On Sophocles' Ajax

A Lecture by David Bolotin

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Ajax's Third Monologue (vv. 646-692)

Ajax: All things does long and uncountable Time
Bring forth unclearly, and once they have come to light, it buries them.
And so there is nothing not to be expected, but even
The dreadful oath and the obdurate heart are found out to be weak.
For indeed I, who once was so tremendously steadfast,
Like iron from dipping, had my edge softened
By this woman here. I feel pity
To leave her a widow among enemies and my son an orphan.
But I shall go to the bathing places
And the seaside meadows, so that cleansing my stains
I may escape the heavy wrath of the goddess.
And going where I can find an untrodden place,
I will bury this sword of mine -- most hateful of weapons --
And dig it into the earth where no one will see.
But let Night and Hades preserve it below.
Since from the time when I received it in my hand
As a gift from most hate-filled Hector,
I have not yet obtained anything dear from the Argives.
But it is true -- the saying of mortals --
"Gifts of enemies are no gifts;" they are not profitable.
Therefore, for the time left I will know to yield
To the gods, and I will learn to revere the Atreidae.
They are rulers, so one has to yield. Why not?
For even things dreadful and most steadfast
Yield to offices. Thus snowy-pathed winters
Give way before fruitful summer.
The gloomy vault of night stands aside for
Day with its white colts to kindle light.
The blast of dreadful winds puts to sleep
The moaning sea. And among these, all-powerful Sleep
Releases what it has bound, and once it has seized, it does not hold on forever.
And as for us, how shall we not learn to be sound of mind?
I will. For now I understand that
We must hate the enemy so much as is suited
To one who will also love us some day; and toward the friend,
In doing service I shall wish to benefit him so much
As is suited to one who always is not going to remain (such). Since for the many
Of mortals the haven of friendship is not to be trusted.
Yet concerning these things it will be well. But you,
Woman, go inside and pray to the gods
That my heart's longing may be completely fulfilled.
And you, friends, honor as she does these wishes of mine
And tell Teucer, if he comes,
To have care for us and at the same time to be well inclined toward you.
For I shall go where my journey must be made.
And you do what I tell you, and you may well learn,
Though I am now unfortunate, that I have been saved.

Let me begin with a brief account of the story of the Ajax. After Achilles' death at the siege of Troy, the Achaeans decided to award his armor as a prize of excellence to the best remaining warrior. The judges chose wily Odysseus, rather than the mighty Ajax, to receive this highest honor. Enraged at the outcome, Ajax sought to retaliate by slaughtering at night the entire leadership of the army. But he was thwarted by the intervention of Athena, who drove him mad, and as a consequence he butchered the communal livestock under the delusion that these cattle were the hated Achaean leaders.

The drama itself opens with Athena telling Odysseus of Ajax's foiled attempt to murder him and his fellow leaders. She then lets him see Ajax himself, who is still mad. But before long Ajax recovers his sanity. He then despairs of revenge and resolves instead to kill himself. His captive woman, Tecmessa, tries to dissuade him, and for a moment it appears as if she has succeeded. Through a monologue devoted to the necessity for accepting change, Ajax leads her to believe that he will live. But his apparent yielding turns out to have been a deception, and soon we see him give a final speech and then fall upon his sword.

The latter half of the play is occupied with the question whether Ajax is to be buried or whether burial will be denied as punishment for his treasonous attack. While Tecmessa grieves in silence, this issue is debated between Menelaus and Agamemnon, on the one hand, and Ajax's brother Teucer, on the other. There is much wrangling, which threatens to get out of hand. But at last, the dispute is resolved by Odysseus, who -- surprisingly -- persuades the commanders to allow his former rival and recent enemy to be buried with the highest honor.

The bond which unifies this seemingly disjointed plot is the question of friendship, or -- most obviously -- of loyalty and gratitude among friends. For until Ajax's suicide, the focus is on Tecmessa's entreaty that he not desert and thus betray his family. And throughout the second half of the play, the quarrel is over the proper response to his disloyalty as an ally. It is not surprising, then, that Ajax's monologue on time and its changes should culminate in a thought about the weakness of friendship. Yet it is hardly the whole truth to call Ajax a betrayor and a traitor. In fact, he first presents himself as a man who believes that one should always love one's friends and hate one's enemies. And in Ajax's view, the leaders who denied him the prize he deserved were themselves the disloyal ones, the ungrateful violators of the "right law" of friendship. Ajax, though a traitor, has always prided himself on his excellence as a friend. This paradox shows the need for a closer look at what kind of a friend he was.

To pose this question properly, we should recall that the code of permanence in friendship and in hate was never the whole, and not even the core, of Ajax's character. He had always wished above all to be excellent, to show his excellence through victory, and to crown his victories by

receiving the army's highest honor. His chief ambition was the Homeric one, aien aristeuein kai hypeirochon emmenai allōn -- always to excel and to be pre-eminent above others. Ajax could not bear that his excellence be unacknowledged, but as a proud man he equally could not endure the thought of unmerited success. And since he well knew that intervention from the gods could give victory even to a worthless man, he openly scorned such easy gains. His refusal to be indebted for his victories to anyone but himself had earned him the wrath of Athena. And this impiety, and not his treason, was the goddess's stated reason for afflicting him with madness.

Ajax's sense of independent excellence was closely bound up with his posture toward friendship. Now it is of course true that a warrior's sense of excellence may be in conflict with the demand for loyalty to his chiefs as well as with the demand for standing by his family; these are, in brief, the stories of Achilles and of Hector. But these instances, though all-important for this tragedy, are extreme ones; for most of Ajax's life the striving to be excellent seems to have gone together with his conviction that fidelity is owed to and expected from friends. Why is that? Now it may well be that this is so simply because human virtue comprises both excellence in battle and loyalty as a friend. But a further sign of the common ground for these two virtues can be seen from the manner that the chastened Ajax will call them together into question. In his monologue, he justifies his refusal ever again to offer unreserved friendship by observing that "for the many among mortals the haven of friendship is not to be trusted." In other words a man cannot always rely on his friends. But this statement does more than voice Ajax's disappointment that others have proved untrustworthy. For that is a difficulty only if a man needs reliable friends, only if he requires assistance from others, only if he cannot depend in life solely on the strength of his own virtue. Previously, however, Ajax had always been a magnanimous friend -- one who loved, most of all, those whom he had helped, rather than those he might need or find useful. The courting and abandoning of friends because of their usefulness or lack of it would have been repugnant to a man who disdained even the help of the gods. Similarly, the wary avoidance of irreconcilable hatred is at the opposite pole from the noble self-reliance of an Ajax. For Ajax thus to hedge in friendship or in hate would be to confess a lack of that self-sufficient excellence in which he gloried. This is not, of course, to claim that he loved and hated because of his pride or in order to show his self-sufficiency. His feelings were from his heart; and it is natural for love, if not for hate, to seem eternal. But Ajax's pride did allow and even dispose him to cherish these feelings in their integrity, free from utilitarian reservations.

Ajax's monologue consists of a re-examination of that understanding of excellence and its relation to friendship which I have just outlined. What leads him to reconsider is the interview with Tecmessa, where she pleads with him to live, and so not to abandon her and their son to the

mercy of his enemies. The crucial difference between them is the following: Ajax believes that in his present impasse, suicide is the only way to show clearly his noble nature. He is too weak to fight against Athena and the Achaeans, and he refuses to help them by fighting Trojans in battle. But his nobility will be evident, as he hopes, through his willingness to stake all on the single award of Achilles' armor and in his refusal to accept any consolation for this his greatest defeat. Yet Tecmessa, after appealing to his pity, challenges his view of what is noble. A man ought, she says, to remember if he has received any delight. "For kindness is that which gives birth to kindness always" -- a free gift is that which always brings forth gratitude. Yet if this were simply true, and if Tecmessa has been kind, then she would not have to be saying this now. So she adds the further claim that a man who loses thought of benefits recieved would not remain, whatever his origins or whatever his previous deeds, a noble man. Tecmessa's appeal compels Ajax to acknowledge how this captive woman has been good for him. He is reminded that his life, like that of others, consists in receiving as much as in giving. This kinship with ordinary human beings may be hard for him to admit. But how can he refuse to give in return for what he has received? Isn't such exploitation of one's benefactors unfair and, as Tecmessa says, ignoble? Ajax himself had declared that a noble man must either live nobly or else die nobly. Yet it is base to die ignobly, so how can he flee his debt to the living? Tecmessa has appealed to Ajax's own conviction that a good man would not be a bad friend. And though he doesn't react openly or at once, his later monologue will show that he has been moved by the force of her argument, as well as by her plea for compassion.

Let us turn now to the monologue itself, where Ajax considers the question of friendship. The range of his thought is indicated by his opening word, hapantha -- all things. "All things does long and uncountable time bring forth unclearly, and once they have come to light, it buries them." By this Ajax does not mean that everything that is comes into being and then perishes. For his reflections encompass even immortal gods. Rather, his contention is that time denies to all beings an uninterrupted pre-eminence and an unshakable trust. Eternity in visible excellence and eternity in friendship were Ajax's two deepest desires, and it is the claim to these which he must now renounce. For the remainder of his speech, he will explore why this is so.

"And so there is nothing," continues Ajax -- and in particular no change -- "not to be expected, but even the dreadful oath and the obdurate heart are found out to be weak." These examples both refer to Ajax's own situation. A solemn oath had bound him to serve Agamemnon and Menelaus. Yet this mighty oath was broken by the traitorous attempt of the still mightier Ajax. "For indeed I," he goes on, "who was once so marvellously steadfast, ... had my edge softened by this woman here. I feel pity," he says, "to leave her a widow among enemies and my son an orphan." His feeling of pity for Tecmessa is the crucial turn that makes this entire speech possible. For it is this pity which motivates his apparent decision to live and thus to learn all that is implied in coming to terms with the world of gods and chieftains. After expressing his compassion, his next words are,

"But I shall go ... to cleanse my stains and so to escape the heavy wrath of the goddess." Ajax seems to contrast his new resolve with the apparently rejected alternative -- implied in the previous sentence -- of deserting his family. What he means, then, is that pity compels him to care for Tecmessa, that to do so he must live, and that to live he must make peace with Athena.

Ajax's thought continues as follows: He intends to bury in some isolated spot the sword he had received from Hector. Hector had given him this sword in the exchange of gifts following their famous duel from Book Seven of the Iliad. Ajax's avowed reason for burying the sword is important; "For from the time when I received it in my hand as a gift from most hate-filled Hector, I have not yet obtained anything dear from the Argives." He clarifies somewhat his understanding of what is dear, to kednon, by assenting to the "saying of mortals" that "'Gifts of enemies are no gifts;' that is to say, they bring no profit." What is dear, then, is what is profitable. Ajax has recently been tormented by Athena, and he has received of late no benefits from the Argives. "Therefore," he says, "in the time remaining I will know to yield to the gods, and I will learn to revere the sons of Atreus." We note that Ajax's avowed willingness to yield before his leaders follows as a consequence of the fact that the gifts of enemies are profitless. Ajax has just complained that the gift from Hector had cost him benefits from his own army, just as the anger of Athena had threatened his life and his ability to help the woman he now pities. For Tecmessa's sake he must live; this requires reconciliation with the gods. But a man like Ajax, even when moved by pity, cannot humble himself so far as to live solely for the sake of a captive woman and a child. If he is to live, he too must receive some benefit that makes his life good for him. In speaking of benefits, Ajax may be thinking especially of prizes of honor, such as the arms of Achilles which he had just been denied. Honor, or timē, is necessary for his life to be enduringly sweet. That he was not well-treated by the army, and that he was denied in particular the prize of Achilles' armor, he now blames on the exchange of gifts with Hector. And public honor from the army is more valuable to him than the glory of single-combat. Consequently, he now goes to bury his sword. In other words, he becomes reconciled with the Argives and submits to their commanders the sons of Atreus. All this is for the sake of his advantage, which he seeks because he chooses to live; and life in turn he chooses out of pity for Tecmessa. What this pity teaches him is that to be alive is to be concerned with advantage -- one's own and that of one's intimates -- and that for the sake of such advantage one must be on good terms with one's own community. To be sure, it could appear that this interpretation rests on the superficial assumption that Ajax intends to renounce suicide. Yet to take him at his word now best prepares an understanding of his ultimate choice.

To clarify what is here at issue, it is first necessary to discuss further the duel with Hector and the exchange of gifts with him. Sophocles virtually tells us to recall the scene depicted in the Seventh Book of the Iliad. He himself places great emphasis throughout the drama on this duel and on the subsequent exchange of gifts. And aside from that, complications arising from the "friendly" exchange between these two noble enemies are

at the heart of this monologue. To understand the duel with Hector, as described in the Iliad, one should contrast it with the earlier duel in Book Three between Paris and Menelaus. The most important difference between these two combats is that Ajax and Hector, unlike the two others, did not fight to settle the war, but "only to determine who was the better warrior." In Sophocles' presentation, Teucer will point to the same aspect of this duel by relating it together with another incident where Ajax did help the army, which he alone is said to have rescued in a decisive turn of battle. With regard to this other incident, Teucer asks mockingly, "Didn't he do these things justly for you?" This question helps mark by contrast the peculiarity of the fight with Hector, which had nothing to do with anyone but the two warriors involved. Simply in order to show their own excellence, they were willing to face mortal danger. Neither made even a pretense of fighting for anyone else's benefit.

This refusal to offer service gives a certain kind of "purity" to the glory which the victor -- and the vanquished -- would derive from the contest. For fame would stem immediately from the deed itself. There would be no prize awarded publicly by inferior, and perhaps incompetent, judges -- not to mention dishonest ones. And furthermore, no uncertainty could mar the standards by which this duel was to be judged. Victory over a great soldier speaks for itself; the warrior in a duel depends upon no one else's good will for his success. In awarding prizes, on the other hand, judges have every temptation to favor their friends at the expense of the most excellent warrior. More generally, men tend to identify the good man with the one who is their benefactor. Although public honor is said to be bestowed for excellence, even in the best case it tends to be awarded only for those excellences which benefit the community. The enemy receives no medal of honor. The group embellishes itself by praising its actual or potential benefactors and by calling them the best men. And what is worse, those men whose excellence most benefits the community may also serve it through secret baseness, and yet they are typically not dishonored on this account (cf. Philoctetes, vv. 78-85; 119; 1049-52). Nevertheless, the army's success requires that all submit to the rulers' judgment of who is worthiest, no matter how repugnant their choice might seem. Public life, then, compels those higher men who seek honor to serve, to yield before, and to be judged by their inferiors -- by those who set the standard for honor. And it often requires that they settle for less than their merit, or even their service, deserves.

Ajax's duel with Hector can be seen as an attempt to escape the indignities of his position in the army. Rather than depend upon the favor of his lesser allies, he would stand alone against a worthy enemy. His splendor would not be eclipsed by the envy and the ingratitude of those who would profit from his virtues. As it turned out, of course, there was no clear victor in the duel; Ajax received the highest praise from his great rival, and the two men parted with an exchange of gifts. In Homer's presentation, in fact, Hector seems to have proposed this exchange precisely to set the two of them apart from the ordinary men in both armies. And so it is not surprising that in Ajax's judgment the exchange of gifts exacerbated the Achaeans' envy, that it made them forget his excellence

and his great services to the army, and that it thus deprived him of the highest honor among his friends. Accordingly, he proposes now to bury the sword which had proved such a costly gift. In the light of this understanding of the duel, for Ajax to give up Hector's gift is an act of submission to the community. He does this to receive again its esteem, which leads to less resentment and is thus more useful in life than the glory he had sought in single combat.

Ajax, then, consents to yield before the gods and before the sons of Atreus. This yielding is not, as he presents it, motivated by a sense of guilt. After all, in his view the chieftains were the ones to injure him; his action was merely retaliation. What he does, rather, is to abandon his claim to revenge. He blames neither himself nor the sons of Atreus. For their offense was only human, and his retaliatory treason merely revealed the hidden weakness of a "dread oath." Life as Ajax now sees it does not allow the luxury that the community give way before the man of excellence. Instead, it requires that virtue be harnessed in the service of the army's common interest and against their common enemies. And in a certain sense this is only fair. The demand that a warrior, if he is to be honored, make more of the allies he serves than of great enemies like himself is hard to blame. That virtue which is not subordinated to the community's interests may be called, as the seer Calchas said in a slightly different context, "excessive and profitless." To be sure, one could say that this demand for the great to defer to the small stems from men's self-interest outweighing their respect for virtue itself. But hasn't even Ajax always pursued his own interest? And hasn't he depended on the community in this pursuit? Hasn't the desire to show his supremacy, and to be honored for it, been a wish -- however magnanimous -- to receive benefits from the group? Isn't it better, then, if he must serve himself, to do so while serving his family and his allies as well? "The gifts of enemies are no gifts." They bring no profit to anyone. Rather than do harm to all around him, Ajax seems now to have chosen to yield before the community, or in other words to help his friends and to harm their enemies. To do this, he must bow before the gods and his commanders and content himself with only so much honor as they may award. Hitherto, Ajax's loyalty to the Achaean cause had been limited by his deeper wish to be excellent, to show his excellence in battle, and to receive the honor he believed himself to deserve. Though he had not been fully aware of this, his loyalty as a friend was limited by his own striving for virtue and by his insistence that his friends be good enough at least to pay him the highest honor. But from now on -- or so it seems -- loyalty will be truly unlimited. Now for the first time Ajax appears to have become a true member of his community; he appears to have learned to accept that union, or alternation, of self-interest and self-surrender demanded by the "right law" of friendship.

Ajax lessens somewhat the pain of yielding to rulers by his observation that "even things dreadful and most steadfast yield to offices. Thus snowy-pathed winters give way before fruitful summer. The gloomy vault of night stands aside for day with its white colts to kindle light. The blast of dreadful winds (by abating) puts to sleep the moaning sea.

And among these, all-powerful Sleep releases what it has bound, and once it has seized, it does not hold on forever." The most important, and most difficult, word in this passage is timais, for which the translations "office," "dignities," or "prerogatives" have been suggested. Indeed, it refers in the first place to the rulers, or to their offices, before which Ajax must yield. But as the examples which he selects make clear, the yielding Ajax has in mind is not submission before the rulers' superior power. Rather it is voluntary standing aside before those who are, at any given time, held in honor -- simply because they are held in honor. Moreover, it is important to remember that Ajax treats submission as his prudent alternative to the exchange of "profitless" gifts with enemies; by submitting to the rulers, Ajax can hope again to receive such cherished things as he had recently been denied. More especially, only by yielding before timais or "honors," that is before the rulers, can he hope to win again those public honors which the army can bestow. To yield before offices or honors, then, is to accept the conditions of a world where public honor, rather than virtue, is supreme. It is to accept that service is the highest excellence and that the outward sign of this excellence, while it may be hollow, matters more -- is worth more -- than excellence itself.

Yielding to offices was presented by Ajax as a requirement in order to complete his reconciliation with the Achaean community. But there is one major barrier which still stands in his way before he can do this. A threat of public stoning had been alluded to earlier in the play. Ajax is a traitor to the army and as such deserves to die. How can he submit to the sons of Atreus if they intend to execute him? Yet perhaps there is a way out of this impasse. For no serious harm came to the army from Ajax's abortive attack. In the circumstances, then, perhaps the chieftains can forgive or, rather, forget his fault. After all, Ajax himself is willing to forego his hopes of revenge. Why shouldn't they also be able to forget his treasonous attempt, just as they had forgotten his deeds of excellence when they awarded the prize? For as the chorus had said, "When the evil is done with, it is of less account." It makes sense, then, to assume that if Ajax were to ask forgiveness of the commanders, his brief hatred would be forgotten in view of the services he might yet perform. The main argument with which Menelaus, and more especially Agamemnon, will later condemn the dead Ajax is that behavior such as his threatens the establishment of law and the preservation of armies and cities. But on those very grounds, in the interests of the army, it would obviously be prudent for them to accept the submission of a still living, still useful, and still dangerous Ajax. Ajax could well hope that by offering compensation he could before long return to his position of honor in the army.

Since it is to the advantage of all to let bygones be bygones, no external obstacle prevents Ajax from making his peace with gods and men. If even the mightiest immortal powers -- continues Ajax -- can yield and submit, "then how shall we (mortals) not learn to be sound of mind?" All Ajax must do is to learn to be sōphrōn, sound of mind or sane. Admittedly, this is a harsh lesson, and one apparently incompatible with his proud

nature. Some have even thought Ajax's words here to be sarcastic. But we should not rule out the possibility that Ajax is sincere, and at least trying to live as he says. Moreover, the loftiness of the immediately preceding verses makes it difficult to imagine such a sudden turn to sarcasm. If the lesson of submission is unendurable for Ajax, as the event indeed will show, we want to know more precisely why. Ajax himself answers this question in the following lines, whose importance is underscored by the first use of the pronoun "I" since he had spoken of the need to yield. These lines are shocking in their bitterness toward life. And such an attitude seems strange at first, since it immediately follows his avowal that he will learn soundness of mind -- that way of life most loved by the gods. But in fact Ajax merely brings out the hidden implications of the posture towards friendship which he had already come to in his speech.

"For I have lately come to know," says Ajax, "that we must hate the enemy so much as is suited to one who will also love us some day; and toward the friend, in doing service I will wish to benefit him so much as is suited to one who always is not going to remain (such). Since for the many of mortals the haven of friendship is not to be trusted." This maxim is an old one, whose wisdom is especially evident in political life and in the relations among cities. But Ajax's version of this traditional saying is unique in some respects. Perhaps the best indication of his state of mind is Sophocles' studied avoidance of the verb <u>philein</u> ("to love") when Ajax is speaking of himself. Instead, Ajax speaks of his willingness to serve and to benefit. By contrast, however, in the first half of the maxim he does not hesitate to speak of the possibility that an enemy might someday come to <u>love</u> him. Moreover, he is quite willing to speak of the need for himself, and for his friends, to <u>hate</u> -- not merely to do harm. Yet when he comes to tell of his own posture toward friends, his roundabout mention of benefits and services makes all the more noticeable the absence of the simple verb "to love."

To see the reason for this absence, and to understand more generally Ajax's new attitude toward love and hate, one must remember that his offer of loyalty and submission had stemmed in part from a wish for benefits from the Achaeans. He now sees friendship as an association bound together against its enemies in the expectation of mutual benefit. As such, it may require forgetfulness of former hatreds and oblivion of former love. Heartfelt gratitude, as well as the desire to punish, must be subordinated to concern for the good of the group. It is those who may cause <u>future</u> harm who must now be hated, and those who can bring <u>future</u> goods who are to be loved. And who can tell when old enemies will find it to their advantage to do a good turn, and who can tell when old friends will no longer be useful? It may not be out of place here to recall the Achaeans' treatment of Iphigenia and of Philoctetes, among others. To prosper in a constantly changing world, men need to be flexible. Accordingly, a sensible man will not expect his attachments, any more than his hatreds, to last forever.

To accept this much is difficult. But what is worse is that the present tense of friendship perishes for Ajax along with its future. He

is so permeated with his new awareness that he speaks of his friend as aien ou menounta (always not about to remain, or always about to depart), rather than use the metrically equivalent, and easier, ouk aei menounta (who will not remain forever). Ajax now sees that at every moment the friend's expected falling away -- through ingratitude, betrayal, or some other form of desertion -- will be present to his mind. He can never close his eyes to that time when a friend will no longer remain one. And with his hope for fidelity shattered, he can no longer offer genuine love or devotion to others. To accept friendship under these conditions is to deny the possibility of loving in the fullest sense. This awareness is all the more bitter inasmuch as Ajax had just promised a return to friendship with the Achaeans and a renunciation of those special claims which had kept him apart. Similarly, his heart had just been softened for the first time to feel pity for his nearest and dearest. The love of excellence and of victory, together with the demand that the army honor him as he believed himself to deserve, had formerly threatened his commitment to the army and to his family. But the sacrifice of those higher claims, and of his higher demands, which was to have facilitated a union with his friends in love, makes him unable any longer truly to love at all. The very desire for advantage and security which seems to support the rule that loyalty to one's friends, and hate of their enemies, be unqualified turns out to destroy the possibility of genuine friendship. No wonder, then, that Ajax breaks off these reflections.

But this is not yet the limit of Ajax's enlightenment. For there is left to consider the alternative of a noble suicide. Cannot Ajax simply reject the world whose baseness he has come to see? Yet even this last recourse is barred to him. To be sure, Ajax can and will kill himself. One may even say that his suicide is the true yielding, the true submission before"offices," and the true reconciliation with the world toward which the deeper levels of his language had been hinting all along. But nonetheless, suicide is not for Ajax a simply noble alternative to the meanness of the world's ways. In fact, it will be another instance of the betrayal which he abhors. Ajax will be not merely a friend let down by others; he himself will be the disloyal one, the one "who will not remain." Even and especially the manner of his death will show that he cannot wholly escape the world which he despises.

It seems to me, in fact, that Ajax comes to understand this much about himself. This is not to say that he thinks of himself as a base traitor to the sons of Atreus. His submission to them was only tentative; and his last word, as well as his first one, will be to blame them rather than himself for what has happened. But as regards Tecmessa it is a different story. Though she had served him faithfully since the beginning, he deserts her without even a word of response to her claim for gratitude. Yet how can he fail to recall that appeal? Surely, he is thinking of her; pity for her and for their son had initiated his speech. But Tecmessa didn't ask for mere pity. She considers herself more than a victim of unmerited suffering; she is the mother of his son, a woman to whom Ajax owes a special debt. Wouldn't a noble man, at any rate, acknowledge that

debt? In this connection, it is most striking that after Tecmessa first questions his nobility, Ajax never again claims that his suicide will be noble. He simply goes to seek -- as he says -- what his heart now longs for. By this silence about the noble, Ajax tacitly acknowledges the justice of her reproach. If I have understood Ajax correctly, he admits that in the decisive respect he is among "the many" -- those who are untrustworthy friends. Such an admission, the most painful that could be imagined from Ajax, should be contrasted with his earlier assertions of his own excellence. In the speech preceding this monologue, for example, he had wished for his son to be more fortunate than himself but like him in all else; for then he would be "not base." But perhaps even that prayer should be understood, retrospectively, to mean that Eurysaces must combine his father's qualities with a <u>better</u> fortune if he is to become, and to remain, not base. Might not there be times when a man is so lacking in external supports that it is impossible wholly to escape baseness? Isn't it Ajax's greatest loss that he has found himself, in part thanks to his own noble disdain for these supports, in just such a situation? Ajax is a man whose undying attachment to the noble compels him to hate even his own blemished life.

Ajax's suicide, however, can also be regarded as the hidden truth of his promise that he would learn to yield. According to this view, his death is like the departure of winter or the passing of night; it is the necessary going under of a dreadful power. By accepting his death, Ajax becomes reconciled in a sense with the order of the world. Yet while he may have come to terms with the divine order and with Athena, Ajax is hardly reconciled with his fellow Achaeans. Far from "revering" the sons of Atreus, he blames them for his death and prays, in his next and last speech, that they may die as miserably as he. He extends this curse even to the whole Achaean army. More generally, his final reflections had implied that the world of the living was the home only of faithlessness and base accomodation. What are we to think of this? With Ajax's death there remains not only the question -- though there is that question -- of whether he deserves, despite his faults, the honor of burial. But together with this there is the issue of whether the Achaean community itself can bestow any but the most hollow honors. By virtue of what, indeed, do they deserve even to escape his curse? Just as the Achaeans must judge Ajax and measure his worth, so they too are being judged.

Yet perhaps Ajax failed to become reconciled with his fellow Achaeans not because of their weaknesses, but because his original thought of submission was never sufficiently just. His willingness to yield to the sons of Atreus did not stem from a simple sense of duty; rather it followed from his belated awareness that this was the more profitable course, for himself as well as for his family. Moreover, Ajax never showed the slightest repentance over his violation of the oath of layalty. Admittedly, he did give evidence of an attempt to forego his desire for vengeance. But is it certain that he even deserved to win Achilles' armor in the first place? And especially if this question leaves any room for doubt, what

great merit is there in his intended renunciation? And who is he subsequently to refuse the prospect of continued life and to judge his community so harshly?

Reflections along these lines, however, are discouraged by the self-revelation of the two commanders in the second half of the play. The very terms in which they defend both the award of armor and the prohibition of burial deny to them, at least, the right to judge Ajax by higher standards. Narurally, neither mentions the divine oath as a source of Ajax's obligation, for the gods also forbid that anyone be denied the right of burial. And in the strictly political debate, neither of them is willing to defend the original award of Achilles' armor even against Teucer's charge that the judges were bribed. Instead, Menelaus argues that it is now his turn to retaliate, while Agamemnon emphasizes the army's need for loyalty. But even Agamemnon is unwilling to base the army's demand for obedience on anything higher than the self-interest of the group, and as a result, he is compelled to maintain -- falsely -- that it is also to the private advantage of each soldier always to obey. He strengthens his case a little by warning Teucer that he'll be sorry if he tries to bury his brother. But Teucer replies with an attack on the army's ingratitude to Ajax and with a thinly veiled denial of Agamemnon's title to rule. Along with the question of whether Ajax deserves burial, the question of the legitimacy of the army's command is more than ever a source of doubt.

At this point Odysseus reappears on stage; it is he who prevents bloodshed and who finally resolves this double question. After establishing his position as Agamemnon's greatest friend among the Argives, Odysseus gives at least three arguments in support of Ajax's burial. To put least things first, I will begin with his final argument -- a reminder that he himself will some day come to need burial. Agamemnon interprets this simply as a statement that every man is out for himself. Now quite possibly, Odysseus's feeling was far less mercenary, but he of course raises no objection to his ruler's understanding of his remark. Odysseus even confirms that it is reasonable and proper for him to labor for himself above all. But his is at any rate an enlightened self-interest. It is the humane aspect of that view of the world which to Ajax had meant above all the denial of true friendship. For it sets a limit to all hatred, and it further prevents the most terrible consequences of the threat which self-interest poses to friendship. We see that Odysseus now offers to act as a "friend" to his former enemy. But more importantly, he is willing to serve a man from whom he can hope nothing in return. But this too makes sense, for it is not prudent to help only those "friends" who can be expected to return the service, since everyone will eventually require a service he cannot return. Since all men dread the prospect of lying unburied, it is wise that they permit -- if not also assist in -- the burial of all others. This sets a precedent of decency which is to the long-term advantage of everyone. This argument, by which Odysseus tries to "enlighten" Agamemnon's self-interest, seems enough to overcome the latter's faltering resistance. But it remains subordinate, for it addresses neither the question of what honor is owed to Ajax in particular nor the question of what is the true source of Agamemnon's title to respect.

A second element of Odysseus' argument is his appeal in the gods' name that Agamemnon not deny burial. The laws of the gods, he says, could be ruined by such an action. It is a violation of divine law for any man to prohibit burial to the dead. But the argument in the gods' name -- which would apply equally no matter who had died -- is intertwined with and overshadowed by Odysseus' repeated reminder of the goodness, nobility, and excellence of his former rival. The reasoning based on Ajax's own merit appears to be of most weight to Odysseus.

It is quite significant in this regard that Odysseus never addresses the question of Ajax's innocence or guilt. He divides the world into friends and enemies, but there is not a word about traitors or disobedient subjects. He never blames Ajax for having tried to torture and kill him. But neither does he seek to mitigate the gravity of his treason by recalling the outcome of the award of arms. Instead, he simply avoids the whole question. In keeping with this, Odysseus is silent also about the great services Ajax had done for the Achaeans while he was still a friend. He does not try to weigh Teucer's case for gratitude against Menelaus's desire for revenge. Odysseus, who never even thanked Athena for saving him from Ajax, shows no more gratitude for a friend's service than indignation at a former friend's betrayal. He knows that friendship is weak and why; thus he does not allow the expectation of kindness or of service to inspire in him the angry sense of betrayal. And while his lack of gratitude may indicate self-interest, he at least refuses to confuse true self-interest with the seeming profit in exacting vengeance.

Odysseus's silence about gratitude, however, points to something higher than mere self-interest. For rather than defend Ajax's claim to burial in terms of his past services, he does so simply on the grounds of his virtue. Odysseus, the winner of the disputed prize, admits that his rival was plainly (or in his eyes) the one best man among the Argives, after Achilles. Perhaps because he knows that the one warrior who is openly best is not always best for or of most value to an army as a whole, he does not blame the court which had awarded him the prize. But he does claim that it would be unjust now to dishonor a man like Ajax. Justice forbids one to harm -- which here means to dishonor -- a good man if he should die. Odysseus never claims, of course, that it is wrong to harm a good man while he is alive. Such a man, after all, might be an enemy, and it would be dangerous if not fatal to contend that one must never harm a good man who is an enemy. But if he should die, it becomes a demand of justice to honor him, or at least not to dishonor him by withholding his corpse from those who would give it burial.

According to his own account, Odysseus acts as he does because excellence "defeats" him, that is it weighs far more with him than hatred. It is not friendship, but virtue, which prevails over hate. In the present circumstances, virtue -- regardless of whether it serves the common cause -- matters more to Odysseus than either friendship or hatred. Thus Odysseus seems to concede that his rival, or at least his rival's highest principle, has won the most important victory. And in the light of the play as a whole, one can perhaps understand why he pays this honor to virtue and why, in his own words, it is victorious with, or over, him. Indeed, even this homage

is probably not free of a prudent self-interest on his part. For while Odysseus presumably acknowledged that public life has more urgent requirements than that of honoring virtue, he may also have seen, as did Ajax, that devotion to the community or its commanders is untenable as the highest law. He may have understood that the rule of loyalty to friends, and hatred of their enemies -- whenever it is divorced from virtue as a whole -- has the inner tendency to decay into acceptance of the lowest self-interest. Even and especially a community of friends which looks up to nothing higher than its own interests is prone to disintegration. Moreover, as we recall, there is a special danger to the position of rulers (and thus of their closest friends) in a community which ignores the claims of excellence. To be sure, a man like Ajax is a threat; but where nobility is not honored, the rulers' title to respect, and to any obedience more reliable than that inspired by fear, is if anything more vulnerable. Once men feel free to look out for themselves first, why should they honor or revere their commanders? And this threat to the rulers' offices cannot be sufficiently met by reliance on their nobility by birth. The claim of a noble nature is always in need of support by virtuous actions. And whether or not this is Odysseus's primary aim, his "virtuous" honoring of the dead Ajax's virtue serves to provide that support and to meet that threat to authority. The excellence of a single man, though it surely threatens any community, must be given the highest possible honor if that community is to earn men's loyalty. Admittedly, the action of the play has raised grave doubts about Ajax's claim to be a man of excellence. For even if Tecmessa were no longer present on stage, the mere thought of her would call into question Teucer's final boast that Ajax was an entirely good man. And yet, for a community which must give honor and for rulers who wish to be honored themselves as just and good men, it does little immediate harm to ignore the whole truth about virtue.