

Ancient Greek Responses to Suffering: Thinking with Philoctetes

'I heard a thumping sound,
the sort always made by a man worn away by pain.
It came from over there.
What a harsh, harsh noise it makes -it hurts my ears-
the unmistakable sound of someone
staggering along as if he's being tortured.
The howl of a man in agony is instantly recognisable,
even from a distance. His groans are all too audible.'¹

With these words the chorus of Greek soldiers respond to the disturbing sounds they can hear before Philoctetes, the hero of Sophocles' tragedy, staggers into view. The Greeks of Sophocles' time did not think suffering had anything to recommend it. They did not believe that suffering ennobled the sufferer, or that it was distributed providentially: they knew that good people often suffered, and bad people sometimes died at advanced ages without suffering much at all. They also knew that they were all, as individuals, likely to suffer extreme and life-threatening physical pain, whether on the battlefield as men or in childbirth as women, and the psychological pain of bereavement was ubiquitous in close-knit communities where premature death happened daily. Their vocabulary of suffering was extensive and nuanced;² indeed, Edwards has recommended thinking about the classical taxonomy of suffering in order to create new modes of language more adequate to the apprehension of pain and distress in our own society.³

Many of the ancient Greek words for suffering occur in *Philoctetes* - *ponos*, *pēma*, *pathos*, *pathēma*, *pēmonē*, *penthos*, *kaka*, *lupē*, *odunē*, *algēdōn*, *algēma*, *algos*, *achos*, *ania*, *athlos*, *mochthos*, *oizus*, *dusphora*, *talaipōria*. Moreover, like the English word 'suffering', these words can mean both physical and mental pain: Sophocles' contemporaries would have had difficulty in making a hard-and-fast distinction between the two. The ancient perception of the psychosomatic indivisibility of suffering partly resulted from the beliefs that emotion had

¹ SOPHOCLES, *Philoctetes* 202-208. A parallel English translation can be found in H. LLOYD-JONES, *Sophocles*, vol. 2, Cambridge (MA), 1994.

² See R. REY, *The History of Pain*, Cambridge (MA), 1993, p. 10-40.

³ R. B. EDWARDS, *Pain and the ethics of pain management* in *Social Science and Medicine* 18/6, 1984, p. 518-522.

physiological effects on the internal organs, and that thinking took place in the midriff.⁴ It was also partly because a key word in the vocabulary of suffering was *kaka*, a term as all-embracing as the French *mal* in French studies of suffering since Durkheim.⁵ *Kaka* can mean ‘evil’, but it can also refer to disease, pain, harm, suffering, misfortune, and even cowardice in the face of these afflictions.

Sophocles’ *Philoctetes*, who has a longstanding infection from a snake-bite received years ago, screams in physical pain for extended sequences. He did nothing immoral to deserve the injury, and nor did anyone else: the play is not about the problem of evil. *Philoctetes* is not ennobled by his suffering and learns nothing from it. Suffering in this play has no inherent metaphysical or ethical status, although it does raise the practical and ethical question of how other human beings should respond to the sufferer. The suffering is depicted with realism. When Neoptolemus finds *Philoctetes*’ cave, he sees ‘some rags drying out in the sun, full of the acute infection’.⁶ He also observes, after *Philoctetes*’ first paroxysm, that ‘his head sinks backward. Yes, a sweat has broken out over his whole body, and a dark, haemorrhaging vein has burst from his heel’.⁷ The play examines in detail how an individual’s suffering deforms his everyday life. It even asks the proto-Utilitarian question of whether the suffering of a single individual should be allowed to outweigh the interests of the whole community. At the end of all this intellectual questioning, however, what the spectator remembers is *Philoctetes*’ screams. It is hard to imagine a modern dramatist or film-maker presenting his audience with a comparable portrayal of unremitting agony.

David Morris has advised us to recover the wisdom of Greek tragedy. He argues (correctly, in my view) that this genre of literature identifies suffering as an inevitable aspect of human life, however wasteful and senseless it may be experienced as being. But I disagree with Morris when he argues that the Greeks emphasised the “social meaningfulness” of suffering, and the human potential to “rise to moments of awesome fortitude, grandeur, and almost inconceivable endurance”.⁸ This was, to be sure, one aspect of the way in which the Roman Stoic Seneca interpreted the Greek tragedians five centuries later. Admiration for heroic endurance has also been a strand in

⁴ See further E. HALL, *Greek Tragedy: Suffering under the Sun*, Oxford, 2010, p. 182-187.

⁵ W. S. R. PICKERING/M. ROSATI, *Introduction* in W. S. F. PICKERING/M. ROSATI (eds.), *Suffering and Evil: The Durkheimian Legacy*, New York-Oxford, 2008, p. 9.

⁶ SOPHOCLES, *Philoctetes* 38-39.

⁷ SOPHOCLES, *Philoctetes* 825.

⁸ D. MORRIS, *The Culture of Pain*, Berkeley (CA), 1991, p. 262; I. WILKINSON, *Suffering: A Sociological Introduction*, Cambridge-Malden (MA), 2005, p. 29.

thinking about heroes in tragedies composed since the Renaissance, inflected by Christian models of asceticism (although I agree with Eagleton that the idea that tragedy ennoble the sufferer has been exaggerated, with distasteful insensitivity towards ‘real-life’ sufferers).⁹ But no classical Greek tragedy construes suffering as having immanent value or ‘social meaning’. By staging suffering in concentrated form, Athenian dramatists confronted “the irreducible dilemma or the uncircumventable paradox that human cultures must give meaning to suffering, yet they cannot”.¹⁰

Philoctetes had joined the Greek expedition against Troy. But he had suffered a wound that made his presence intolerable to his comrades. Apparently by accident and unwittingly, he had intruded into the shrine of Chryse, the nymph who lived on an island named after her, and been bitten by the poisonous guardian snake.¹¹ The wound on his foot festered. The Atridae ordered Odysseus to remove Philoctetes from Troy, and abandon him on the uninhabited island of Lemnos, a boat ride away. Ten years have passed, and now the Greeks need to recover Philoctetes, since an oracle has told them that without him and his special bow, inherited from Heracles, they can’t win the war.

The cynical, now middle-aged Odysseus returns to Lemnos with the young Neoptolemus. His purpose is to trick Philoctetes into returning to Troy with them (he is, they correctly predict, unlikely to cooperate). On this desert island there are no cities, institutions, lawgivers, judges or priests to provide moral guidance. Distinctions between right and wrong have to be made up as they go along. Nothing in this simple scenario distracts the audience from the problem of Philoctetes’ suffering. There is neither a death nor any reported combat. Uniquely amongst Greek tragedies, there are no females and no character is related by blood to any other. Yet inter-subjective relationships are central, since Odysseus and Philoctetes are rivals for the fatherless Neoptolemus’ filial attachment. By removing the biological and kinship elements, the social and moral ramifications of the way in which individuals respond to Philoctetes’ suffering are cast into the clearest possible light.

The responses to Philoctetes fluctuate even within the psyche of each involved party, but one image remains constant - that Philoctetes’ state of

⁹ T. EAGLETON, *Sweet Violence: An Essay on the Tragic*, Oxford, 2002; on ancient asceticism see J. PERKINS, *The Suffering Self: Pain and Narrative Representation in the Early Christian Era*, London, 1995.

¹⁰ J. D. AMATO, *Victims and Values: A History and Theory of Suffering*, New York-Westport (CT)-London, 1990, p. xxiv.

¹¹ SOPHOCLES, *Philoctetes* 1327-1328.

suffering aligns him with wild animals. His bodily debility has made it impossible for him to practise the arts and crafts of civilisation -farming, weaving, the manufacture of tools- which the Greek pre-Socratic philosophers had argued divided humans from the animal world. When we meet Philoctetes, his first response is pleasure at hearing the Greek language spoken after so long in solitary confinement on the island,¹² but this animal-like linguistic and social isolation is a metonymy for his psychological situation. In his private world of pain, when the spasms strike, language can scarcely reach him.

Several behaviours in the sufferer himself are explored. He repeatedly expresses suicidal urges.¹³ During his first convulsive fit of agony, he begs Neoptolemus to cast him into the fires of the volcano on the island;¹⁴ the volcanic fires also function as an analogy for the pain which surges within Philoctetes' flesh. In his spasms, he screams for a weapon to cut himself up with - 'a sword, or an axe, or any weapon - just get me one!' He wants 'to mangle this flesh, to hew limb from limb with my own hand; all I can think of is death'.¹⁵ He is also angry about his helplessness¹⁶ and obsessed by the question of who is responsible for his suffering, on a paranoid impulse blaming the Atridae (who did abandon him but did not cause his injury). This is an incorrect reaction to a wholly correct perception on his part - that his problem is quite as much social as physiological. He desperately needs to have his suffering *acknowledged*. The worst aspect of his mental suffering is his fear that absolutely nobody except Odysseus and the Atridae is even aware of what he is going through¹⁷ and his rage that the Atridae saw it as a justification for making him forfeit all social standing. They removed all his normal rights as a fellow general - to recognition, respect, freedom to express his opinions, self-determination and autonomy, to move around physically, and to the protection of his group. This is social erasure -what Orlando Patterson, in the context of transatlantic slavery, called 'social death'-¹⁸ and it often accompanies physical suffering in modern societies. Philoctetes is so outraged at his 'social death' that he even rejects the offer of being cured at Troy by the sons of Asclepius.¹⁹

The play begins when the Greek party arrives and Odysseus immediately identifies the location as the place where he exposed Philoctetes,

¹² SOPHOCLES, *Philoctetes* 234.

¹³ SOPHOCLES, *Philoctetes* 1348-1349, 1216.

¹⁴ SOPHOCLES, *Philoctetes* 800-801.

¹⁵ SOPHOCLES, *Philoctetes* 1207-1209.

¹⁶ SOPHOCLES, *Philoctetes* 1281.

¹⁷ SOPHOCLES, *Philoctetes* 254-260.

¹⁸ See O. PATTERSON, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study*, Cambridge (MA), 1982.

¹⁹ SOPHOCLES, *Philoctetes* 1332.

‘with his foot oozing from the disease that devoured it’, because ‘we weren’t even able to conduct libations or sacrifices at our ease, so wild were the obscenities to which he subjected the whole encampment, with his shouting and groans’.²⁰ The most telling word here is the one which I have translated ‘at our ease’, *hekēlois*, an adjective often used to describe the gods’ carefree enjoyment of their banquets. The sufferer, implies Odysseus callously, was acting *distastefully* when he spoilt the non-sufferers’ civilised pleasure.

Odysseus’ response to Philoctetes as a sufferer has always been comprehensive repudiation. Now, years later, Odysseus remains unmoved. He expresses no pity nor apology. Yet Odysseus is aware of the transformative power of pity on a sensitive person such as Neoptolemus: ‘Don’t look at him, since you have a gracious nature, and may wreck our chances’.²¹ Neoptolemus indeed turns out to be instinctively empathetic. He is so shaken by Philoctetes’ suffering that he agrees to take him back to Greece himself. His support for Philoctetes is something he *learns* through witnessing the older man’s suffering: he describes the emotional experience he undergoes as ‘a startling pity’ which ‘fell hard upon’ him²² and made him ‘change his opinion’ (*metagnōnai*).²³ The support which pity creates in him becomes unconditional. At the critical moment towards the end, he stands by his promise to take Philoctetes on his own ship back to mainland Greece even if though it means wrecking his ‘career prospects’ at Troy.

The heart of the play depicts a terrible paroxysm of agony. Philoctetes himself utters cries that in ancient Greek poetry indicate wordless vocalisations of pain or despair. This is how the episode begins:

NEOPTOLEMUS: Why have you gone quiet for no reason? What has suddenly paralysed you like this?

PHILOCTETES: *a! a! a! a!*

NEOPTOLEMUS: What is it?

PHILOCTETES: Nothing serious. Carry on, son.

NEOPTOLEMUS: Are you in pain from the usual affliction?

PHILOCTETES: Not at all. I think it’s passing... *i-ō, gods!*

NEOPTOLEMUS: Why are you groaning and calling on the gods?

PHILOCTETES: ... the ones who can come and help, soothe the pain... *a! a! a! a!*

²⁰ SOPHOCLES, *Philoctetes* 7-11.

²¹ SOPHOCLES, *Philoctetes* 1068-1069.

²² SOPHOCLES, *Philoctetes* 965-966.

²³ SOPHOCLES, *Philoctetes* 1270.

NEOPTOLEMUS: What's happened to you now? Tell me... Don't try to keep it quiet... Something's obviously wrong.

PHILOCTETES: I'm done for, child. I can't hide the problem from you. *attatai!* It pierces straight through me, it pierces straight through me. I can't stand it. I'm done for, child. It's devouring me, child. *papai! apappapai, papappapappapappapai!* For the gods sake, if you have a sword with you, child, strike my ankle, cut my foot off there! Now! Don't worry about killing me! Do it!

NEOPTOLEMUS: But what is the sudden change that makes you scream so very loudly?

PHILOCTETES: You know...

NEOPTOLEMUS: What?!

PHILOCTETES: You do know, child.

NEOPTOLEMUS: What is the matter? I *don't* know!

PHILOCTETES: You must know. *Pappapappapai...*

NEOPTOLEMUS: The burden of disease you are carrying is dreadful.

PHILOCTETES: Yes, dreadful. Beyond words. But pity me.

NEOPTOLEMUS: So what should I do?

PHILOCTETES: Just don't leave me because you're frightened. She comes only intermittently, when she has had enough of wandering.

There are several interesting aspects to this interchange, beginning with the personification and externalisation of the pain (*nosos*) as a female who visits him intermittently. Secondly, the painful part of his body feels objectively *separable*, and he wants it removed, however violently. Thirdly, he attempts to suppress and deny the pain until it becomes uncontrollable. Fourthly, it forces him to repeat himself, as if he can't find alternative words to express the unremitting waves of pain. Fifthly, the metaphors are not unlike those used to describe pain today - the pain *pierces right through* him and *devours* him.²⁴ Sixthly, Philoctetes' verse form dissolves during this episode: his 'extra-metrical' utterances, such as '*a! a! a! a!*' and '*apappapai*', break up the rhythmical flow of his speech. Lastly, his pain, as he says, is 'beyond words'. That is why Sophocles wrote those strange non-verbal noises for him, the sounds emitted by bodies in pain - animal or human- regardless of language or culture. The communication between the sufferer and the witness, despite the witness's best

²⁴ For a brilliant comparative study of the metaphors for pain in ancient Greek and contemporary English, see F. BUDELMANN, *Bringing together Nature and Culture: On the Uses and Limits of Cognitive Science for the Study of Performance Reception* in E. HALL/S. HARROP (eds.), *Theorising Performance Reception: Greek Drama, Cultural History, and Critical Practice*, London, 2010, p. 108-122.

intentions, is deficient. In the hands of expert actors, the effect of this scene is still devastating. The most significant part of suffering concerns the effect on us for which we cannot find words to articulate. Suffering can negate us because it destroys the very meaning of language.

Neoptolemus asks if Philoctetes would like him to touch him anywhere. As another spasm of pain arises (the metaphor here is ‘it crawls on me’),²⁵ Philoctetes can’t stand the thought of physical contact, but doesn’t want to be left alone. Eventually he passes out, insisting that Neoptolemus stay until he regains consciousness. It is important to him that his suffering takes place in the sympathetic, although non-intrusive, listening presence of another human being.²⁶

The reaction of Neoptolemus’ men is subtly distinguished from his. At first they are the chief mouthpiece for pity. In a central song they linger on the horrors that Philoctetes must have suffered over the years.²⁷ They volunteer to stay behind and look after him while Neoptolemus and Odysseus make arrangements at the ship. But their support turns out (unlike that of Neoptolemus) to be conditional. They are increasingly frustrated by his unwillingness to serve his own medical interests, since he refuses to leave the island on the ground that his social ‘personhood’ has been repudiated. The interchanges between Philoctetes and the chorus reveal how the sufferer’s psychological state can alienate him from his community, and that the community can show crass psychological insensitivity in terms of the humiliation which may accompany the offer of help to the sufferer. When another paroxysm of agony overwhelms Philoctetes, he screams at them not to leave (1186-1189): ‘*Ai-ai, ai-ai!/ O God! O God! This has finished me!/ My foot, my foot! What am I going to do with you/for the rest of my life?!*’

For Philoctetes, malign god and agonising foot are real physical presences. But the chorus, while still horrified at what he is suffering, are finally alienated and about to abandon him themselves. If he won’t be helped on the terms offered by the community, the community wants to put as much space between themselves and their defiant, noisy, noisome compatriot as they possibly can.

At this climax, Neoptolemus, although with reluctance, stands by his promise to look after Philoctetes. The chorus and Odysseus are equally determined that he must be brought to Troy. Only divine intervention can resolve this impasse, and the demigod and hero Heracles appears, resolving

²⁵ SOPHOCLES, *Philoctetes* 787-788.

²⁶ SOPHOCLES, *Philoctetes* 1105, 867-876.

²⁷ SOPHOCLES, *Philoctetes* 684-705.

Philoctetes' problem by making the return to Troy and the cure by Asclepius' son Machaon a command from the gods. But the reason why Philoctetes trusts Heracles needs to be emphasised. Heracles was a friend -not a blood relative- and bound to him by precious reciprocal ties of loyalty, respect, and promises of mutual protection. More importantly, Heracles had suffered a degree - although not a duration- of physical agony equivalent to Philoctetes' own.²⁸

Philoctetes knew how badly Heracles had suffered because he had done him the ultimate kindness of helping him die. He built him a pyre and set light to it on Mount Oeta, a deed he recalls as 'the act of a benefactor'.²⁹ Philoctetes, in the world of modern medicine, might have faced trial in agreeing to assist Heracles, who was dying a slow and agonising death, to a swifter demise. But in Sophocles' ethical universe this act of assistance in euthanasia was conceived as doing the sufferer a substantial favour.

Philoctetes is the ultimate example of the Greek tragic hero because his suffering is constant, 'in-your-face', and never acceptably justified. The problem of the cruelty shown to Philoctetes formerly, when he was put out of sight, out of hearing, and as far as possible out of mind, is never resolved. What the play does, despite all the attempts of the Greek leaders at Troy to erase him, is make Philoctetes' anguish as visible and audible as possible. Surely ancient Greek tragedy's combination of directness about suffering, as well as its complexity in dissecting the impact of suffering on human relationships, has been a main reason for its renewed popularity in the theatres of the modern world.³⁰

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²⁸ SOPHOCLES, *Philoctetes* 1418-1419. For a recent study of the ethics of *Women of Trachis*, see E. HALL, *Deianira deliberates: precipitate decision-taking and Trachiniai* in S. GOLDHILL AND E. HALL (eds.) *Sophocles and the Greek Tragic Tradition: Studies for Patricia Easterling*, Cambridge, 2009, p. 69-96. For an outstanding analysis of the importance of the representation of physical pain in both *Philoctetes* and *Women of Trachis*, see F. BUDELMANN, *The Reception of Sophocles' Representation of Physical Pain* in *AJP* 128/4, 2007, p. 443-467.

²⁹ SOPHOCLES, *Philoctetes* 670.

³⁰ This article has been written for, and in honour of, a kind and generous individual in the Classics profession with whom I have had the privilege of working. Freddy is unique, and we all understand the ancient Greek contribution to world culture better for his work in the field.