The greek worldview: sophocles and his tragedies

The birthplace of tragedy was the city of Athens, and here it also reached its full flower in the fifth century B.

C. with the masterpieces of the three great Greek tragedians: Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides. Among these Sophocles is often held to be the greatest dramatist of all, at the least Oedipus Rex, following the footsteps of Aristotle, is held to be the greatest and most perfectly crafted tragedy of all times. Revered by modern scholars for his treatment of the individual and for the complex issues that his plays address, Sophocles was also revered by his contemporaries: he received the first prize for tragic drama over Aeschylus at the drama festival held in 468 BCE, when he was twenty-eight years old.

He wrote around one hundred and twenty-three plays for the Athenian theatre, and won twenty-four festivals — he placed second in every festival that did not win. Only seven of his plays, however, have survived intact. They are (in the order in which they are thought to have been written): Ajax, Antigone, The Women of Trachis, Oedipus Rex, Electra, Philoctetes, and Oedipus at Colonus. From the fragments remaining, and from references to lost plays in other works, scholars have discovered that Sophocles wrote on an enormous variety of topics. He also introduced several key structural innovations, including ending the tradition of writing trilogies on connected topics, introducing painted background scenery, changing the number of speaking actors from two to three, and enlarging the chorus from twelve to fifteen men. In the Greek stage theatre was generally held to be a medium of instruction.

This becomes evident from the fact that the Greek word for “ producing” a play is most directly translated as “ teaching” a play. Though Aeschylus is generally regarded as the father of tragedy as he raised tragedy to an art form that inspired and brought out the best in people, Sophocles is by no means than him. The plays of Sophocles was socially relevant and gives us a true picture of not only Sophocles’s world-view but the world-view of the Athenians in particular and the Greek civilization in general. The plays of Sophocles are far from being mere artistic studies, devoid of moral import or social significance. Human nature, to the Greeks, has more than a psychological interest.

Thus, in the tragedies of Sophocles we find, the passions and sufferings of mankind are everywhere painted, not only as they appear in themselves, but also as they appear in relation to the eternal laws of justice and divine government. The mysterious decrees of destiny are always visible in the background of the picture; and the actions of mortal men, when seen under this aspect, acquire unwonted grandeur and impressiveness. The plays of Sophocles reflect the Greek concern about the great questions of religion and the issues that are considered are quite complex with deep philosophical significance. As far as the popular legends are concerned, Sophocles belonged to a later stage than Aeschylus in the history of religious belief, and that during his time the myths are no longer regarded by the Greek society as revelations of truth, but only as picturesque and striking fictions. Sophocles handles the old mythology with the utmost tenderness, and addresses the gods of the people in language of pious reverence.

The legendary deities still figure in his dramas as the directors of human destiny. It is the oracle of Apollo that foretells the disasters of Laius and Oedipus in Oedipus Rex, and urges on Orestes to the work of retribution; and it is Athene who encompasses the fall of Ajax in the play of that name. Moreover, reverence for the established forms of worship is enforced on all occasions, and Athene is extolled for this very quality, that “ she knows, more than any other land, how to honour the gods with due ceremonies. (Ajax)In all these matters Sophocles reflects the popular traditions and feelings of the time, and yet the impression, which he produces, is not the same as that produced by Aeschylus who wrote at the height of his glory a some time before Sophocles came into prominence. Sophocles nowhere shows the same earnestness and anxiety in dealing with the sacred legends; his tone is more modern and speaks of a time when Greece had outgrown the simple religion practiced during Aeschylus, but recognizes its value and efficacy, and everywhere speaks of it with veneration. The modern beliefs reflected in Greek tragedy during the time of Sophocles become evident in occasional passages, where the author abandons the language of the popular religion, and speaks in a loftier strain.

They are principles independent of any particular creed, and applicable to all times and places. Foremost among them is the conviction, as definite in Sophocles as in Aeschylus, that the world is governed by divine laws, whose duration is everlasting. Not today or yesterday” were they created, “ but from all time, and no man knows when first they were brought forth. ” (Antigone) They were “ begotten in the serene heights of heaven; no mortal

race of men gave birth to them, nor shall forgetfulness every lay them to sleep.

”(Antigone)These laws are synonymous with justice, and ordain “ reverent purity in every word and deed. ” They are ascribed, not on stone, but in the hearts and consciences of men. To some they are revealed, from others they are hidden. Antigone in the play of that name knows and understands them, but Creon is deaf to their injunctions. Though they often clash with human law, in the end they are triumphant; and Creon, who has set them at defiance in prohibiting the burial of Polyneices, finds when too late that “ it is best to keep the laws established by heaven, even to the end of life.

”(Antigone) The worldview as reflected in the Sophocles’s work asserts that side by side with these divine ordinances there exists a supreme and eternal being who presides over the universe. Sometimes this omnipotent being appears to be represented by Zeus, though as a rule the Zeus of Sophocles is merely the god of the Greek mythology, and the son of Earth and Chronos. But not infrequently he is addressed in language that seems to hint at a deeper and more philosophical understanding of the omnipotent being. He is “ the sole dispenser of the future,” who “ abides in heaven for ever, overseeing and guiding all things”(Oedipus at Colonus). His power is everlasting, and “ neither all-subduing sleep, nor the unwearied months of heaven, can overmaster it.

In his hands is placed the administration of these eternal laws to which the whole universe is subject, and “ Justice, proclaimed from old, sits with Zeus by everlasting decree. ” (Oedipus Rex)The signs and proofs of this divine

order in the world are to be seen in the retribution that inevitably falls upon guilt and injustice. On this point Sophocles is no less emphatic than Aeschylus. Wickedness, according to his teachings, can never prosper. “ If a man walks proudly in word or deed, with no fear of Justice, and follows unrighteous gains, how shall he escape the arrows of the gods? (Ajax) Sometimes evil-doers are cut off in the very moment of triumph by the “ swift-footed vengeance of heaven”; at other times punishment appears to be delayed; but “ the gods, though slow, are sure in visiting crime, where men abandon godliness and turn to evil.

”(Oedipus at Colonus) Sophocles in his tragedies is less optimistic in his view of man’s destiny and this is also a reflection of the times. He cannot shut his eyes to the fact that, while crime is punished, innocence is not always protected, and suffering and misfortune often overtake the guiltless. This truth is exemplified in most of his extant dramas. Antigone is put to death, because she obeys the laws of God rather than the laws of man, and Oedipus is plunged into overwhelming disasters by a cause external to himself.

Deianeira and Philoctetes are similar examples of unmerited suffering. Often, again, this misery is the result of ancient crimes, in which the victims have had no share, but of which they feel the effects. For “ when a house is once shaken from heaven, the curse ceases nevermore, but passes on from generation to generation,” bringing forth pain and sorrow; even as the surge, when driven by fierce Thracian blasts, “ rolls up the black sand from the depths of the sea. (Oedipus at Colonus)In his treatment of this matter Sophocles diverges widely from Aeschylus.

Writing in an earlier age, it was the constant aim of Aeschylus to show that misfortune is connected with sin, and never entirely undeserved; and that even when an ancestor’s crimes are being expiated, there is always some contributory guilt on the part of the sufferer. Sophocles has no such conviction. He admits the existence of unmerited evil, and makes no attempt to reconcile the fact with the justice of the eternal laws. These deviations from strict equity must be accepted and recognized as part of the order of the universe, though their reason is inexplicable to human wisdom. They are mysteries, which, “ if God conceals, no man can discover, however long he searches.

” Such advancement in thought and philosophy of the dramatist has its sources in the development of the Greek world-view itself. Yet the conclusion that Sophocles draws from these reflections is not altogether despondent or fatalistic; it is the old Greek moral of moderation and self-distrust. The Greek world-view, though certainly pagan and heroic, cannot be termed fatalistic. All human fortune is full of uncertainty, and mankind are but “ phantoms and airy shadows,” whose prosperity “ passes away as swiftly as the leaves of the slender poplar.

” Hence it is foolishness “ to reckon on the morrow, or on the days beyond. ” (Oedipus at Colonus) But at the same time divine laws govern the world, though their workings are often difficult to explain. Veneration for these laws is the truest wisdom, and the best safeguard against misfortune. “ Revere the gods,” says Hercules, “ all things else are of less account in the eyes of Zeus. Reverence, moderation, and humility are the qualities that, according to Sophocles, avail a man best in the long run.

The sum of his teaching is contained in the words of warning that Athene addresses to Odysseus, after showing him the results of impiety and presumption in the case of Ajax. “ Wherefore,” she adds, “ speak no words of insolence against the gods, nor boast thyself, if thou excellest in strength of hand or store of riches. One day suffices to cast down and raise up all human prosperity; and the gods love the sober-minded, and hate evil-doers. However, the heroic pessimism expressed in such a world-view has often been made too much of. It is true that in several passages human life is described in gloomy language.

Ajax in his despair exclaims that “ every day only brings us nearer to death,” and the chorus lament that “ life is but a shadow, and that a man no sooner seems to be happy than he falls away. ” Elsewhere they declare their conviction that “ it is best not to be born, and that after birth the next best by far is that a man with all speed should go to the place from whence he came. These and similar reflections, however, need not be supposed to have more than a dramatic significance. In the places where they occur they are the natural utterances of sorrow in the face of some great calamity. But it is a mistake to remove them from their context, and to quote them in succession, as representing the philosophy of Sophocles in his tragedies or the world-view of the Greeks. His plays, in the general impression, which they produce, are not of this despondent character; in spite of their tragic contents they are distinguished by a certain brightness of tone.

Modern tragedies on the same subject, such as the Oedipe of Voltaire, and the Oreste of Alfieri, are far more sombre and depressing. Sophocles, as we know, was cheerful and tranquil in life, and the tendency of his dramas is in

the same direction, and suggests a natural and healthy delight in human existence and in the outward facts of nature. Antigone lays down her life, not as a burden from which she is glad to be released, but as a bright and joyful possession, and gazes with sorrow on “ the sacred light of the sun” which she is never to behold anymore. Even Ajax, in his state of desperation, parts with regret from “ the splendour of the shining day,” and from the “ rivers and plains of Ilion which have given him nourishment. ” As regards the state of the dead, and life beyond the grave, in his tragedies, Sophocles merely reproduces the indistinct conceptions of the popular belief.

Human beings still retain a kind of existence after death, and possess the same physical features as before. Thus Oedipus, having been blind on earth, will be blind in Hades. But their life is dim and shadowy, they “ feel no pain,” and “ grief touches them no more. Their only passion is the desire for vengeance, and the influence, which they can exert upon the living, is directed towards this sole object.

In addition to these popular notions Sophocles mentions, in one fragment, the Orphic doctrine of the future happiness of the soul. But his references to the state beyond the grave are slight and infrequent; Antigone, for example, when going to her death, thinks more of what she is leaving behind her than of any cheerful prospect for the future. In fact, there is nothing in the plays of Sophocles to suggest that the Greeks had any deep or permanent conviction on the question of immortality.