aeschylus' Oresteia: a literary commentary*. Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 85: "The question whether Agamemnon had any real choice in the decision to sacrifice Iphigenia is (like the question about Artemis' anger) a major area of disagreement in the interpretation of the play." For a survey of the various interpretations, cf. *ibidem*, 76–96; and Edwards, M. 1977. "Agamemnon's decision: Freedom and Folly in Aeschylus." *CSCA*, 10, 17–38, 18–19.

²⁹ M. West (1990: 180).

³⁰ On Agamemnon's being compelled to sacrifice Iphigenia because he has to fulfil Zeus' plan for the destruction of Troy, cf. Sommerstein, Alan H. 1996. *Aeschylean Tragedy*. Bari: Levante, 361–366.

of sacrificing his own daughter. He *yields* to it, which does not show him in the light of a helpless, passive victim.³¹ Therefore I cannot agree that “Agamemnon’s mental processes are knocked sideways”;³² rather, they are redirected. The *παρρακοπά* prompts him to direct his thoughts away from the domain of the divine (*φρενὸς πνέων δυσσεβῆ τροπαίαν*), which represents the absolute boundary of human power. Once he has turned his back on the demands of *θέμις* and narrowed his view of the ‘controllable’ reality,³³ his self-confidence loses all bounds (*τὸ παντότολμον φρονεῖν με τέγνω*); he can act decisively and efficiently until he is overtaken by divine punishment. By diverting his thoughts from the transcendent sphere of the divine, he diverts them from his own limitations, thus allowing himself to form a different perception of himself and reality. This, however, seems to be an innate tendency, merely brought out by the *παρρακοπά*.

V.

Having narrowed down his horizon of reality perception, the agent may well claim to believe that his success lies with the gods, but this belief has little or no impact on his practical decisions: it is motivationally inert. The agent either fails to associate his dependence on the gods with his actual situation,³⁴ or else transposes it within his mental or cognitive horizon.³⁵ How is this possible? Whenever the Aeschylean agent faces a crucial decision, the authority of divine forces — the foundation of both the validity and sanctions of *θέμις* — appears to be much more uncertain, dubious even, than the immediate “human” factors which spur him to action. These factors (ambition, gain, military glory, war danger, the welfare of the polis, passion) prompt the agent to identify with his social self and, above all, to

³¹ Cf. C. Gill (1990: 23–24, especially n. 79).

³² Dawe, R. D. 1968. “Some reflections on Ate and Hamartia.” *HSCP*, 72, 89–123, 110–111.

³³ This concept, of course, is not to be found in Aeschylus; I use it to describe the belief expressed, or hinted at, by the actions of some Aeschylean characters. While none of them denies the gods’ existence or their interference in the world, some do express, through word or action, the belief that they can nevertheless master the reality of their current situation (e.g. in *Th.*, cf. notes 5, 7, 8, 9, 10; Xerxes in *Pers.*, cf. 69–72, 745–751).

³⁴ Cf. n. 13.

³⁵ This is a possible interpretation of Agamemnon’s claim that the gods of Argos are merely the *metaitioi* of his military success and safe return, *Ag.* 810–3 — for a brilliant commentary on this passage, see A. H. Sommerstein (1996: 371–372).

perceive himself and his situation in terms of what is attainable with his own, that is, human powers. In other words: influenced by these factors, he views reality as limited by the horizon of his own sight. The *παράκοπά* may be considered as a demonic force strengthening these factors, or, in a psychologistic reading, as a hypostasis of these factors.

However, an insight into one's dependence on the gods (i.e. into a broader, transcendent reality) is essentially different from insights concerning human affairs: rather than observe an element within his manageable horizon, the agent discovers the limits of this horizon and recognises the authority of the forces affecting yet transcending it. This insight can only serve as motivation if the agent adopts a different internal stance: if he directs his thoughts at his own limitation and opts for a different perception of reality and his own self. While the incentive to do so does come "from the outside", from divine law and oracles (which presupposes a general religious instruction and upbringing),³⁶ this external incentive, *at the very moment of deciding*, proves weak: thus the turn can be effected only by an act of faith — that is, by the agent's *will* to shift the focus of his thought (and self-awareness) from the prevailing immediate incentives of the situation to a transcendent, unthinkable, divine *tremendum*. In cognitivist terms, he is willing, in a given situation, to activate himself those cognitive potentials not activated by (superficial) external stimuli. In this sense, the motivating realisation is enabled by the act of his will. The *Oresteia*, which permits a clear judgment, reveals *in its dénouement* a more complex picture of true reality than the one imposed by the surface circumstances at the moment of the agent's decision: the working of divine forces in what has seemed a humanly manageable reality becomes obvious enough to be perceived without particular insights or faith, even by the characters who were blind to it earlier.³⁷

VI.

Orestes and king Pelasgus in the *Suppliant Maidens* both obey divine commands, although not without consideration and even some hesitation.

³⁶ Thus it does not result from the agent's arbitrary decision, as it does with the existentialist self.

³⁷ Cf. the contrast between the chorus' doubts about Orestes' perception of the Erinyes, expressed in the conclusion of the *Choephoroi* (1048–64), and the obvious presence of the latter in the *Eumenides*.

Orestes' words in *Choe.* 297–8 show at least a slight uncertainty about Apollo's oracles,³⁸ thus forming a contrast to the assertion of his firm belief in 269–270:³⁹ “Apollo's great oracle never will betray me, / ordering me to see this dangerous work.”⁴⁰ This contrast, in my opinion, is a sign of the dynamics of his inner life. At the moment of crisis, when he has to strike the blow and kill Clytemnestra, he wonders whether he should respect his mother's breast.⁴¹ What has held him back to ask this question? His sense of *aidos* (αἰδώς), for Orestes' society regards the parent as a supreme object of *aidos*, a feeling that is presumably reinforced by Clytemnestra's words and gestures. The warning comes from the outside: it is Pylades who warns him that “it is better to have no human friends than to incur divine enmity”.⁴² He offers no reasons for his warning, nor does Orestes for his acceptance. Nevertheless, the latter does accept it and acts accordingly. Why? Orestes' decision can only be explained by supposing that, at this very moment, his fear of the gods outweighs all other considerations (and becomes the preponderating reason). The gods are not present in the same sense as Pylades, Clytemnestra, the chorus, or any other (human) being; their presence can only be perceived by one who is aware of his own limits and trusts in the divine existence. It becomes evident only later, *post eventum*, in the dénouement. This explanation of Orestes' decision is supported by the fact that Apollo cannot fulfil his promise of expiation without Athena's help; indeed, Orestes can hardly be imagined as envisaging the comprehensive procedure of his expiation. Nevertheless, it is made possible by his trust in Apollo.

King Pelasgus, on the other hand, is faced with the choice whether to give protection to Danaus' daughters fleeing from Egypt, which involves the risk of war, or not to do so, which might incur Zeus' wrath. Here is the immediate (almost “tangible”) danger of war, there religious duty and

38 τοιοῖσδε χρησμοῖς ἄρα χρῆ πεποιθένοι/ κεί μὴ πέποιθα, τοῦργόν ἔστ' ἐργαστέον. “Why shouldn't I trust oracles like these? But even if I didn't, I'd still be driven / to carry out the work”, translated by A. Shapiro — P. Burian (2003). Cf. Peradotto, J. 1969. “The Omen of the Eagles and the ΗΘΟΣ of Agamemnon.” *Phoenix*, 23, 237–263; R. P. Winnigton-Ingram (1983: 137–138), and Garvie, A. F. [ed.]. 1986. *Aeschylus: Choephoroi*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 119–120, do not believe that these words imply any doubt in Orestes' mind. But if so, why should he have asked such a question at all? He could certainly have expressed his assurance more clearly, rather than introduce his own, personal motives by saying: κεί μὴ πέποιθα.

39 οὔτοι προδώσει Λοξίου μεγασθενῆς / χρησμός κελεύων τόνδε κίνδυνον περᾶν.

40 Translated by A. Shapiro — P. Burian (2003).

41 *Ch.* 869 ff.

42 A. F. Garvie [ed.] (1986: 294).

divine sanctions somewhere in the future. His first concern is not for his own life, but for the welfare of his polis, “that to the State/city *above all things* this matter may work no mischief”.⁴³ He is firmly determined to observe divine authority⁴⁴ but does not want to violate the authority of Egyptian law.⁴⁵ Considering the matter at some length, he arrives at the conclusion that “there is no issue without grievous hurt, but the grace of Zeus may restore all plundered goods, so there is need of sacrifice, and that many a victim falls to many a god.”⁴⁶ It is only when the Danaids threaten to hang themselves from the statues of the gods that he makes his final decision to protect the suppliant maidens. Why? Because “if he does not effect the quittance of (religious) debt, his city will suffer the pollution beyond all range of speech”;⁴⁷ he believes that “the wrath of Zeus who guards the suppliant compels his reverence; for supreme among mortals is the fear of him”.⁴⁸ In other words: he believes that disrespect for divine commands can bring more harm to Argos than the threatening war. It is, as Friis Johansen and Whittle remark, “a simple calculation of the degree of ‘fear’ involved in either course”, but (they continue) it is this very calculation “that at one stroke creates a new Pelasgus”. I cannot agree with their conclusion that “this complete metamorphosis is nothing else but a good testimony to the primacy of dramatic function over psychological consistency in Greek tragedy”.⁴⁹ What needs to be taken into account is the origin of the “greater evil”: unlike war, Zeus, his wrath and the ways in which he operates are beyond mortal understanding. This is genuine transcendence, a divine reality which is, of course, at work in the world. Mortals should bear in mind their dependence on this reality. The proper attitude to the gods is therefore a sense of fear, supreme fear, ὑψίστος φόβος. Pelasgus decides only when he hears the chorus’ words, which are lashes, whipstrokes, to his

43 A. *Supp.* 410–411.

44 A. *Supp.* 340: πῶς οὖν πρὸς ὑμᾶς εὐσεβῆς ἐγὼ πέλω;

45 Cf. A. *Supp.* 336, 387–391. By what right the sons of Aegyptus claim the Danaids as their property is left obscure; “this obscurity must be deliberate and it can hardly have any purpose except to concentrate attention upon the violence of the pursuit and the loathing which it engenders”, R. P. Winnigton-Ingram (1983: 60).

46 This is no easy matter for judgment and he will not judge it save with the consent of his people. Later, he will go to advance the Danaids’ cause after having made his decision. However, he has to consider the matter himself carefully and profoundly, in silence, cf. A. *Supp.* 406–417, cf. also 438–454.

47 *Supp.* 472–473.

48 *Supp.* 478–479.

49 *Aeschylus The Suppliants*, vol. II, lines 1–629, 376.

heart.⁵⁰ And only then can the chorus assert: “Then you understand. I have opened your eyes and you see.”⁵¹

This supreme, divine reality can be, paradoxically, ignored — a major issue running through all extant Aeschylean tragedies. Many Aeschylean characters do in fact ignore it. How is this possible?

VII.

Can this ignorance be explained in terms of the so-called cognitivist model of *akratic* action, as suggested by the cognitivist system of thought? Let us begin by sketching the “cognitivist system of thought” and the concept of “*akratic* action”. Richard Gaskin’s article ‘Do Homeric Heroes Make Real Decisions?’ accounts concisely for both terms: what is essential for the cognitivist model (which is, in essence, an Aristotelian model of practical wisdom) is the supposition that “there is no gap to be felt between an agent’s proper perception of the morally relevant facts of a situation in the context of an overall desire for eudaimonia or eupraxia — itself constituted by a distinctive way of seeing his life — and his decision to act appropriately”.⁵² Gaskin’s definition rests on the supposition that “the cognitive need not be conceived as motivationally inert”.⁵³

“The akratic agent knows the truth, he is in a sense aware of how he should act, and in a sense not [...] like someone overcome by a god (a passion) and forced to act accordingly. The akratic agent is in full possession of the major premise of the relevant practical syllogism, but his perception of the situation is in some way damaged by the impact of a desire, so that he in some sense fails to see the situation straight. [...] The akratic man’s *knowledge* of what he should do [...] remains intact at the moment of weakness, while some aspect of his *perception* of the situation [...] is dulled.”⁵⁴

My major objection to this interpretation is that the agent could hardly know how to act without perceiving the situation correctly: perception is part and parcel of knowledge, and most certainly its prerequisite. Of course the present paper is not concerned with Aristotle’s cognitivist model of

⁵⁰ A. *Supp.* 466: ἦκουσα μαστικτήρα καρδίας λόγον.

⁵¹ A. *Supp.* 467: ξυνηκας· ὠμμάτωσα γὰρ σαφέστερον.

⁵² Gaskin, R. 2001. “Do Homeric Heroes Make Real Decisions?” In Cairns, Douglas L. 2001. *Oxford Readings in Homer’s Iliad*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 147–69, 154.

⁵³ *Ibidem* 153.

⁵⁴ *Ibidem* 164–5.

akratic action,⁵⁵ but since the conclusion of Gaskin's essay argues that this model may explain the dilemmas of Aeschylean heroes as well,⁵⁶ I must counter in my own conclusion that the present analysis offers a somewhat different answer. The agent's knowledge of what he should do is linked to a certain — more complex or, we may say, ethically superior — self-perception. In a certain situation, however, factors arise which influence the agent's self-identification: his somehow dulled perception of the situation is actually his changed self-perception, his sense of self having been taken over by other considerations. Thus he begins to think and reason from a different universal proposition. Yet the domination of the new sense of self is not complete; rather, there are now two conflicting senses, which engenders an ethical dilemma in the first place. Caught in such dilemmas, the subject usually ponders not only what he should do, but also who he is. The external factors tend to support the agent's identification with the limited, "inferior" self: he can only resist their pressure — and allure — by directing his thoughts at his dependence on the gods. This, however, cannot be done without his will. The problem lies not in the soul but in the world, and that is where the solution should be sought, says Gaskin.⁵⁷ True, but the protagonist only perceives the true picture of the world when he grasps, through his experience of divine supremacy, what he is himself. And in the decision-making moments, this can only be grasped, "seen", through the soul.⁵⁸

To sum up, the situation of the Aeschylean hero is inextricably interwoven with religious matters — or, more precisely, with the problem of man's dependence on the gods. Dependence on the gods is not an obvious truth, not even for Aeschylean characters; divine reality cannot be "seen" or perceived in the same sense as "worldly" things: it is a matter of believing. Divine reality can become a relevant factor in a morally significant situation

55 For a brilliant critical analysis cf. two studies by D. Davidson: Davidson, D. 1980. "How is Weakness of the Will Possible?" In Id. 1980. *Essays on Actions and Events*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 21–42; and Davidson, D. 2004. "Paradoxes of Irrationality." In Id. *Problems of Rationality*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 169–187.

56 R. Gaskin (2001: 167ff.).

57 R. Gaskin (2001: 168).

58 The cognitivist model, in the form presented by Gaskin at least, is based on the supposition, that agent's »normal« (i. e. undulled by desire) knowledge fits the reality perfectly as does his self-perception fit his true self; therefore it seems to exclude the transcendent character of reality, which is beyond human grasp. In the decisive moments of Aeschylean tragedies insights into transcendent dimensions of reality can only be acquired through one's willing acceptance of divine supremacy. Only the one who is willing to »see« his own nothingness, is able to see the reality properly.

(that is, at the moment when a character is making his decision) only if the character recognises its existence. Yet recognising the existence of divine reality does not quite amount to “seeing” or perceiving it correctly, unless the concept is expanded beyond its regular use (in the cognitivist model). Believing in transcendent reality depends to some extent on the agent’s decision, on his will. It precedes his judgment and affects his decision-making; in a sense, it re-constructs his cognitive dispositions. It might be said to broaden the concept of reality. The old men of Argos and the suppliant maidens in the two tragedies quoted above show what such broader reality looks like. Aeschylean characters do not say much about it, but some of them, e.g. Orestes and Pelasgus, do appear to believe in it. They appear to take God seriously.

