Greek Tragedy and Civilization: The Cultivation of Pity

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Of all the strategies for civilization reviewed by Albert O. Hirschman in *The Passions and the Interests*, one is distinctly missing: that civilization might be rendered more decent and peaceful by cultivating the civilizing emotions based upon love and pity. The reason, it seems, is not the fear that these civilizing emotions are too weak to quell rage, greed, and violence, but too strong, too likely to cause problems of their own, which is why Kant writes of "pathological love." Turning to Greek tragedy, I argue that it provides a *paideia* in pity, an account of what it would take to educate and channel the civilizing emotions, so that they might foster civilization. Here is an alternate account of what it might take to tame civilization and its discontents, an account neglected in modern political theory.

The supreme tragic emotion, to judge from the surviving tragedies, is eleos *or* oiktos. *Both words are generally translated into English as pity.* Stanford, *Greek Tragedy and the Emotions*

There is a school that holds that the history of modern political philosophy, beginning with Machiavelli, is a history of decline. Whereas the classic philosophers Plato and Aristotle held that reason might come to know man's place in the cosmos, and order his world accordingly, the modern philosophers are satisfied with far less: a commodious and peaceful social order. How this commodious and peaceful order might be best achieved is, of course, a subject of debate among moderns. In *The Passions and the Interests*, Albert O. Hirschman (1977) argues that while moderns disagree on much, a surprising number hold that the solution to the riddle of civilization is to transform passionate desires into interests, so as to replace the love of pleasure, domination, and honor with the love of gain. Such a solution became attractive, in part, because moderns could no longer be convinced that reason constituted an adequate bulwark against passion and desire.

NOTE: Three referees for PRQ made a number of helpful comments, especially regarding the continuity between the poets and the classics, and the discontinuity between Athens and Jerusalem.

Hirschman recounts a number of steps in the transformation of passion into interest that need not be recapitulated here. Most striking are the alternatives that such a strategy replaces, not merely the rational repression – of passion and desire, but also the strategy of setting passion against passion – the insight that "one set of passions, hitherto known variously as greed, avarice, or love of lucre, could be usefully employed to oppose and bridle such other passions as ambition, lust for power, or sexual lust" (41). Of all the alternatives considered by Hirschman, however, one is missing: that society might be ordered by setting powerful civilizing passions, passions that reflect a genuine concern for others, such as love and pity against the uncivilized passions, such as naked ambition, lust for power, greed, envy, and unbridled sexual desire. It seems such an obvious solution, the most obvious of all perhaps: to set love, care and concern for others against all those passions that lead us to exploit others. Yet, this solution finds almost no place in modern thought, seemingly being regarded as more utopian than even the classical ideal, the rational control of desire.

There is, however, a tradition in which this most obvious solution, as I have called it, is central: that of classical Greek tragedy. It must be teased out, for the tragedies are, of course, not texts in political theory, but works of art. The solution of the tragic poets to the riddle of civilization is pity, though it is not pity as moderns understand it. Nor is it identical with Christian pity, which is why it will not be useful to draw figures such as St. Augustine into the fray. Before characterizing this solution, it will be fruitful to consider Hirschman's study of the passions and interests in more detail. Doing so will lead to a great many generalizations about political thought in the early modern era, each of which taken out of context is probably wrong. Hirschman's book is so well known that many readers will be familiar with it, and so able to set the larger context for themselves. My essay concludes with some speculations as to why the poets' solution seems so unavailable today . . . indeed, virtually forgotten, almost incomprehensible.

Passions and Interests

By the seventeenth century, says Hirschman, it was widely held that moralizing philosophy and religious precept could no longer be trusted to restrain the destructive passions. While repression and coercion suggested themselves as alternatives, the instability of such solutions was widely recognized. Harnessing the destructive passions, transforming them in some way so that they might serve society, became the modal strategy. In the modern era, harnessing has come to mean the principle of countervailing passion, to set ambition against ambition, avarice against avarice, as the authors of *The Federalist* put it (Numbers 72, 51). Perhaps the most fascinating aspect of Hirschman's

argument is the wide range of theorists he shows to have embraced the principle of countervailing passion. Bacon ("to set affection against affection and to master one by another"), Spinoza ("an affect cannot be restrained nor removed unless by an opposed and stronger affect"), Hume (to restrain the "love of pleasure" by the "love of gain"), and of course Hobbes, who set fear against desire, are exemplary. Important, and only infrequently commented upon by Hirschman, is that not one of these theorists proposed setting what might be called the civilizing passions, such as love and pity, against the uncivilized ones. Rather, their program is almost always that of setting one uncivilized passion against another.

Against this conclusion it might be argued that, for example, the fear upon which Hobbes relies, to say nothing of the love of comfort and commodious living, other favorite Hobbesian passions, are themselves actually civilizing passions, insofar as they may promote civilization. True enough, but then *any* passion becomes civilizing, if only society is clever enough to turn such passions back against their unruly possessor: the strategy of countervailing passion. By civilizing passions I mean those passions that are originally and primarily (but not exclusively) concerned with the welfare of others, such as pity, compassion, and some types of love. That society might be based upon such passions is, I believe, a stranger and more alien notion than first appears, which is perhaps why there is a tendency to assimilate it to more familiar notions, such as regarding a passion as civilized if civilization can somehow exploit it.

It is not the case that love and pity have been ignored as bulwarks of civilization because they are generally regarded as too weak and ineffective to counter the uncivilized passions. On the contrary, love, and even pity, most of these authors recognize, are sufficiently powerful to get men and women to do virtually anything, including sacrifice their lives. Thus, David Johnston (1986) interprets Hobbes' *Leviathan* as rhetoric, designed to convince men of the improbable proposition that fear of death really is their greatest concern. Only then will they be effectively subject to the sovereign. Emotions like love and pity are not too weak to civilize society, but too strong, too unpredictable, too difficult to bring under civilization's sway. It is the sheer immediacy and intensity of the passions, even the civilizing ones, that get us into trouble. It is for this reason that Kant (not one of the authors examined by Hirschman) distrusts love and compassion in all their guises, as they cannot be commanded. On the contrary, their "object may determine the will be means of inclination," for Kant a most troublesome outcome. The love that is commanded in the Scriptures, says Kant (1956: 25–26; BA 12–14), "is beneficence from duty . . . [it] is practical love, not *pathological* love; it resides in the will, and not in . . . feeling, in principles of action and not in melting

compassion; and it alone can be commanded." [1] Compassion is "pathological" because it attaches us to particular persons, leading us to do something because of our feelings toward the person, rather than because we have chosen the action for its own sake by an act of will. Compassion is dangerous precisely because it cannot be "commanded."

Orginally understood in the late sixteenth century in terms of what Bishop Butler (1896: I, 97–98) calls "reasonable self-love," that is, the rational pursuit of all aspects of human fulfillment, almost a classical ideal, interest soon came to be defined in strictly economic terms. Clearer about the character of this transformation than its sources, Hirschman's study, particularly of Hume, supports the conclusion that it is as much fear of the uncontrolled nature of the civilizing passions, as it is fear of the uncivilized ones, that led to the solution of interest. Otherwise expressed, love, pity, and compassion are not only powerful enough to control greed, lust, ambition, and desire: they are so powerful that they themselves become the problem. To set the civilizing passions against the uncivilized ones is to invite disaster, even should the civilizing passions prove more powerful. Better to channel the uncivilized passions into the activity of acquisition, and so render these passions virtually sacred, almost a calling. This is the strategy of interest. Inherent in this strategy, and seemingly inseparable from it, suggests Hirschman, is the idealization of interest: as though the disruptive, uncivilized passions are somehow rendered calm and beneficent when transmuted into the pursuit of economic interest. I shall return to this point in the conclusion.

It will be useful to turn to the Greek tragic poets, who pursue a strategy for civilization not represented among Hirschman's moderns. The poets' strategy is to unleash pity and compassion as civilizing forces in such a way as to educate these powerful passions, so that they will not be so dangerous. In a word, tragedy is *paideia*, a civilizing education, in pity. The classic philosophers Plato and Aristotle pursue a similar strategy, seeking not merely to establish the supremacy of reason, but to educate the passions. Plato's *Symposium* is about the education of eros, so that it might come to lead the lover to the beautiful and good. Similarly, Plato's *Phaedrus* identifies a form of mania that may properly lead the psyche. As Martha Nussbaum (1986: 204, 214) puts it,

> Plato has used "mania" and related words to designate the state of soul in which the non-intellectual elements–appetites and emotions–are in

[1] My translation is based upon, but alters, that of Lewis Beck (1959: 16). A popular translation, that of Carl J. Friedrich in the Modern Library *Philosophy of Kant* edition (1949: 147), translates "Pathological" *(pathologische)* as "psychological," helping the reader to gloss over the stringency of Kant's opposition to compassion.

> control and lead or guide the intellectual part. . . . The *Phaedrus* . . . is clearly claiming that certain sorts of essential and high insights come to us only through the *guidance* of the passions.

Aristotle too seeks to educate the passions. This is the project of much of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, in which it is not enough to do the right thing, not even for the right reason. The passions must desire what is right, and this requires their education and training. For both Plato and Aristotle, *sophrosune* (prudent wisdom) "requires the correct passional response. Without the right 'passion,' the very same choice and action will cease to be virtuous" (Nussbaum 1986: 308).

While the approach of the classic philosophers is similar to that of the poets, it is not identical, and it is on the difference that I focus. One way to characterize this difference is to state the obvious. For all their concerns with educating the passions, the classics value the supremacy of reason in a way the poets never do. Plato's *Symposium* and *Phaedrus* must be contrasted with *Republic* and *Gorgias* (among other dialogues), which seek the triumph of reason over desire. The poets promote not merely the education of pity, but an education in the civilizing connections with others that pity represents. It is the poets' interest in the *quality of passionate relatedness to others that distinguishes their approach* from that of Aristotle in the *Ethics*. As Jonathan Barnes (1976: 31) puts it,

> Aristotle shows a remarkable indifference to the effects of the good man's actions on his fellows; even when such eminently social virtues as generosity or munificence are under discussion, it is, one feels, the character of the virtuous man rather than the effects of his virtuous actions that excites Aristotle's interest.

Despite their differences, both the classics and the poets find a type of reason in the passions. Or as Nietzsche (1974: 110) so in touch with classical thinking on this topic states, "as if every passion didn't have its own quantum of reason." It is this that joins the classic philosophers and tragic poets, separating them from the moderns studied by Hirschman.

Pity in Greek Tragedy

Virtually every extant tragedy contains calls for, and expressions of, pity. *Eleos* and *oiktos*, the words we translate as pity, are among the most common terms in Greek tragedy, far more common than such terms as *arete* or *hubris*, terms frequently seen as central to the tragic vision. Aristotle (*Poetics* c 6) defines tragedy in terms of its ability to evoke pity (he always uses the term *eleos*, which seems to be the slightly less emphatic of the two) and fear (*phobos*). Pausanias (1.17.1) states that there was an Altar of Pity at Athens,

though it may have been Hellenistic. Pity was obviously a central emotion to the Greeks, and Stanford (1983) makes it the central emotion in his *Greek Tragedy and the Emotions*, arguing that the clumsier "compassionate grief" would be a better translation. I do not seek to demonstrate that pity was important for the tragic poets, as I assume this to be well established. I seek to show that pity was central to the tragic poets' strategy for civilization, an issue that has received far less attention.

One sees the poets' strategy nowhere more clearly than in Sophocles' *Ajax*. When in a fit of madness Ajax kills sheep instead of his intended target—the leadership of his own army—his humiliation is complete, and he must kill himself to salvage whatever honor he can, regardless of the effect of his death on his wife and child. A selfish man who even at the moment of his death regrets only that he didn't succeed in killing the Greek generals, Ajax is nonetheless an attractive character in important respects. He is forthright and courageous, without guile, willing to die for the same principles he lived for.

While Ajax is admirable in many respects, he could not exist in the polis: he would destroy it, or the polis would destroy him. It is Odysseus who represents the virtues of the polis. Not, in Sophocles' account, because Odysseus is the better talker, but because he can feel pity and compassion, emotions quite absent in the heroic Ajax (line 1355). In a word, Sophocles would render pity an aspect of *arete*, as Plato and Aristotle would render *sophrosune* an aspect. "Pity, generosity, gratitude for what has been well done, forbearance towards injuries: these are what Odysseus urges in the final scene too, thinking here also, as he says, of himself, as well as of Ajax" (Kitto 1961: 123). It is these same values that civilize the polis. *Ajax*, a play that spans the distance between the archaic world and that of the polis, is about precisely this. So too are many of the extant tragedies, not just those of Sophocles, the poet ostensibly most concerned with pity. As Bennett Simon (1978: 136) says about Euripides' *Heracles*, "A new notion of heroism is defined in the *Heracles*, a heroism that incorporates rather then disowns the suffering and enduring that are the lot of the old, the child, and the woman."

It is this that distinguishes the poets from the classic philosophers. Both poet and philosopher seek to educate the passions, but only the poets seek to educate the passions that connect men and women to each other in pity and compassion. It is their belief in the civilizing potential of these passionate connections that separates the poets from the philosophers. In this regard the poets are more democratic, which is not to say that the tragic poets, with the possible exception of the younger Euripides, favored democracy. The poets are democratic in the more general sense of being concerned with sentiments that may be shared among citizens, and so bind the *demos*. To put oneself in the place of another, to feel sympathy and compassion for him, is not the

same thing as being willing to talk and reason with him, and so recognize him as a fellow citizen. But it is a good start. Most virulently anti-democratic thought, particularly at Athens, is based on the assumption that the *demos* does not share fully in what it is to be human, as Eli Sagan (1991: 159–67) demonstrates in study of *hetaireiai*, oligarchic political clubs that played a leading role in the anti-democratic coups of 411 and 404.

In a typically Greek remark, Oedipus locates his greatness in his ability to bear enormous pain, more than any other man could bear (*Tyrannus* line 1415). Such a remark reflects the influence of the heroic ethic on tragedy, but it remains a version of the heroic ethic, a contest in agony. Civilizing this ethic, the tragic poets seem to say, is about measuring a man's greatness, and that of the polis, in terms of pain-sharing, not just pain-bearing. Not Oedipus' ability to bear more pain than another, but Oedipus' willingness to share the pain of the citizens of Thebes, granting it priority over his own, is the true measure of his greatness, Sophocles seems to suggest (*Tyrannus* lines 59–64, 93–94). With this principle all three tragic poets seem to agree, so that in his *Heracles* (lines 1234–36, passim), Euripides portrays King Theseus as the symbolic embodiment of the sound polis not merely because he is brave and stead fast, though of course these virtues are important. In Theseus is embodied the entire constellation of virtues centered upon pity, such as compassion, generosity, decency, and love of humanity (*philanthropia).*

When I refer to pity, it is actually to this constellation of emotions that I shall be referring. For, as Rousseau asks in his *Second Discourse* (1964: 131), what are generosity, clemency, and humanity, but pity (*pitié*) applied to the weak, the guilty, and the species in general? Pity is the paradigmatic civilizing passion, a broad definition that the rest of this paper is intended to support. I have not found it useful to distinguish among such closely related terms as pity, mercy, and compassion, all of which, the *Oxford English Dictionary* relates, have their French and English origins in Latin-based Christian thought. The Greek concept of pity is pre-Christian. Not the disposition to mercy and compassion, but the felt connection to the suffering of others like oneself, is key. *Suggnome*, a term that Nussbaum (1990: 375) renders as "fellow-thought-and-feeling" captures the experience upon which pity depends, and it is this experience of connection in pity that I emphasize. Or as Stanford (1983: 24) puts its, in *eleos* and *oiktos*, "there is no question here of the pitier being being separate from another's agony. You respond to it in the depths of your being, as a harp-string responds by sympathetic resonance to a note from another source."

Adopting Walter Nestle's claim that "tragedy was born when myth began to be assessed from a citizen's point of view," Jean-Peirre Vernant (Vernant and Vidal-Naquet 1988: 26) argues that Greek tragedy confronts heroic values and ancient religious "representations with the new modes of thought that

characterize the advent of law within the city-state." This is part of the story. Another part, which I have emphasized, would put the definition of tragedy a little differently. Tragedy is born when men become convinced that they can act more nobly than the gods, not because they can compete with them, but because humans can offer what the gods never can: pity and compassion. Tragedy is born when men begin to redefine nobility, an argument that A. W. H. Adkins has made about the philosophers (1960, 1973). Only whereas Plato and Aristotle would make *sophrosune* the measure of nobility, the tragic poets would make pity and compassion its standard. Which is why Euripides has Amphitryon, father of Heracles, say to Zeus that "I, mere man, am nobler [have more *arete*] than you, great god" (*Heracles* line 342). This is not mere *hubris* talking, but fact: Amphitryon is capable of depths of pity and compassion that Zeus can hardly imagine.

This does not, of course, equip man to compete with the gods—that would be *hubris* indeed, the *hubris* of Ajax. Rather, it allows men to think of the polis as a place where men may offer each other support, pity and compassion in the face of the depredations of the gods, and the harshness of life in general. J. Peter Euben's (1990: 90) comments on the puzzling resolution of Aeschylus' *Oresteia* trilogy capture this ideal well. "The *Oresteia* does not end suffering but collectivizes it through the medium of dramatic performance."[2] To collectivize suffering is a key dimension of pity, what humans can do for each other that the gods cannot. Tragedy is not only about this shared suffering; it is this shared suffering, suggests Euben. Such an interpretation gives new meaning to the insight that tragedy is a civic celebration, "an occasion to say something about the city. . . . and essentially a festival of the democratic polis," as Simon Goldhill (1990: 114) puts it. From the perspective of pity, Greek tragedy is a celebration of the willingness and ability of the citizens of Athens to share each other's pain. It is to this aspect of Athenian greatness too that Thucydides' Pericles refers when he states that "since a state can support individuals in their suffering, but no one person by himself can bear the load that rests upon the state, is it not right for us all to rally to her defence?" (*History* II.60) Like the tragic poets, Pericles transforms pain-sharing into an act of civic virtue. Such virtue is not tantamount to democracy, I have

[2] There is, as Euben emphasizes, much dispute over the resolution of Aeschylus' *Eumenidies* (third play of the *Oresteia* trilogy). Athene's embarrassingly bad arguments in favor of Orestes (she always takes the side of the man, lines 735–40), and the complete and utter transformation of the Furies into the Kindly Ones, are among the false notes frequently commented upon. Few, however, would argue that the *Oresteia* is not about the transformation of *lex talionis* under the influence of such civilized values as mercy and pity.

suggested, but it is its ground. One might argue that the moderns studied by Hirschman seem to have found another ground, that of shared interest. Perhaps recognizing others as having valid interests similar to one's own requires more than a little *suggnome*. The question is whether more sympathy and compassion would support an even stronger community. Hirschman's moderns answer no, in part because they lacked the poets' confidence, shared to some degree by the classic philosophers, that even powerful emotions might be educated and refined. Tragedy is this education.

Pity in the State of Nature: *Philoctetes*

I propose to read Sophocles' *Philoctetes* as an account of pity in the state of nature. Unlike modern state-of-nature theorists, Sophocles' state of nature does not assume that man is orginally asocial. In this sense the comparison is limited. On the other hand, Sophocles does assume that in suffering, at least, we are all rendered potentially asocial: isolated and alone. It is pity that brings us back into the community of others. Because of the difference between classics and moderns regarding human sociableness, it might be argued that it is misleading to equate Philoctetes' isolation on a deserted island with the state of nature. Perhaps, but my key argument for the comparison (and it is that, not an identity) is that the setting of Sophocles' play serves the same function as modern state-of-nature theory: to reveal aspects of what it is to be human that are so basic that society ignores them at its peril.

Bitten by a sacred snake which caused a wound that would not heal, Philoctetes was marooned on Lemnos by shipmates who could not bear his suffering. After some years, Neoptolemus is sent to Philoctetes by Odysseus to obtain Philoctetes' magic bow, so that with it Troy might be taken. After much hesitation, Neoptolemus steals the bow but, overcome with remorse, gives it back. Justice never once enters into the matter on either side. In presenting his side, Philoctetes appeals neither to justice nor the "norm of reciprocity." Rather, he says simply, "take pity on me" (*su m'eleeson*) (line 501). In deciding to return the bow, Neoptolemus refers not to justice, but to his ability to feel Philoctetes' pain. "A kind of compassion, a terrible compassion, has come upon me for him. I have felt it for him all the time" (line 965).

As has been frequently pointed out, for example by Edmund Wilson (1965) in his essay "The Wound and the Bow," the location of this play on a deserted island is significant, making it a metaphor for civilization itself. There the isolated and wounded Philoctetes struggles with the wily and instrumental Odysseus (so different from Odysseus in Sophocles' *Ajax*) for the soul of the young Neoptolemus, who is filled with compassion for Philoctetes, but remains vulnerable to the persuasions of his commander, as well as his own greedy desire to possess Philoctetes' bow (lines 658–70).

Which side of man is to prevail? The play seems to suggest that while pity is a profound and powerful emotion, the harshness of our circumstances as well as the intensity of our desires and fears may lead us to cut ourselves off from those who suffer. Aristotle argues similarly, as will be shown shortly.

"You are not bad yourself," says Philoctetes to Neoptolemus. "By bad men's teaching you came to practice your foul lesson" (line 972). Recall in this regard the father of Neoptolemus: Achilles, the original pre-political man, raised not in civilized society by corruptible humans, but in natural purity by the half-human centaur, Chiron. The question is whether Neoptolemus will be able to return to his own true nature. "Be your true self [*sautou genou*] again," pleads Philoctetes (line 950). But, is Neoptolemus already too corrupted? Like almost all accounts of the state of nature, *Philoctetes* is an account of how civilization might be built on the basis of what one finds in nature, in this case the conflict between pity, greed, and glory. Here pity is exemplified by Neoptolemus' ability to stay connected to Philoctetes' suffering, not rendering him merely the outcast, the scapegoat, and the other. Conversely, what Philoctetes asks of Neoptolemus is not to be cured by him, but simply to remain emotionally connected to him, and so to humanity. "The sickness in me seeks to have you beside me," says Philoctetes simply (*to gar nosoun pothei se xumparastaten labein* [line 675]).

What if this were the foundation of civilization: not justice, but the ability to stay connected to others, and so sympathetically to share their emotions, and so ease their isolation, their alienation from humanity? Easier perhaps in joy (unless envy should get in the way), such sharing is even more important in sorrow. This, I argue, is the poets' answer to the riddle of civilization. But, if the answer is different from that given by most in the Western tradition, it is no less fragile than other answers, such as rational self-control, as Neoptolemus' future exploits suggest.[3] Though fragile, pity may nonetheless be strengthened, through an education in pity. This is the task of tragedy.

[3] In the Homeric tradition it is Neoptolemus who goes on to slaughter Priam at an altar in Troy, an old man whom his father had respected and spared. Sophocles obliquely refers to Neoptolemus' future at lines 1440– 45. In this passage Heracles tells Neoptolemus to act with piety (*eusebeia*) when he sacks Troy. This might lead one to posit a tight link between pity and piety among the Greeks, as tight as in the Christian era (the English term "pity" has its origins in the Latin *pietas*, piety). In fact, my thesis is that pity is something quite different, the distinctly human virtue, what humans can offer each other that the gods cannot. Piety concerns man's relationship to the gods and other men, as this relationship is mediated by a respectful attitude toward the gods. Pity is a strictly human relationship, unmediated by the gods.

The Tragedies—the Cultivation of Pity

Tragedy is *paideia* in pity. An untranslatable term, as Werner Jaeger (1945: v 1, v) points out, *paideia* is best rendered in this context as an upbringing in the civilizing emotions centered on pity. While pity may be natural, it is not therefore automatic. It is easy to feel pity. What is difficult, and requires education, is to feel pity toward the right person to the right extent at the right time for the right reason in the right way—that is not easy, and it is not everyone who can do it. Hence to do it well is a rare, laudable, and fine achievement. This sounds like Aristotle (*N. Ethics* 1109a25–30) because the idea is similar: pity may be natural, but it requires education and proper guidance so that it may be properly channeled. Like the classic philosophers, the tragic poets reject any sharp distinction between reason and passion, arguing, in effect, that the passion of pity may be subject to reason by means of education.

In part, the education of pity concerns removing barriers to it. Or as Orestes puts it in Euripides' *Electra*, "Uneducated men are pitiless, but we who are educated pity much. And we pay a high price for being intelligent. Wisdom hurts" (line 295). Like Orestes, Aristotle recognizes in his *Rhetoric* (2.1378a–1385b) that pity is much more likely to be evoked in some people and circumstances than others. *Eleos* is less likely to affect people who are themselves in desperate circumstances, as when Iphigenia states, "Unhappiness, O friends, can harden us toward sorrow harsher than our own." (Euripides, *Iphigenia at Tauris* lines 352–53). Similarly, pity is not to be expected from those in a mood of arrogant self-confidence. It is also less likely to be effective in those who are angry, rash, afraid, or shocked. Finally, those filled with spiteful envy (*phthonos*) at the prosperity of others are unlikely to feel pity. Those most likely to feel pity are more experienced in living, less bold, more sensible, and weaker than those powerful and heroic figures such as Ajax, who cannot feel pity. Those most likely to feel pity include "those who have children, and parents, and wives; for these are part of them, and are such as to suffer the evils of which we have spoken" (*Rhetoric* 2.1385b; Salkever 1986: 295). From this perspective, the poets' frequent call, generally through the chorus, for temperance and *sophrosune* takes on a new meaning. These virtues are not only valuable themselves. They create the conditions, a calm space, in which pity can emerge. They are a call to clear one's mind of rash emotions, such as those just identified by Aristotle, so that one might better experience the civilizing ones, above all pity. Pity is civilizing both because it reflects and is the cause of those connections to others that sustain community.

The Katharsis of Pity and Fear

As is well known, Aristotle defines tragedy in terms of its evocation of the

katharsis of pity and fear (*Poetics* c.6). Much ink has been spent on this definition, in large measure because Aristotle is so cryptic, promising more detail elsewhere (*Politics* bk. 8, c.7), but never delivering, though one supposes that the promise was fulfilled in a now lost work. Interpreting *katharsis* as a type of *paideia*, Stephen Salkever (1986: 274–304) argues that Aristotelian *katharsis* is concerned with introducing order into disorderly souls, and so reducing the lust for power and glory. In defining *katharsis* as he does, Salkever steps outside the usual debates over the term, which concern whether *katharsis* is best seen as a type of ritual pruification and cleansing, or rather emotional and intellectual clarification. Salkever's in not, however, an idiosyncratic use of the term, finding support in Plato's *Sophist*, where the process of *paideia* through *elenchus* (argumentation in which a proposition is refuted by deriving its opposite), rather than admonition, is characterized as the cathartic art (*kathartike*) (213b).

In the democratic polis, suggests Aristotle, the fundamental flaw is *pleonexia*, especially as it takes the form of *kerdos*: love of gain. Laws can help, but they are insufficient. Education is also necessary, and it must be an education aimed at the passions. This is the task of tragedy. Through the excitement of their pity and fear when confronted by the fearsome fates of those who grasp for too much, average citizens (those citizens most capable of feeling pity in the first place, as Aristotle's *Rhetoric* reveals) will earn the value of self-restraint. They will, that is, learn to fear that the same thing might happen to them. The pity they feel for others is in the end self-pity, as in the *Iliad* (19.302), where the captive women in Achilles' tent join in the lamentations over the body of Patroclos. But, Homer adds, "It was a pretext, for each was bewailing her own personal sorrows."

My argument is not simply that Salkever gets Aristotle wrong. It is that Aristotle misinterprets the tragic poets, rendering their account more individualistic and self-centered than it truly is.[4] For the tragic poets, we pity neither

[4] In *The Violence of Pity in Euripides' Medea*, Pietro Pucci (1980) holds to a more stringent view than either Aristotle or Salkever, arguing that (at least for Euripides) we pity another in order to identify our own suffering with that of the other, so that we might externalize our own suffering in the other, and so gain control of it there. Pity is violent because it is the imposition of our own suffering on others, via a process of psychological identification. While such an interpretaion has its place (it helps to explain Medea's pity for the children whom she is soon to murder) it hardly seems a complete explanation of pity in the Greek tragedies. Only by assuming, as Pucci does, that writing is itself a violent imposition ("Internal and external voilence begin in the very act of writing, for they are inscribed in the general structure of the sign . . . " [127]), does it make sense to argue that pity in the tragedies is always an act of violence. Pucci seems to confuse writing with what is written about, though he would presumably argue that this distinction is naive.

for the sake of others nor ourselves. In pity this distinction is itself dissolved. We pity because we are connected to others, so that their pain becomes our own. This seems to be the teaching of Aeschylus in *Prometheus Bound*. Like *Philoctetes*, *Prometheus Bound* concerns a pre-political state in which the building blocks of society are being laid down. This is why it is such a universal founding myth. Like *Philoctetes Prometheus, Bound* is exceptionally located outside the polis, in a howling wasteland. All other extant tragedies (with the exception of Euripides satyr-play *The Cyclops*) take place within established society: if not within the polis, then among barbarians who generally turn out to be about as civilized, or uncivilized, as the Greeks (Aeschylus' *Persians*, Euripides' *Iphigenia at Tauris*, *Helen*).

Read from a perspective that puts pity first, it becomes apparent that neither technology, including the civic skills with which to build a city, such as justice, nor the gift of unseeing hope, are Prometheus' greatest gift to man. His greatest gift is of himself, his own suffering, so that man might learn pity. "I gave to mortal man a precedence over myself in pity," he says (*thnetous d'en oikto prothemenos*) (240). By this he seems to mean that he gave man the example of his own suffering, staked out on a rock for long ages, so that man might learn pity. "Yes, to my friends I am a spectacle of pity." (*Kai men philois g'eleinos eisoran ego*) (248) Indeed, Prometheus suffers so that the whole earth comes to pity him.

> The wave cries out as it breaks into surf;
> the depth cries out, lementing you; the dark
> Hades, the hollow underneath the world,
> suddenly groans below; the springs of sacred flowing rivers all lement
> the pain and pity of your suffering,

says the chorus (403–35). Through his suffering pity is born, evoked by Prometheus as though he were its suffering midwife. Spread throughout the world, it is pity, not technology or justice, that is Prometheus' primary contribution to civilization.

Unlike Prometheus' other gifts, pity doesn't *do* anything. Instead, it connects us to others, and so allows us to be human, rather than "like swarming ants in holes in the ground," as men and women were before Prometheus' sacrifice (450). Thus, the chorus (while not human, the daughters of Oceanos act as humans would be expected to; as is often, albeit not always, the case they respond as the ideal spectator would be expected to) vows at the very end of the play that they will suffer with Prometheus, even if doing so achieves nothing, at least in the short run (1065). In this way they will express their solidarity with him against the tyranny of Zeus. Here it seems pity is a virtual political principle (f. 400). If one guides one's life by the

constellation of emotions centered upon pity, as Theseus does, then one could never be a despot, nor tolerate it.

Pity Hurts

Whereas we generally hold that to be an object of pity is demeaning, the Greek wants to be such an object. Now we are in a position to understand the difference. While it is easy and relatively painless to simply "pity" another, it is difficult to identify with their pain so closely that it becomes our own. Who wants or needs more pain? "I haven't got time for the pain, I haven't got room for the pain," goes a popular song, subsequently perverted into a jingle to sell an analgesic. Kant's labeling "melting compassion" as "pathological" serves a similar function, insulating us from others' pain as well as our own, which might be awakened by participating in another's suffering. Not so in the poets' account of pity. When the call for pity meets a response, it generally takes the form of participating in another's suffering, mourning with another over his pain, and so joining him in it. As Neoptolemus says to Philoctetes, "I have been in pain for you: I have been in sorrow for your pain" (*algo palai de tapi soi stenon kaka*) (*Philoctetes* line 805). Often this pain sharing is the task of the chorus, and one sees it no more clearly than in Sophocles' *Electra* (line 135, passim), where the Chorus of Women of Mycenae seeks to become one with her suffering. The chorus in Aeschylus' *Prometheus* (line 1065, passim) seeks to do the same as does the chorus in *Philoctetes*, Euripides' *Trojan Woman* (lines 198–210, passim), and a number of other plays. Have you come here "to howl feeling with me," Prometheus asks the chorus (line 300, Scully and Herington trans.) The answer is yes. As is so often the case, the chorus is not so much the ideal observer as the ideal pain-sharer. In *Ajax* (lines 282–83), the chorus of Salaminian sailors demands to play this role. "How at the start did the catastrophe swoop down. Tell us: we share the pain of it."

It is through pity, the willingness to share another's pain, if only for a few moments, and so help him rejoin the human world, that humans express their solidarity in a world that was not made for humans . . . or at least not for their happiness. This is often all we can do, say the tragic poets. It is surely the most distinctively human thing, what humans can offer that the gods cannot, perhaps the only way we are superior to the gods: not in power, but in our ability and willingness to share pain. In this regard it is interesting to compare the pity of the choruses with the pity of Theseus, which is so much more detached. Why? Because Theseus, mythical king of Athens, is almost a god, virtually a male version of Athene, whose benevolence is similarly detached. He is benevolently humane, *philanthropia*; but genuine pity remains the province of real humans.

Though there are similarities, the pity of the Greek tragedies differs from Christian pity. Prometheus is no progenitor of Jesus Christ. God's pity, like his mercy and compassion, stems from God's ability to share man's feelings and agonies, a capacity enhanced by the mediation of Jesus, the virtual embodiment of pity (cf. Psalms 69:20, 72:13, 102:13, 103:13, Isaiah 63:9; Hosea 1:6; and Jonah 4:11; with Matthew 20:30–34; First Corinthians 15:19; and James 5:11). For the tragic poets, on the other hand, pity is a distinctly human emotion, one of the ways in which man is superior to the gods. An implication of this difference is that for the tragic poets, pity frequently doesn't *do* anything: it neither heals the lame, nor restores sight to the blind, though it may well provide refuge, as Theseus does for Oedipus (*Oedipus at Colonus* 630–40). Rather, tragic pity establishes a connection to others, as though to say "no matter how great your sorrow, I shall not let you fall out of the world." Tragic pity is based upon the acceptance of necessity and doom, whereas the quest for transcendence may lead us to reject the suffering of others, as though by so doing we might escape it ourselves. Tragic pity is a distinctly human virtue, one which unites us with others, what Euben calls the collectivization of suffering, and separates us from the gods. It is for this reason that pity is the real measure of what it means to subject myths about man and gods to the standards of the strictly human polis.

Pity and Civilization

Classic philosophers and tragic poets alike seek to educate and rationalize the passions. Especially characteristic of the poets, however, is the identification of *sophrosune* with the injunction to think mortal thoughts (*ta thneta phronein*). What is it to think mortal thoughts? To know the condition of man: that he is born in pain and is fated soon to die, while experiencing much pain along the way. *Pathei mathos*, the wisdom that comes from suffering, is not merely a proverbial expression appearing throughout the tragedies. It is their motto, one that should be taken quite literally. *Mathema*, knowledge, stems from *pathema*, suffering. Not merely, I would add, one's own, but from the felt connection to that of others. It is this connection that encourages human thoughts, the sine qua non of human wisdom. Do you know what it is to be a man, asks the drunken Heracles in *Alcestis*? Do you know what the human condition is really about? It's that we all have to die. In the face of this fact, wine is a comfort. So too is love. Most important, however, is that "mortal man must be mortal–minded" (*thnetous thneta kai phronein chreon*) (line 799).

To know one's place as a mortal being is to know that one lives in a world of suffering, ironic recoil, enormous waste of potential, and death, all of which is made bearable only be the compassion of fellow sufferers. It is just this that

the gods cannot offer, as they do not suffer as men do. As Arrowsmith (1974: 6) puts it, "the man who knows himself always knows one thing his mortality. It is because he knows he is doomed that he will, in theory, act compassionately toward other men no less doomed than he." Thus Odysseus is able to pity the corpse of Ajax because he recognizes that "I too shall come to that necessity" (Sophocles, *Ajax* line 1365). This same way of thinking leads Philoctetes to state: "Take pity on me. Look how men live, always precariously balanced between good and bad fortune" (*Philoctetes* lines 501–503).

It is when we appreciate, embrace, what it is to live a distinctly mortal life that we are most likely to feel pity. Why? Is it because when bad things happen to others, we will fear that they will happen to us, and so pity them as we would really pity ourselves? This is part of the story, the part emphasized by Aristotle and Salkever. The other part is that in thinking mortal thoughts we understand that detaching ourselves from the pain of others will not save us. It will only make a painful life more so, by depriving us of the distinctly human consolations available to those who do not shrink from confronting the pain and suffering of human existence.

These consolations do more than make life easier to bear; they make a decent civilization itself possible. As post-modern interpreters of human nature (though they do not call it that) such as Jacques Lacan (1953: 11–17; 1977: 1–7) have done so much to emphasize, much of the aggression and other craziness present in the world is an acting-out of the pain and terror that stems from the isolation of human existence. As though one could overcome one's own pain and mortality by inflicting pain and death on others. This, I think, is what the heroic ethic, the agonal culture is ultimately about: a constant struggle for excellence as an alternative to confronting one's own weakness and mortality. It may well be what much of the politics among, and within, nations is also about. Certainly this is the thesis of Hans Morgenthau (1962: 13), who argues in "Love and Power" that the quest for power, whether by individuals or nations, is an attempt to remedy

> the awareness of insufficiency born of loneliness and which only love can give. . . . The power relationship is, then, in the last analysis, a frustrated relationship of love. Those who must use and suffer power would rather be united in love. Master and subject are at the bottom of their souls lovers who have gone astray.

I have written not of love, but of pity; the idea, however, is similar. Pity is not merely consolation for man's isolation and pain. It is also the recipe for civilization, as the consolation it provides not only makes men and women feel better. The connections of pity also help to contain the aggressive acting-out by which men, women, and nations otherwise seek to overcome their pain.

Development of Pity?

It is generally held that of the three tragic poets, Sophocles is the preeminent exponent of pity. As Winnington-Ingram (1980: 328) puts it,

> That pity was for Sophocles a supreme value need hardly be argued. Pity inspires every work of his that has come down to us: pity and *suggnome*, that capacity to enter into the feelings of another which made possible every aspect of his dramatic creation.

I have not, however, found it useful to distinguish among the poets in this regard, as my concern is not with the presence of pity in the work of a particular poet, but its role as founding principle of civilization in Greek tragedy. From this perspective, Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound* is as central a document of pity as is Sophocles' *Philoctetes*.

There is, however, a transformation in employment of the concept that can be traced from Aeschylus to Euripides, from the first tragic poet whose works survive (*Prometheus Bound* was produced about 479) to the last, whose final play, *The Bacchae* was posthumously produced about 405. For Aeschylus, pity is a cosmic principle endorsed by the gods, not only the Titan Prometheus, but in *Agamemnon* as well. The "eyes' arrows of pity" connect us to the sufferings of others, says the chorus, and so teach us the wisdom that comes from suffering, a principle ordained by Zeus (177–78, 241, 250–51). For Sophocles, on the other hand, pity is a strictly human affair. Hyllus, son of Heracles, who has been horribly burned to death by a poisoned robe given to him by his wife Deianira, puts it this way in instructing the servants in how to handle his father.

> Take him up, servants, showing your great fellow-thought-and-feeling *(suggnomosune)* with me concerning these events, and knowing the great lack-of-thought-and-feeling *(agnomosune)* of the gods concerning the events that have taken place. They who, having engendered us and calling themselves our fathers have overseen these sufferings (Sophocles, *Women of Trachis* lines 1265–70).

Euripides writes in a similar vein, except that the occasions for pity in his works are frequently more personal than cosmological (*Iphigenia at Tauris* 352–53; *Heracles* 342). It is this that makes Euripides the preeminent *political* theorist of pity. When Euripides has King Theseus say of Heracles that "you saved me then, and now I pity you," he is writing of pity as a political, as well as a personal, relationship (*Heracles* 1237–38). The same may be said of Medea's pleas for pity and shelter from King Aegeus (*Medea* 711). Pity is the best that the good polis, epitomized in the anachronistic tragic formula of the good king, can offer. Yet, these differences among the poets are not ones we should make too much of. What is really changing as we move from Aeschylus

to Euripides is not the concept of pity, but the scale of cosmological and political vision within which pity, as well as all the other human virtues and vices, find their place. Euripides' well-known interest in character, for example, is bound to affect his portrayal of pity, rendering it a less grand alternative to the *agnomosune* of the gods (almost everything in Euripides is less grand[5]), but no less fundamental.

Conclusion

Why does the poets' solution to the riddle of civilization today seem so distant, so improbable, so far-fetched? In part the answer is surely that the teachings of the classical philosophers have frequently been interpreted as endorsing the triumph of reason over desire, an ideal but apparently impractical solution. In fact, Plato and Aristotle come closer to the teachings of the poets than is generally acknowledged, recognizing that desire and reason must be blended. Or rather, both classics and poets recognized that desire and reason are always already blended, so that desire-cum-reason is susceptible to education.

Nor is the poets' solution reflected by another who writes of pity, Rousseau. Elsewhere I have argued what can only be asserted here. While what Rousseau calls *pitié* is indeed comparable (which does not mean identical) to the *eleos* and *oiktos* of the tragic poets, Rousseau turns to pity in order to avoid positing the principle of sociability: that morality and civilized society stem from the felt connections of men and women. Such an approach is not only internally contradictory (pity *is* a social relationship I have argued), but it has almost nothing to do with that of the tragic poets. It is Rousseau's strange and mysterious view of pity that accounts, I believe, for its complete absence in *The Social Contract*. One may argue whether or not Rousseau restores to civilized man something of the freedom of the primitive of *The Second Discourse*, who feels only *pitié*. What Rousseau is unable to do is reintroduce the concept into society where he needs it most, as he has defined *pitié* as presocial. This is one of the most ironic moves in the history of Western thought, restricting pity to primitives so that Rousseau need not posit sociability as the ground of human society. It is, apparently, human

[5] Euripides' predilection for the *mechane*, what in the Latin phrase became the *deus ex machina*, is no sign of grandness in Euripides' plays. On the contrary, the god on a machine generally arrives to make moral hash out of the resolution. Euben (1986: 242–51) points this out about the improbable resolution of *Orestes*, but it is characteristic of most of Euripides' plays. The *deus ex machina* is almost always ironic, demonstrating as one god on a machine puts it that "Heaven never hates the noble in the end. It is for the nameless multitude that life is hard" ([*Helen* 1678–79). Only by "noble," Castor means the vain, foolish, and vengeful, such as Helen and Menelaus.

sociability, with its implications of human dependence, that is so freightening to Rousseau (Alford 1991: c8).

There is, however, another reason that the poets' solution seems so alien today, more alien, one suspects, than it would have seemed to those early moderns who sought to set one passion against another. To conceptualize social harmony in terms of a balance of power among the passions is to think in terms of the dialogue of the passions, their dynamics, the way they divide the self against itself. Such an approach, I have argued, fails fully to appreciate and cultivate the civilizing passions. Nonetheless, it respects the passions: their power, their integrity, their manifold complexity, as well as their irreducible presence in almost every aspect of life. To substitute interest for passions is to lose this repect, particularly when interest is subsequently idealized as a calm, *dous*, gentle, sociable, and humane activity, as Hirschman (1977: 56–67) shows it to have been. As though greed, unbridled desire, the lust for power and the thrill of domination were somehow rendered pure and beneficent when pursued as an economic interest. In fact, commerce, money making, and acquisitiveness may lead to hell on earth, especially when they create two classes of men: those who have acquired much, and those who have acquired almost nothing.

Hirschman (1977: 130–33) pays less attention to the way in which the pursuit of interest also distorts the passions of those who have succeeded, though he notes in closing that it is no accident that capitalism is accused of stunting the development of man, crippling the "full human personality." Nor is this a mere side-effect, an unintended consequence. Rather, it was the point all along: to cripple the passions by reducing them to interests, so that man might be made safe for society. This reduction of passion to interest is characteristic not only of many lives, but of much academic discourse as well. Interest becomes king, the task of public policy (and even sometimes political theory) being seen as that of protecting diverse, but actually remarkably similar, and boring, interests. What Alexis de Tocqueville means when he says that the "aspect of society in the United States is at once excited and monotonous" (*Democracy in America*, part II, bk. 3, para. 45).

While my criticism overlaps with the concerns of certain classical theorists and others who question the relativism implicit in regarding interest as given, it is not identical. My concern is to restore the dialogue of passions, first perhaps within the academy. In the absence of such a dialogue there can be no discussion of a policy for pity, or a regime based upon compassion. Consider, for example, how many academic treatises are written on interests: national interest, self-interest, critiques of the claim of liberal pluralism to protect diverse interests (critiques which nonetheless assume that interests are real and important), theories of an ideal society designed to guarantee that

individuals will be able to protect their own self-interest, and theories of politics that purport to explain everything in terms of interests. Conversely, consider how few articles are written with titles like "Foreign Policy as a Defense against Loneliness," or "Lust as a Motive in the Pursuit of Political Power," or "The Acquisition of Wealth as Means to the Pleasures of Domination." Morgenthau's "Love and Power" is a rare exception. It is, in part, because there are today relatively few treatises on topics such as these that there are relatively few treatises on the proper role of pity and compassion in public life. The condensation of the passions into interest squeezes out both the civilizing and uncivilized passions, and has for some time.

What is probably the most fundamental reason for the strangeness and unavailability of the poets' solution has yet to be mentioned. Theirs represents an orientation to contingency that has its roots in Athens rather than Jerusalem. It is no accident that the English term "pity" stems from the Latin *pietas*, "piety," just as "*pitié*" does. Pity is how men and women share the piety they owe to God with each other in this world. For the Greek, on the other hand, *eleos* and *oiktos* are strictly human relationships. As pity stems from piety, so *eleos* and *oiktos* probably stem from inarticulate cries of grief, commonly rendered as *elele* and *oi* (Stanford 1983: 22–24). Greek pity stems from the felt connection to human suffering, a suffering frequently inflicted by the gods. This, though, did not lead the Greeks to regard human suffering with piety, but with pity that is, with human solidarity in the face of the depredations of the gods.

Rejecting the help of the gods, Ajax is driven mad by them. What lesson does he draw from his humiliation? He speaks of yielding (*eikein*) to the gods, and reverencing (*sebein*) kings (Sophocles, *Ajax*, 666ff). "Surely he should have reversed the verbs," says Winnington-Ingram (1980: 49). But, no. This is how the Greeks thought about the gods, and the cosmos in which they reign. In such a world pity is an expression of human solidarity against the caprice and jealousy of the gods, what humans can offer each other in such a world. This is, I argued, the lesson of *Prometheus Bound*, the lesson he taught man with his own suffering, a lesson that is all too easily misinterpreted in Christian terms. Christianity, the Enlightenment, science, technology, modernity: all these and more are about the dream of avoiding contingency, if not for ourselves, then for our souls, our descendents, or humanity. The Greeks were under so such illusions, which is not to say that they idealized suffering. Nor should we. Avoidable suffering should be avoided. The Greeks, however, lived closer to the edge, with fewer comforts, perhaps fewer hopes probably fewer blind hopes. In such a world pity becomes even more important, offering connectedness without shelter, understanding without salvation. In

our post-modern world, in which so many human hopes have proven to be blind, it is time to reconsider the poets' solution to the riddle of civilization.

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Received: January 31, 1993
Accepted for Publication: September 9, 1993