

Ancient Greece: The Rule of Law

Adapted from: A. Tiatorio, *Freedom and Equality: The Human Ethical Enigma*

The three plays of The Oresteia tell the story of the ancient and cursed House of Atreus and the endless violence and bloodshed of revenge that plagued it. The curse of the House of Atreus originated with the evil events of a feud between two brothers, Atreus and Thyestes. Atreus lured Thyestes to a reconciliation feast at which he served his hated brother a meal made of the butchered bodies of his own children. Thyestes ate, only to discover to his horror what his own brother had done. In retribution, Thyestes called down a blood curse on the House of Atreus as he fled with his one remaining son Aegisthus.

Many years passed, and Atreus had two sons, Agamemnon and Menelaus. The wife of Menelaus was the famous Helen who brought on the fateful war with Troy that would take Agamemnon away from his home for 10 long years. During his absence, his wife Clytemnestra, took as her lover none other than the same Aegisthus, the sole surviving son of Thyestes, and the agent of the blood feud curse. The two lovers, plotting revenge, awaited the return of Agamemnon, thus bringing us to the beginning of the Orestia.

In the first play, Agamemnon, King of Argos, returns home from the siege of Troy only to be brutally murdered by his faithless wife Clytemnestra. She, for her part, in collusion with her lover, takes revenge on Agamemnon for his sacrifice of their own daughter, done a decade earlier to appease the gods on the eve of the voyage to Troy. In a merciless scene of carnage she stabs her husband to death while he sits naked in his bath. She proclaims to the world that it was her duty, blood for blood revenge for the murder of her daughter. This is a clear statement of the old way of settling scores and one that offered no escape from the cycle of violence since it was now necessary for Agamemnon's son, Orestes, to exact revenge for the death of his father by murdering his own mother. This is the subject of the second play of the three.

Orestes returns to Argos and in a disguise enters the palace pretending to bring important news. With the help of a faithful accomplice he first kills Aegisthus and then slays his own mother, Clytemnestra. Although Orestes declares it to have been his duty, it is clear that this additional act of violence has not lifted the curse and that the cycle of revenge will not end. The Furies appear, vicious serpent haired female hags representing the ancient blood feud way, sworn to pursue and punish Orestes for killing his mother and closest of kin.

*Follow, seek him-round and round
Scent and snuff and scan the ground,
Lest unharmed he slip away,
He who did his mother slay!*

His blood must flow in payment for hers. Orestes flees ahead of the relentless Furies and the third play, The Eumenides, begins. Driven by the ghost of Clytemnestra, obsessed with revenge, the Furies pursue Orestes to the sanctuary of Apollo at Delphi where he asks the god to protect him. Apollo sends Orestes to plead his case to the goddess Athena.

After completing Eumenides have students paraphrase excerpts from the play by completing the Student Handout. Use this as a basis for a Socratic seminar ethics discussion.

Teacher's Guide

Socratic seminar ethics discussion lesson plan for The Oresteia of Aeschylus, the Athenian

<p>Orestes:</p> <p><i>...An Argive am I, and right well thou know'st My sire, that Agamemnon who arrayed The fleet and them that went therein to war - That chief with whom thy hand combined to crush To an uncitied heap what once was Troy; That Agamemnon, when he homeward came, Was brought unto no honourable death, Slain by the dark-souled wife who brought me forth To him, enwound and slain in wily nets, Blazoned with blood that in the laver ran. And I, returning from an exiled youth, Slew her, my mother-lo, it stands avowed! With blood for blood avenging my loved sire; And in this deed doth Loxias bear part, Decreeing agonies, to goad my will, Unless by me the guilty found their doom. Do thou decide if right or wrong were do</i></p>	<p>The murder of Agamemnon by his trusted wife is a massive betrayal of trust in one of the most egregious assaults on the innate human ethical sense.</p>
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Students should be encouraged to relate this to their own personal experiences and feelings.

Try to stimulate discussion along the following lines:

Do you expect your friends and family to support you in times of trouble? Do you expect to stand by them? Why?

Have you ever been let down, disappointed or been betrayed by a friend? What was your reaction? Did you want to get even?

Have you ever felt used by some one you trusted? Why is this so hurtful?

In Eumenides, Aeschylus dramatizes the transition from the old fear driven kinship-based idea of justice represented by the archaic Furies to the new public ethic needed for stability in a larger, non-kin based community represented by the newer Olympian gods. But Athena cannot decide such a complicated case alone.

<p>Athena:</p> <p><i>Too mighty is this matter, whosoe'er</i></p>	<p>Honesty and truthfulness are prized but not easily obtained so oaths and pledges are</p>
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<p><i>Of mortals claims to judge hereof aright.Yet, as on me Fate hath imposed the cause, I choose unto me judges that shall be An ordinance forever, set to rule The dues of blood-guilt, upon oath declared. But ye, call forth your witness and your proof, Words strong for justice, fortified by oath; And I, whoe'er are truest in my town, Them will I choose and bring, and straitly charge, Look on this cause, discriminating well, And pledge your oath to utter nought of wrong.</i></p>	<p>required to ensure just dealing.</p> <p>Human behavior can be described as the pursuit of self-interest through social cooperation and here we find the ethical core dilemma: how to balance individual freedom with group responsibility. The issue of lying is an important ethical problem because knowing what is true is necessary to proper decision making in the pursuit of self-interest. Lying is ethically unacceptable behavior in all human culture, yet all humans are urged to lie when the truth is understood to be detrimental to self interest.</p> <p>Ask: Why do we treat perjury as a serious crime? Is it sensible to expect that people will lie?</p> <p>Do you lie? When do you think it's OK to lie?</p> <p>Would you lie to save a loved one from being punished for something he or she <u>did</u> do?</p>
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Athena decides that the case must be heard by judges and so creates a court where reason would prevail. The Furies are outraged.

<p>The Furies:</p> <p><i>Now are they all undone, the ancient laws, If here the slayer's cause Prevail; new wrong for ancient right shall be If matricide go free. Henceforth a deed like his by all shall stand, Too ready to the hand: Too oft shall parents in the aftertime Rue and lament this crime, Taught, not in false imagining, to feel Their children's thrusting steel: No more the wrath, that erst on murder fell From us, the queens of Hell, ...</i></p>	<p>The only way to achieve freedom and equality is through the application of relentless reciprocity.</p> <p>Not paying back the murderer in kind will encourage more murder. This is very basic to the innate human ethical sense.</p> <p>Structure the discussion to pursue this notion. Ask students to give examples from their own life that illustrate this theme.</p>
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But Athena pushes ahead against the railing Furies as they struggle to retain their importance as guardians of primordial human ethical urging to pay back kind for kind, measure for measure. Athena would replace emotional instinct with reason and vengeance with justice.

<p>Athena:</p> <p><i>O men of Athens, ye who first do judge The law of bloodshed, hear me now ordain. Hereto all time for Aegeus' Attic host Shall stand this council-court of judges sworn, ...</i></p> <p><i>Thus I ordain it now, a council-court Pure and unsullied by the lust of gain, Sacred and swift to vengeance, wakeful ever To champion men who sleep, the country's guard. Thus have I spoken, thus to mine own clan Commended it forever. Ye who judge, Arise, take each his vote, mete out the right, Your oath revering. Lo, my word is said.</i></p>	<p>The expectation is that interested parties will be bias and will not render a fair judgment. Athena calls for “pure and unsullied” judges to protect the community.</p> <p>Their natural ethical sense urges all humans to seek individual happiness within social groups. Ethical cooperative groups are like concentric circles around the individual. The most immediate circles of family and then friends and professional associates command the greatest claim to responsibility. This sense of obligation diminishes rapidly as the circles widen, until little or no obligation for the welfare of “strangers” or “outsiders” is felt. A sense of reciprocal obligation and loyalty works to stabilize and strengthen these groups. Everyone is motivated by the same innate ethical instinct to protect the interests of other members of their recognized ethical cooperative groups thus leading to the belief that friends will naturally help friends.</p> <p>Ask students to reflect on their own experience with favoritism encountered in school, on athletic teams or at work.</p>
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The Furies refuse to let go and promise to bring pain and suffering to any who ignore them. The base genetic urgings of mankind will not be easily erased.

<p>The Furies:</p> <p><i>Woe on you, younger gods! The ancient right Ye have o'erridden, rent it from my hands.</i></p>	<p>Reciprocity is the only way to balance</p>
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<p><i>But heavily my wrath Shall on this land fling forth the drops that blast and burn, Venom of vengeance, that shall work such scathe As I have suffered; where that dew shall fall, Shall leafless blight arise, Wasting Earth's offspring, Justice, hear my call! And through all the land in deadly wise Shall scatter venom, to exude again in pestilence on men. What cry avails me now, what deed of blood, unto this land what dark despite? Alack, alack, forlorn Are we, a bitter injury have borne Alack, O sisters, O dishonoured brood Of mother Night!</i></p>	<p>human behavior and to ensure freedom and equality for individuals. If this is lost chaos will result.</p> <p>Human beings expect others to behave as they themselves behave and this usually means expecting gratitude in return for good deeds and retaliation for bad ones. But, the ability to rise above this simple ethic in order to achieve a greater group good is also highly prized behavior because the universal and unrelenting reliance on reciprocity leads inevitably to impasse and stalemate. People inherently know this. This is why generosity, magnanimity and charity are honored and considered to be virtuous.</p> <p>The recognition of how our innate ethical impulses can lead to trouble is an important ethical lesson.</p> <p>The teacher should challenge students to think through the ramifications of this and how vicious cycles might be avoided.</p>
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Orestes is freed from the curse, and Athena exerts all of her persuasive powers to convince the Furies that their considerable and ageless wisdom will not be forgotten and that they too have a place in the new world order. Vengeance must now serve a new master.

<p>Athena:</p> <p><i>And nevermore these walls within Shall echo fierce sedition's din, Unslaked with blood and crime; The thirsty dust shall nevermore Suck up the darkly streaming gore Of civic broils, shed out in wrath And vengeance, crying death for death! But man with man and state with state</i></p>	<p>The innate sense of reciprocity has not been abandoned merely reassigned from individuals to the community at large. Vengeance will now be administered by the state.</p>
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<p><i>Shall vow the pledge of common hate And common friendship, that for man Hath oft made blessing, out of ban, Be ours unto an time.</i></p>	<p>The ethical dilemma surrounding capital punishment can be used to encourage discussion of differences or similarities between the revenge of an individual and that administered by the state.</p>
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Since a powerful instinct for reciprocity is genetically ingrained in all people, the resulting revenge cycle can be almost impossible to break. These all too common types of situations result in ethical conflict that is difficult to overcome because both sides make a claim to being morally justified in their actions and tend to take immutable positions. The Oresteia is about a rage/revenge cycle that can open a fruitful discussion of this ethical dilemma. Remember ethics is an ingrained sense of what the right is and what the wrong is. It is not rooted in reason or logic. To promote ethical growth, the teacher should try to direct the discussion to personal student experiences with these payback feelings rather than be drawn into a debate about the particular issues in the plays themselves.

Make a circle to bring students generally face to face and conduct the Socratic seminar discussion of the excerpts from the Eumenides. Challenge students' conclusions and help them find alternative courses of action. Challenge student reasoning by suggesting the alternatives. Try to promote student-to-student interaction and encourage them to elaborate on reasons for their judgments. Explore the concept of "frame of reference" to uncover reasons why there is honest disagreement. It is very important for students to be sensitized to this.

Essential Question Essay

The emergence in Golden Age Athens of an ethic based on the public good rather than on religiously reinforced custom and supernatural authority, even though inaugurated by the Olympian deities, and never really freed from divine oversight, was a major departure. It opened the door to a new kind of justice, one based on the human capacity to reason and to decide about right and wrong. The significance of this change is obvious. The Greeks were the first to search for a system to insure justice, a concern that did not plague primitive egalitarian societies. Justice is a new idea born out of the realities of this new society from the need to rediscover the sense of fairness that had been lost. The Greeks, it seems, were the first to realize that this was an elusive quarry in a hierarchical community, and that this was a real world human issue that could only be resolved through human effort.

Students should be asked to synthesize what they have learned from their ethics study of Eumenides by writing a reflective essay about the essential question of Justice, what it is and how they think it can best be achieved.