

Reading ἔκων, οὐκ ἔκων, and ἄέκων in Aeschylus.  
Stephen C. Fineberg (Knox College)

ἔκων has two basic meanings: in a passive sense it means “willing” or “without resistance”, while in an active sense it means “with intent” or even “with purpose”. The adjective is common in the Homeric epics, but in the Aeschlean corpus, which for the present argument includes the *Prometheia*, it reveals an intent or, in its negated forms, lack of intent on which critical thematic issues turn. This paper focuses primarily on the *Agamemnon* and the *Prometheus Bound* where 14 of the 18 instances of ἔκων and its variant forms are concentrated. Debate about guilt and innocence in the *Oresteia* and the *Prometheia* lies at the heart of the plays themselves, and it continues to engage modern scholars. Fraenkel (*ad loc*, p. 763) in his monumental commentary on the *Agamemnon* informs us that ἄκων ἔκτεινε (“He did the killing unintentionally”) was a recognized legal term. I will contend here that it is also the basis for deciding guilt or innocence in the *Oresteia* and the *Prometheia*. A large thematic question, I believe, turns on a small nuance of poetic usage. I forecast my argument below with the most significant examples.

In the first play of the *Oresteia*, Agamemnon disparages the loyalty of his fellow Greeks, but praises Odysseus. In the case of most of the Greeks, he says, loyalty was little more than “the likeness of a shadow,” but Odysseus could be trusted because he sailed for Troy against his will, οὐκ ἔκων (*Ag* 841), and once he sailed he proved a “ready yoke fellow”. We know Odysseus to be crafty, even deceitful, in the epic poems, and by the time of Sophocles’ *Philoctetes* he has become a confirmed villain, but for Agamemnon in the *Oresteia*, Odysseus is the one man he could trust. If Odysseus’ unwillingness makes him most trustworthy, Aigistheus’ willingness confirms his unmitigated culpability. Aigisthus acted, says the chorus, with deliberate intent, ἔκων (*Ag*1613). Agamemnon, however, occupies the middle ground of a protagonist who is torn in two directions. Agamemnon at first hesitates to step on the purple carpet, but at last he tells Clytemnestra that he will do it because she wishes it. She, however, insists emphatically that he must tread on the carpet, not because she urges him, but because he himself wishes it, ἔκων (*Ag* 943). Agamemnon’s fault resides not simply in his actions, but in his will. In such terms, it becomes even clearer why Orestes’ initial reluctance to kill his mother is so important for his acquittal – Pylades’ sole function (and single line) in the play is to urge Orestes on.

In the opening play of the *Prometheia*, ἔκων in all its variant forms works much as it did in the *Oresteia* to mark the central thematic issue of willful excess, unwilling compliance, and the ambivalence that lies between. At one extreme is Zeus’ tyrannical rule of pitiless force and, at the other, the realm of Ocean where compassion resides and force is unknown. In a subtle permutation of Aigisthus’ intentional murder of Agamemnon, Zeus is un-willing to free Prometheus. “Who will free you, asks Io, with Zeus unwilling, ἄκοντος Διός (*PV* 771)?” With purpose, Zeus constrains and cruelly torments his enemy. Also unwilling are Zeus’ victims, Hephaistos who reluctantly (ἄκων, *PV* 19) carries out Zeus’ cruel orders, and also Inachus who, under threats from Zeus, unwillingly evicted his daughter Io from their home, ἄκουσαν ἄκων (*PV* 671). At the opposite extreme, the Oceanids affirm their willingness to hear Prometheus’ appeal for sympathy: “You have shouted out to us who are not unwilling,” οὐκ ἀκούσαις (*PV* 277).” The Oceanids are not only willing to listen but finally to stand firm as Zeus brings mountain ranges crashing down upon Prometheus and themselves. They are as immune to Zeus’ threats as Zeus is absolute in his pitiless violence. Prometheus, however, occupies a middle ground. He was at first a willing ally of Zeus who was himself willing (ἔκωνθ’ ἐκόντι, *PV* 218), but now with even greater will Prometheus defies Zeus’ authority (ἔκων ἐκων ἡμαρτον, *PV* 266), and in consequence he becomes one of the tyrant’s unwilling victims. Unwillingly, says Hephaistos, do I punish you against your will, ἄκοντά σε ἄκων (*PV* 19). In the *Prometheus* as in the *Agamemnon*, villainy is marked by active intent, while its victims are defined by their lack of willing compliance, and the protagonists show an ambivalent will – in each instance ἔκων in all its variant forms marks the critical passages.