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## A FORM OF OPPOSITION: SMALL /BIG

In their discussion of Sophocles W. Schmid and O. Stählin<sup>1</sup> suggest that the notion «great results from small causes» which emerges from some Sophoclean passages<sup>2</sup> might have been of sophistic origin and belongs to the *μηχανόεν τέχνας* (*Ant.* 365-6), that is to the intellectual, social and political achievements of man<sup>3</sup>. The same view for the same passages is quoted by W.B. Stanford in his edition of the *Ajax*<sup>4</sup>. Although some of the examples referred to may echo, as we shall see, sophistic teachings the allegation of a sophistic origin seems to require some qualification, since the evidence from Homer onwards to the fifth century suggests otherwise; that is, throughout this period, sporadically admittedly, we encounter pairs of opposites<sup>5</sup> to the same effect with the ones mentioned by the above scholars. Our problem then is somewhat transposed and we have to see it in terms of the cumulative effect of the available evidence.

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1. *Geschichte der griechischen Literatur*, B. I<sup>2</sup> (München, 1959, <sup>1</sup>1934) 316, η. 1.

2. *Ajax* 1253-4: μέγας δὲ πλευρά βοῦς ὑπὸ σμικρᾶς ὄμωσ  
μάστιγος ὀρθὸς εἰς ὄδον πορεύεται. Also *Ajax* 1077-8, 1148-9,  
*Ant.* 477-8, *El.* 415-6. I quote from the Oxford Classical Texts unless otherwise indicated.

3. For the achievements of man as they are presented in the first stasimon of the *Antigone* in relation to sophistic teachings see, for example, W. Schmid, «Probleme aus der sophokleischen *Antigone*», *Philologus*, 62 (1903) 13-21. See also Joan V. O' Brien, *Guide to Sophocles' Antigone* (London and Amsterdam, 1978) 47, 58-59. Andrew Brown, ed. *Sophocles: Antigone* (Wiltshire, 1987) 154.

4. *Sophocles' Ajax* (London, 1963) 195, ad 1077-80.

5. G.E.R. Lloyd, *Polarity and Analogy*, Cambridge, 1966, has studied systematically pairs of opposites from «the earliest times down to and including Aristotle...in relation to the larger problem of the development of logic and scientific method in this period» (p. 1.). Mention should be made of Ernst Kemmer's monograph, *Die polare Ausdrucksweise in der griechischen Literatur*, Würzburg, 1900, on the so-called «polar expressions», in which two opposite or complementary terms are frequently used instead of a single general concept e.g. night and day instead of always, all the time, land and sea instead of the whole earth. These studies do not deal with the opposition small /big from the point of view I intend to approach it in this article.

Let us start from Homer. In the *Odyssey* the only example of the opposition refers to a physical phenomenon. When Nestor relates to Telemachus the sea storm that caused the wreckage of the Achaeans and drove Menelaus with five ships to Egypt, he describes the rocky coast in which

...Νότος μέγα κύμα ποτὶ σκαίδν ῥίον ὠθεῖ,  
ἔς Φαιστόν, μικρὸς δὲ λίθος μέγα κύμ' ἀποέρχει. (γ 295-6).

The small rock which keeps off a big wave in a way defies the opposition that seems inherent in the two adjectives. Judging by the result of their encounter the small rock is shown to be more durable than the big wave. Evidently what is decisive for this outcome and its verbal expression is the respective inherent qualities of the two forces in operation, that is the hardness of the rock on the one hand and the liquidness of the sea on the other. On these conditions the value of the adjectives small/big becomes relative and consequently the opposition they express at first sight is also qualified by their relativity. Referring of course to a physical phenomenon the poet in all probability wanted to underscore his point, in other words the wreckage of Menelaus' ships against such a crag! Even so the statement of the poet denotes a realisation that, despite appearances, «small» things can withstand big ones with all the consequences implied in such a reversal.

The opposition small/big further serves to illustrate the might of the gods compared to human limitations. For the first time we come across such an example in *Theognis*:

εὐχομένῳ μοι κλύθι, κακάς δ' ἀπὸ κῆρας ἄλαλκε·  
σοὶ μὲν τοῦτο θεὰ σμικρόν, ἐμοὶ δὲ μέγα (13-4 W).

Here both adjectives refer to the same object, that is to the prayed for safety of the poet. Obviously what makes possible the verbal opposition is the different perspective of the poet in evaluating the significance of his entreaty: the most crucial for a man is but a small thing for Artemis, namely to keep off the goddesses of death from the suppliant. No doubt the «small» favour that he asks is a token of the divine omnipotence. From this point of view the characterisation «small» is a euphemism and it is partly restored to its proper dimensions in the second member of the opposition, when by human standards it is rendered as great.

Again in the *Choephoroe* after Electra's discovery of the lock of hair on the tomb of Agamemnon she prays to the gods that they

may help them. She concludes her invocation with a general, metaphorical statement which seems to allude to a proverb<sup>1</sup>.

...εἰ δὲ χρὴ τυχεῖν σωτηρίας,  
 μικροῦ γένοιτ' ἂν σπέρματος μέγας πυθμῆν (203-4).

The small seed contains within it the potential which will transform it in due time into a big tree<sup>2</sup>. Within its dramatic context the statement alludes to the tremendous consequences, provided the lock belonged to Orestes, which it would have for the House of Atreus. So, with gods' help<sup>3</sup> an apparently insignificant incident could prefigure events of the greatest importance, like the return of Orestes and the rightful punishment of Aegisthus and Clytemnestra.

Somewhat differently, in Herodotus the predominance of small over big military forces refers to god's might and more specifically to the commonplace of divine envy<sup>4</sup>. In his attempt to dissuade Xerxes from his design to invade Greece in order not to awaken the jealousy of the gods Artabanus resorts to an analogy from the physical world: as the god smites with his thunderbolt everything excessive, in the same way «καὶ στρατὸς πολλὸς ὑπὸ ὀλίγου διαφθείρεται κατὰ τοιόνδε· ἐπεὰν σφι ὁ θεὸς φθονήσας φόβον ἐμβάλη ἢ βροντήν, δι' ὧν ἐφθάρησαν ἀναξίως ἑωυτῶν. οὐ γὰρ ἔῃ φρονέειν μέγα ὁ θεὸς ἄλλον ἢ ἑωυτόν» (VII. 10.ε)<sup>5</sup>. The alleged achievement of the numerically small army is due to divine causation and has little to do with the human agents of the victory. So the opposition small/big is used in order to emphasize the insolence of the great host who induce the divine envy and their own consequent humiliation.

The evidence we have advanced so far makes clear that we cannot speak of sophistic origin, in relation to the *μηχανόεν τέχνας*, for the

1. H. J. Rose, *A Commentary on the Surviving Plays of Aeschylus*, II (Amsterdam, 1958) 138, ad 204.

2. See also Manfred Bissinger, *Das adjektiv Μέγας in der griechischen Dichtung* (München, 1966) 90, who considers the metaphor sharpened by the opposition small/big.

3. Cf. also *Choe.* 262-3: (Ζεῦ) κόμιζ', ἀπὸ μικροῦ δ' ἂν ἄρειας μέγαν  
 δόμον, δοκοῦντα κάρτα νῦν πεπτωκένας.

4. For divine envy in general, see, for example, Peter Walcot, *Envy and the Greeks: A Study of Human Behaviour* (Warminster-England, 1978) 31-50.

5. Cf. also Her. VII. 18.2, for a similar view of Artabanus who insisting in his opinion he repeats that he has seen «πολλά τε καὶ μεγάλα πεσόντα πρήγματα ὑπὸ ἡσσόνων». God's work as well is the defeat of the Persians in the homonymous tragedy of Aeschylus, despite their numerical supremacy (337f., 345). The same commonplace is preserved also in a fragment of Euripides [*Fr.* 974 (N<sup>2</sup>)].

opposition small/big. The form and the effect of the cases we saw are more or less similar to the analogous passages from Sophocles. Evidently the difference between them is in their content, as the examples we examined, either refer to a physical phenomenon or exemplify the gods' might, whereas the Sophoclean passages have to do with human action and behaviour. It remains to investigate whether or not these particular passages reflect sophistic ideas and, furthermore, their relation to similar examples from other authors.

Once again the notion «great results from small causes» in regard to human action and behaviour does not originate from sophistic teachings. On the contrary this idea seems to have become proverbial quite early as a fragment of Alcaeus indicates: γελοῖον φήσαντος εἶναι ἀπὸ μικρῶν πραγμάτων οὕτω μεγάλα θηρᾶν, οὐ κατ' Ἀλκαῖον ἐξ ὄνουχου τὸν λέοντα γράφοντας... (Z 115, L-P). The nail from which the painter starts his picture prefigures the lion, that is a small token may lead, literally or metaphorically to important inferences. A further, although much later, indication of the proverbial character of the opposition is provided by the *Orestes* of Euripides. There Menelaus tries to justify his reluctance to help Orestes and his sister by pointing out the impotence of a small military force to defeat a larger one:

σμικροῖσι γὰρ τὰ μεγάλα πῶς ἔλοι τις ἂν  
τόνοισιν; ἀμαθὲς καὶ τὸ βούλεσθαι τάδε (694-5 B).

Although Menelaus refers to a specific situation, the general character of his words (and the evidence we have advanced so far) indicates that we have to do with a proverb, which he has adjusted to his purpose. In other words the exception proves the rule: that is the general application of the opposition small/big under certain conditions. Indeed, Thucydides presents a specific application of the above axiom related to Pausanias. In the Lacedaemonians' judgment the Spartan King «ἔργους βραχέσι προυδήλου ἂ τῇ γνώμῃ μειζρόνως ἐς ἔπειτα ἔμελλε πράξειν» (I. 130.1); by his changed life-style he made patent his future great plans concerning his allegedly intended collaboration with the Persian autocrat. Again an apparently meagre indication led by a rational process to an important inference.

To come to specific intellectual, social and political realities which may be related to sophistic ideas as well we have to start from Archilochus. His verses

]νγῆ σὺν σ[μ]ικρῇ μέγαν  
πόντον περήσ]ας ἤλθεσ ἐκ Γορτυνίης (24 W),

exemplify the antithesis between the tiny boat and the immense sea and by extension the achievement of the traveller who undertook the risk during the trip. Certainly in the small boat is invested an amount of human experience and expertise which compensates somewhat for the dangers involved in such an undertaking.

As early then as Archilochus however implicitly, the notion of the power of «technology» appears, a notion that became, as is well known, central to sophistic idea of the omnipotence of intellect in general. This same idea may be traced in two examples from the *Ajax* and the *Antigone* quoted by W. Schmid and O. Stählin. In the *Ajax*, when Agamemnon refers to the defeat of the hero in the contest for Achilles' arms, he gives the upper hand not to the big men but to the wise (1250ff.). He brings home what he means with an example from the animal world:

μέγας δὲ πλευρὰ βοῦς ὑπὸ σμικρᾶς ὄμωσ  
μάστιγος ὀρθὸς εἰς ὄδον πορεύεται (1253-4).

The small goad which keeps straight and disciplined the big ox represents the end product of a whole process of civilisation brought about by the human intellect. In those terms the great bulk of the ox proved to be useless<sup>1</sup>. So the apparently small is in reality much more powerful and important than the big. Evidently what makes the difference is the respective quality of the material and the intellectual realms which shows the predominance of inner abilities over external appearance. The fact that Ajax is not only a «big body», combined with the folly of Agamemnon himself in forbidding his burial, colours his words with ironical connotations, but this does not affect their general validity.

In the second case from the *Antigone*, by a similar example of the power of «technology», the poet illustrates some political realities. In his effort to assert his authority against Antigone's defiance Creon confronts her with the following words:

σμικρῶ χαλινῶ δ' οἶδα τοὺς θυμουμένους  
ἵππους καταρτυθέντας· οὐ γὰρ ἐκπέλει  
φρονεῖν μέγ' ἔστις δοῦλός ἐστι τῶν πέλας (477-9).

The small bit which breaks the spirited horses represents the power of authority and by extension the complex mechanisms which produce and

1. See also Bissinger, p. 85, who points out the underestimation of the physical stature in these verses.

support it with the final aim of keeping the subjects disciplined. Obviously any authority may be challenged or overthrown one way or another as in the present case. In general, however, the rational, organized authority can exert its grip over the immense but dispersed power of the subjects. Once again the small bit is only the visible symbol of a concentrated, intelligent force with clear purposes. In this respect the subjects are not an adequate match for it, until of course they prove otherwise.

More explicitly connected with sophistic concepts is the second example from the *Ajax* referred to by W. Schmid and O. Stählin. There Menelaus alluding to Ajax points out the precedence of social values over a mighty stature:

ἀλλ' ἄνδρα χροή, καὶν σῶμα γεννήσῃ μέγα<sup>1</sup>,  
δοκεῖν πεσεῖν ἂν καὶν ἀπὸ μικροῦ κακοῦ.  
δέος γὰρ ᾧ πρόσεστιν αἰσχύνη θ' ὄμοῦ,  
σωτηρίαν ἔχοντα τόνδ' ἐπίστασο (1077-80).

Menelaus is aware that a small evil can overthrow a big body, which throws into relief the essential limitations and underestimation of the external make up of a human being<sup>2</sup>. As a safeguard against such a weakness he proposes moral, social values, δέος and αἰσχύνη which may point to the Protagorean «theory» of civic virtue<sup>3</sup>. These very virtues Ajax notoriously lacked and ironically Menelaus himself ignores in his order that Ajax should remain unburied (1089). On the other hand whoever is deprived of these virtues is rendered prey to any «insignificant» adversity, against which the mighty body proves to be useless. In fact, then, the opposition is not between the great bulk and the small evil, but between the external appearance and the absence of social virtues which enables the apparently trifling wrong to have a disproportionately drastic effect.

These are the only cases from Sophocles in which sophistic ideas may be, more or less, discerned in regard to the opposition small/big. All have to do with human action and more concretely with intellectual, social and political «achievements» and from this point of view we may

1. Cf. *Il.* III, 227: (Ajax) ἔξοχος Ἀργείων κεφαλὴν τε καὶ εὐρέας ὄμους.

2. J.C. Kamerbeek, *The Plays of Sophocles: Commentaries, I, The Ajax* (Leiden, 1963) 210, ad 1077. Bissinger, p. 87.

3. Kamerbeek, p. 210, ad 1079, 80: «The possibility of Soph. being influenced here by the philosophy of his time is far from being excluded. For the σφζεσθαι of mankind, Hermes brought them αἰδώς and δίκη (Pl. *Prot.* 322 b. c), σωτηρία («preservation») is the term put into the mouth of Protagoras (*ib.* 321 b)».

say they belong to the *μηχανόεν τέχνας*. However, the rest of the evidence from the poet and other authors, as we shall see, does not relate to specific sophistic concepts.

To begin with, far from expressing any idea of «contriving» the two other examples quoted by W. Schmid-O. Stählin from Sophocles are, we may say, antagonistic to it. The first example from the *Ajax* (1148-9) refers to immoderate human conduct (see below). The second from the *Electra* shows the effect of a brief but timely speech in regard to a crucial situation. When Chrysothemis refers vaguely to the night dream of Clytemnestra, Electra urges her to report it, however briefly, for she knows that

...πολλά τοι μικροὶ λόγοι  
ἔσφηλαν ἤδη καὶ κατώρθωσαν βροτοῦς (*El.* 415-6).

Electra's words are prophetic for Clytemnestra's fate, as her dream indeed portends her death. Evidently the consequences of the brief tales<sup>1</sup> are far more reaching than their surface meaning. Their significance, of course, is not assumed by rhetorical means, but it is inherent in the situation they referred to. From this respect they have little to do with «contrivances».

In the same way, further evidence from other authors provides examples referring to human realm without specific sophistic connotations. Thus the effect of petty errors on the fortune of the tyrants is presented in a fragment of Euripides:

ὄρᾳς τυράννους διὰ μακρῶν ηὐξημένους,  
ὡς μικρὰ τὰ σφάλλοντα, καὶ μὲν ἡμέρα  
τὰ μὲν καθεῖλεν ὑψόθεν, τὰ δ' ἦρ' ἄνω (*Frg.* 420 N<sup>2</sup>).

The notion that inconsiderable blunders can overthrow the supreme might of tyrants denotes not only a clear awareness of the limitations of human power but, more important, it expresses a consciousness of the erosive impact of seemingly trifling matters which nonetheless can be potentially destructive. In the midst of an absolute, corrupt power, it takes a great deal of maturity and wisdom to come to the above realization, historical experience of similar instances notwithstanding. Judging then from the potential result the opposition under discussion is again reversed.

1. For similar instances of the consequences of a brief speech see *OT* 120f., *OC* 443f., 616f., *Thuc.* IV. 126.1.

In a different context the opposition small/big occurs also in Democritus. There the respective qualification of the pair small/big depends on the terms of its realization: μικραὶ χάριτες ἐν καιρῷ μέγισταί τοῖς λαμβάνουσι (*Frg.* 94 D-K). As it seems, the decisive factor is the proper opportunity which transforms an insignificant favour granted to somebody into an important one. In the second fragment a small appetite equates poverty to wealth (*Frg.* 284). The peculiarity of these two examples is that the opposition small/big consists of one member which could be small or big depending on special conditions that determine its magnitude.

Finally some other instances of the opposition refer to immoderate human conduct and its consequences. Again we cannot trace any specific sophistic ideas in them, although the first example we will see from the *Ajax* is mentioned by W. Schmid and O. Stählin, among the other cases which allegedly reflected sophistic opinions. There Menelaus, arguing with Teucer over Ajax's burial, uses metaphorically a physical phenomenon in order to assert that Teucer, insolent as he is, in his opinion, will have soon to keep silent.

σμηκοῦ νέφους τάχ' ἄν τις ἐκπνεύσας μέγας  
χειμῶν κατασβέσειε τὴν πολλὴν βοήν (1148-9)<sup>1</sup>.

The strong wind coming out of the tiny cloud refers here metaphorically to the allegedly intemperate behaviour of Teucer, which has to be subdued. In other words the empty noise of unruly speech is easily exposed for what actually is. In this metaphorical use of a physical phenomenon there is no room, I think, for sophistic influence, especially in regard to the μηχανόεν τέχνας. Similarly the other cases of the opposition referring to immoderate human conduct are far from displaying such ideas. So Andromache in the tragedy of the same name relates Menelaus' rude attitude towards her and lack of elementary ability to judge critically in the following words:

οὐ χρὴ 'πι μικροῖς μεγάλα πορσύνειν κακά (352)<sup>2</sup>.

Andromache discerns clearly what Menelaus is unable to see, namely the puny cause - Hermione's jealousy - which should not trigger great calamities, not only Andromache's and her son's death but also Neoptolemus' revenge on Menelaus and his daughter. His answer about the relati-

1. Bissinger, p. 108, considers the opposition attractive.

2. Cf. *Andr.* 387: ὦ μεγάλα πράσων αἰτίας σμηκρᾶς πέρι.



vity of what is great<sup>1</sup> does not negate the validity of Andromache's statement and the dreadful results that could follow Menelaus' superficiality.

Somewhat differently the Chorus in the same play point out the uncontrollable quality of a tongue which causes «*σμικρᾶς ἀπ' ἀρχῆς νεῖκος ἀνθρώποις μέγα*» (642). Loose control of one's tongue generally is also referred to in a fragment of Euripides in which the poet by analogy with a physical phenomenon brings home his point that one should not tell anybody whatever one wants to remain secret (*Frg.* 411 N<sup>2</sup>). As a small beacon fire can burn a whole *λέπας*, in the same way, a secret told to one man is not a secret anymore: everybody will know it. In those instances human excessive has the potential to blow up an insignificant matter out of proportion.

Looking back at the evidence we have advanced, we are in a better position to evaluate the view of W. Schmid - O. Stählin (and shared by W. B. Stanford), according to which the notion «great results from small causes» might have been of sophistic origin and belongs to the *μηχανόεν τέχνας*. Our survey showed that this notion extends without interruption as far back as Homer, and it may refer to physical phenomena, to divine power or more often to multifarious aspects of human action and behaviour. Precisely the contribution of the general, intellectual and ethical climate, especially of the second half of the 5th century, was to apply the notion under discussion more to human agents than to outside forces, be they natural or superhuman. Indeed in this context some examples of the opposition in Sophocles correspond to the sophistic *μηχανόεν τέχνας*. Generally however the overall characteristic of the cases under discussion is that from seemingly small causes great results issue, with the necessary corollary that what appears small and insignificant is, actually or potentially, equally or even more important than what appears great. So it seems more to the point to relate the alleged opposition small/big to the problem of appearance and reality which was one of the most fervently debated problems in the second half of the 5th century, with the qualification that at least in origin this problem dates back as far as Homer and it starts empirically from the

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1. Cf. *Andr.* 368-9: εὖ δ' ἴσθ', ὅτου τις τυγχάνει χρεῖαν ἔχων,  
τοῦτ' ἔσθ' ἐκάστῳ μεῖζον ἢ Τροίαν ἐλεῖν.

P.T. Stevens, ed. *Euripides: Andromache* (Oxford, 1971) 141, ad 368-9: «These lines are a variation on the proverbial saying that the best thing of all is to get what you want.»

observation of a physical phenomenon. It follows that the stylistic figure was there and accordingly was used by several authors to express their own ideas, sophistic ones not excluded.

ΠΕΡΙΛΗΨΗ

ΜΙΑ ΜΟΡΦΗ ΑΝΤΙΘΕΣΗΣ: ΜΙΚΡΟ /ΜΕΓΑΛΟ

Οι W. Schmid και O. Stählin, *Geschichte der griechischen Literatur*, B. I<sup>2</sup> (München, 1959, <sup>1</sup>1934) 316, σημ. 1, υποθέτουν ότι η αντίθεση «μεγάλα αποτελέσματα από μικρές αιτίες», που υπάρχει σε μερικά χωρία του Σοφοκλή, ίσως να έχει σοφιστική καταγωγή και έχει σχέση με το μηχανόεν τέχνας (Αντιγ. 365-6), δηλαδή με τα διανοητικά, πολιτικά και κοινωνικά επιτεύγματα του ανθρώπου. Στην έκδοση του *Αίαντα* ο W.B. Stanford συμμερίζεται την ίδια άποψη για τα ίδια χωρία.

Η εξέταση όμως της αντίθεσης αυτής από τον Όμηρο ως το τέλος του 5ου π.Χ. αιώνα δείχνει πως στο διάστημα αυτό συναντούμε τέτοιες περιπτώσεις, οι οποίες μπορεί να αναφέρονται σε φυσικά φαινόμενα, στη δύναμη των θεών, ή συχνότερα, ιδιαίτερα κατά το β' μισό του 5ου π.Χ. αιώνα, σε ποικίλες πλευρές ανθρώπινης δράσης και συμπεριφοράς. Το λεκτικό λοιπόν σχήμα προϋπήρχε των Σοφιστών και το χρησιμοποίησαν διάφοροι συγγραφείς για να εκφράσουν κατά περίπτωση ορισμένες ιδέες χωρίς να αποκλείονται και οι σοφιστικές. Έτσι μερικά μόνο παραδείγματα της αντίθεσης αυτής στο Σοφοκλή ανταποκρίνονται σε σοφιστικές αντιλήψεις. Το γενικό ωστόσο χαρακτηριστικό όλων των περιπτώσεων που είδαμε, δηλαδή το ότι μικρές αιτίες προκαλούν μεγάλα αποτελέσματα με συνέπεια ότι παρουσιάζεται ασήμαντο να είναι πραγματικά ή δυνάμει εξίσου ή σημαντικότερο απ' ό,τι παρουσιάζεται σπουδαίο, μας επιτρέπει να συσχετίσουμε την αντίθεση αυτή με την αντίθεση «φαινομένων» /πραγματικότητας.