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**Books**

## The Ajax Dilemma by Paul Woodruff

**Massimo Pigliucci** distinguishes justice from fairness in Paul Woodruff's latest tome.

In the 5th century BCE, Sophocles wrote a tragedy about the rivalry between the Greek heroes Ajax and Odysseus. The two competed for the title of most valuable man in the army that was laying siege to Troy. The prize was Achilles' armor (he was dead, you know), which was forged by none other than the god Hephaestus. The Greeks' leader, Agamemnon, was a bit of a coward, and he made a jury of soldiers decide the contest instead of taking responsibility for the decision himself. The soldiers unanimously awarded the armor to Odysseus (who eventually did lead them to victory, via his Trojan Horse stratagem), even though Ajax had arguably been the more valiant soldier, and many owed their life to his bravery in battle. As a result of the decision against him, Ajax was irreparably wounded in his honor, became temporarily mad, attacked his superiors, and ended up committing suicide.

This epic story is the background of Paul Woodruff's book on the relationship between justice and fairness. The volume includes a strange afterword, very much in the style of a business self-help-book, by Cale McDowell (whilst Woodruff is a classicist and a professor of philosophy, McDowell is an attorney). Indeed, the book is an odd mix, as if the author couldn't make up his mind whether to write a philosophy book for the general public (always a welcome initiative) or a philosophically-informed version of *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* (a much more dubious proposition). The first approach, of philosophy for the public, is represented, for instance, by a chapter on justice that begins with a quote from John Stuart Mill and goes on to explore the relationship between justice and fairness (Rawls is mentioned, of course, although only superficially engaged with), the goals of justice, the value of fair procedures when it comes to justice, and the role of principles in the exercise of justice – all done in a nicely accessible way, with examples drawn both from Sophocles' story and from modern day settings. However, the second soul of the book (so to speak), of 'the habits of effective philosophers', also shows up repeatedly, particularly in Part Four, where the reader is presented with a sequence of very brief sketches, such as what characterizes a good loser: "Good losers know when to be angry... are angry enough, but no more... understand the value of everyone's contributions... know just how good they are..." And so on, platitude after platitude.

Woodruff's main philosophical thesis is that – contrary to John Rawls' famous theory – justice cannot be equated with fairness, and that indeed, the pursuit of fairness sometimes undermines justice. So it may not have been just, but it was fair for the army to award the prize to Odysseus because he really was their most valuable man; and (regardless of his motives) it was fair of Agamemnon to establish a clear procedure for the awarding of the armor. And yet all this fairness resulted in tragedy, not just because of Ajax's suicide, but because the Greek army lost a major player as a result. However, even by the end of the book it isn't clear what Woodruff thinks should have been done differently. Should the army have given the armor to Ajax, knowing how much he prized his honor, and therefore how insulted he would be if not given what he thought was his due? Very well: but what of Odysseus, then, who presumably cared just as much about his honor, and moreover, was actually worthy of the prize? Should Agamemnon have made the decision on his own, thus showing his leadership to his soldiers? (There is a lot of talk about leadership in the book.) But why then wouldn't it be a demonstration of leadership to ensure a dispute is resolved fairly, following transparent procedures?

One of Woodruff's themes is that Ajax represents those us who are asked to sacrifice honor (or, in modern terms, pride in what we do or who we are) to keep things going. Think of the worker who is denied a well-deserved raise. She's wounded, not so much because of the missed income, but because of what the decision says to her about her worth. The idea this is supposed to illustrate is that justice is a community good, and that in order to ensure it, sometimes we need to ignore fairness to individuals. Maybe so, and this is certainly a debate worth having, but Woodruff's book just barely gets the discussion going, without providing the reader with sufficient tools or opportunities to wade in deeper.

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*Massimo Pigliucci is Professor of Philosophy at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. He is the author of Answers for Aristotle: How Science and Philosophy Can Lead Us to A More Meaningful Life (Basic Books, 2012). His philosophical musings can be found at [www.rationallyspeaking.org](http://www.rationallyspeaking.org).*

• *The Ajax Dilemma: Justice, Fairness, and Rewards*, by Paul Woodruff, OUP USA, 2011, £12.99 hb, 272pp. ISBN-13: 978-0199768615.

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