



Oedipus and the Riddle of Human Existence

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Abstract: Oedipus, as portrayed by Sophocles in *Oedipus Tyrannus*, is probably the most paradoxical and controversial character in Western literature. A hero who saved the ancient city of Thebes from the menacing Sphinx by solving her riddle is declared a polluter, responsible for the plague. Oedipus conducts the investigation in public, declares himself guilty and is sentenced to exile. In the process, not only does he discover his identity but he also creates it and becomes who he is. The figure of Oedipus is interpreted here as an answer to the riddle of existence: pain and suffering are not a punishment from the gods but the price humanity pays for consciousness, autonomy, compassion, and daring. A brief critique of Sigmund Freud's concept of Oedipus Complex is also presented. Dreadful deeds, as well as magnanimity of the spirit, are at the heart of man.

Keywords: Oedipus; Sophocles; Jaspers, Karl; Sartre, Jean-Paul; Nietzsche, Friedrich; Camus, Albert; boundary situation; existential freedom; conscience; plague.

Wonders are many, and none is more wonderful than man.
Sophocles, *Antigone*

Pitiful, you suffer so, you understand so much...
I wish you had never known.
Sophocles, *Oedipus the King*

The Plot

Sophocles' play *Oedipus Tyrannus* is based on the myth of Oedipus. Its early versions appear in Egypt and India, and the oldest written version in European literature can be found in Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. Aeschylus, Euripides, Julius Caesar, Ovid, Seneca, and later André Gide and Jean Cocteau wrote plays about the hero. But it was Sophocles who immortalized the story in his play, with its central theme of the origin and identity of man. This theme brings to mind the iconic painting by Paul Gauguin of 1897: "Where do

we come from? What are we? Where are we going?"¹ This painting may well have anticipated the pressing existential concerns of the twentieth century.

Oedipus was doomed before his birth. Laius, the king of Thebes, learned from the Delphic Oracle that a son born of his wife Jocasta would kill his father and marry his mother. The king believed the oracle and was seized by fear. When the boy was born, he pierced

¹ Paul Gauguin, *Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going?*, 1897-98, oil on canvas, 139.1 x 374.6 cm, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

his feet with a nail, bound them together and ordered a servant to expose the infant on Mount Cithaeron. However, the servant disobeyed the command and passed the baby boy to a shepherd, who in turn took him to Corinth, where a childless royal couple, Polybus and Merope, adopted him as their son.

One day, Oedipus was teased by a drunk about his origins. In search of truth regarding his identity, he went to consult the Delphic Oracle and heard the dreadful prophecy. In defiance of Apollo's will, he decided never to return to Corinth. At the crossroads "where three roads meet,"² he encountered an old nobleman in a chariot who ordered him out of the way. Oedipus, who was on foot and alone, retorted that he acknowledged no betters except the gods and his own parents, meaning the Corinthian couple. When the old man struck him on the head, the infuriated Oedipus killed him and his entourage. Oedipus then proceeded to Thebes, where the Sphinx (the strangler) awaited at the city gate. Half-woman and half-lion, she had been devouring any traveler who could not give the correct answer to her riddle: "What walks on four legs in the morning, two legs at noon and three legs in the evening?" Oedipus answered the Sphinx with one word: "Man." He thus responded to the metaphorical meaning of the riddle and it was this Cartesian beam of reason that conquered the monster. The Sphinx, deprived of a strangulating hold on human mind, hurled herself off the rock. The grateful city offered Oedipus the throne and the hand of the widowed Queen Jocasta. The couple had four children and lived happily, until a plague struck the city many years later.

This is the moment at which Sophocles' play begins, and it is in the context of this play that the existential dilemmas of Oedipus are discussed here. As Thebes is in the grip of the plague, Oedipus sends Jocasta's brother, Creon, to consult the Delphic Oracle. He brings back the message from Apollo that the city is polluted by the presence of Laius' murderer, who must be found and punished if the plague were to end. The city's elders turn to Oedipus for help—he once saved the city from the monster and he should now save it from the plague. He takes upon himself the task of conducting the inquiry and discovers that

it was he who killed the old king and then married his own mother. Uncannily echoing the Sphinx, Jocasta commits suicide and Oedipus blinds himself before going into exile.

The self-destroying protagonist was an archetypal hero of Greek culture. Pericles, on whose figure Sophocles partially modelled Oedipus, was a great benefactor of Athens, yet he also contributed to Athens' demise by entering the Peloponnesian war. In his hubris, he believed that he could conquer Sparta, a city-state renowned for its supremacy in warfare. The plague, an element which Sophocles added to the old myth, ravaged the city and Pericles died of it in 429 BC. *Oedipus Tyrannus* was staged the very same year, and thus the tragedy of Oedipus merged with the tragedy of Athens.³

Freud and the Myth of the Oedipus Complex

Having reached middle age, Sigmund Freud was becoming increasingly desperate to make a monumental discovery, on par with his hero, Charles Darwin. When his seduction theory became a liability, he needed a new dogma which would form the centerpiece of his psychoanalytic theory. Rather like Oedipus, who unlocked the riddle of Sphinx with one word, Freud believed he had discovered a single key-idea that solved the riddle of neurosis. In October 1897, after reading the great play, Freud confessed to his friend, Wilhelm Fliess:

Only one idea of general value has occurred to me. I have found love of the mother and jealousy of the father in my own case too, and now believe it to be a general phenomenon of early childhood...If that is the case, the gripping power of Oedipus Rex...becomes intelligible...the Greek myth seizes on a compulsion which everyone recognizes because he has felt traces of it in himself. Every member of the audience was once a budding Oedipus in phantasy, and this...causes everyone to recoil in horror.⁴

And in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud wrote that

³ For a detailed interpretation of the Oedipus myth and its significance in signaling the transition from mythos to logos see Eva Cybulska, "Oedipus: A Thinker at The Crossroads," *Philosophy Now* 75 (September/October 2009) 18-21.

⁴ Sigmund Freud, *The Origins of Psychoanalysis. Letters to Wilhelm Fliess, Drafts and Notes: 1887-1902*, transl. Eric Mosbacher and James Strachey, New York, NY: Basic Books, Inc. 1954, pp. 223-4.

² Sophocles, "Oedipus the King," in *The Three Theban Plays: Antigone, Oedipus the King, Oedipus at Colonus*, transl. Robert Fagles, New York, NY: Penguin Books 1984, pp. 155-251, here line 805. [Henceforth cited as OTK with line number]

Oedipus' destiny

moves us only because it might have been ours – because the oracle laid the same curse upon us before our birth as upon him. It is the fate of all of us, perhaps, to direct our first sexual impulse towards our mother, and our first hatred and our first murderous wish against our father. Our dreams convince us that that is so. King Oedipus, who slew his father Laius and married his mother Jocasta, merely shows us the fulfilment of our own childhood wishes.⁵

Freud arrived at his Oedipal insight not through the painstaking research and observation of his patients, as he often claimed, but in a moment of sudden illumination when reading these words of Jocasta:

As for this marriage with your mother –
Have no fear. Many a man before you,
in his dreams, has shared his mother's bed. [OTK 1074-6]

Several scholars (particularly Frank Cioffi and Richard Webster) have demonstrated that hardly any of Freud's ideas were a result of observation, and he never doubted or tested his hypotheses. Freud was not an empiricist and he extracted the confirmations of his *a priori* claims from patients under

most energetic pressure...exerted by the analytic procedure against strong resistance.⁶

Elizabeth Thornton persuasively argued that the Oedipus-idea could be retraced to Freud's relapse into cocaine addiction:

A common effect of drug intoxication is that its victims see some special significance in whatever attracts their attention at the time. There is often no logical reason for their choice.⁷

Freud jumped to the idea of Oedipus Complex in a moment of epiphany and then extorted supportive confessions from his patients to prove his theory. As

his older colleague, Joseph Breuer, once commented, he was prone to speculations and unsubstantiated generalizations.

Webster persuasively interpreted the Oedipus Complex as Freud's uncanny revival of the Original Sin; in effect as an anti-psychological doctrine.⁸ As Jean-Pierre Vernant perceptibly observed, Polybus and Merope were Oedipus' psychological parents, while Laius and Jocasta were strangers for him.⁹ Oedipus had no sexual desire, conscious or unconscious, for either queen. His marriage to Jocasta, which one might call a marriage of convenience, came with the throne. As conceived by Freud, the Oedipus Complex was not a result of complicated emotional relationships within a family, but an instinctive biological impulse that all males would go through. According to his theory, young toddlers presumably plot to murder their fathers in order to sleep with their mothers.

Freud pursued his overvalued idea without a shadow of doubt. He never attempted to falsify his earth-shaking discovery in a scientific way; instead, the Oedipus Complex acquired a status of a religious creed, and heretics (his own term) were excommunicated from the Psychoanalytic Movement (among them Carl Gustav Jung). Cioffi argues that only spurious confirmations, a key feature of pseudoscience, were admitted (FQP 210-39). At this juncture the question arises whether this concept represents Freud's lapse into a mythic mode of thought? It seems to concretize the myth's symbolic message, much like his other ideas in *The Interpretation of Dreams* concretize the symbols of dreams. Despite Freud's strong identification with Oedipus as being a solver of riddles, his own reaction to being confronted with a possible plagiarism of Arthur Schopenhauer and Friedrich Nietzsche was distinctly unheroic and lacks the greatness of Oedipus.

The Enigma of the Self and of Human Existence

William James declared the phenomenal self to be "the most puzzling puzzle with which psychology has to

⁵ Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, transl. James Strachey, Middlesex, UK: Penguin Books 1985, p. 364.

⁶ Quoted in Frank Cioffi, *Freud and the Question of Pseudoscience*, Chicago and la Salle, IL: Open Court 1998, p. 246. [Henceforth cited as FQP] [Sigmund Freud, "Heredity and the Aetiology of the Neuroses," transl. M. Meyer, in *Collected Papers, Volume 1: Early Papers*, Hogarth Press 1924, pp. 138-54, here p. 150.]

⁷ E. M. Thornton, *The Freudian Fallacy: Freud and Cocaine*, London, UK: Paladin Grafton Books 1986, p. 267.

⁸ Richard Webster, *Why Freud Was Wrong: Sin, Science and Psychoanalysis*, London, UK: Harper Collins 1995, pp. 318-9.

⁹ Jean-Pierre Vernant and Pierre Vidal-Naquet, *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece*, transl. Jane Lloyd, New York, NY: Zone Books 1990, p. 108.

deal."¹⁰ The authentic self is often born from the spirit of crisis. Jaspers called such crises *Grenzsituationen* (boundary situations), and death, guilt, and suffering are among them.¹¹ Customary, rational way of thinking cannot fathom the incomprehensible and the best way to deal with such a situation is not by reasoning, but by becoming the *Existenz* one potentially is. Each one becomes who one is: a coward becomes a coward and a braveheart becomes a brave person.

For instance, when Oedipus faces the greatest crisis of his life, his inquiry into the past leads him to certain decisions and actions that form the essence of his personhood and define his existence. According to Sartre,

man is nothing else...but the sum of his actions,
nothing else but what his life is.¹²

Denying or deliberately distorting past deeds would have meant for Oedipus denying who he was: His uncompromising inquiry into the truth of his identity challenges his construct of himself and becomes a test of his authenticity. Would he lie to himself or would he follow the dictates of his conscience and face the consequences? If he chooses the latter, he may lose all the trappings of power as well as the admiration of his people. In this way a question of identity becomes a question of integrity and of authenticity: it echoes the riddle of the Sphinx with the caveat that it runs much deeper.

The myth of Oedipus differs from the standard myth of a hero in that in it he acts alone and out of his own volition and intellect. In the agonistic dialogue with Teiresias, Oedipus boasts:

There was a riddle, not for some passer-by to solve –
it cried out for a prophet. Where were you?
Did you rise to the crisis? Not a word,
you and your birds, your gods – nothing.
No, but I came by, Oedipus the ignorant,
I stopped the Sphinx! With no help from the birds,
the flight of my own intelligence hit the mark.

[OTK 447-53]

Previously, the gods (especially Athena) assisted

heroes, as it was the case with Odysseus, Heracles, Bellerophon and Jason. The gods claimed the accolades but also shouldered the responsibility and guilt for the actions of man. However, Oedipus acts without any divine help, and it is the intelligence of the head, not the courage of the chest, that triumphs over the Sphinx. He thus becomes a paradigmatic hero of pure Hellenic reason. Later, by taking responsibility for killing his father and marrying his mother, he alone owns the catastrophes in his life.

Nietzsche considered Oedipus to be the most suffering character on the Greek stage whom he described as "a noble man who was predestined for error and misery despite his wisdom."¹³ Nietzsche also warned that

wisdom...is an abominable crime against nature [and]
that anyone who, through his knowledge, casts nature
into the abyss of destruction, must himself experience
the dissolution of nature. [BT 47]

Greatness comes to mortals at the price of suffering, and Nietzsche knew this connection well from his own life experience.

Julian Jaynes persuasively argued that consciousness did not arise far back in human evolution but it was a learned process based on metaphorical language. The hallucinated voices of the Greek gods gave way to internal dialogues and the dominance of the brain's (normally) left hemisphere became established. Jaynes also advanced the thesis that in the voyage to the self the story of identity was created in the breakdown of the bicameral mind and that it happened at some point between Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*.¹⁴

Etymologically seen, consciousness and conscience share their root and it needs to be taken into consideration that there can be no conscience without an autonomous consciousness. As Martin Heidegger pointed out, conscience involves the willingness to take responsibility and also the acceptance of guilt brought about by one's actions, and perhaps this is the price one pays for human autonomy and existential

¹⁰ William James, *The Principles of Psychology*, New York: Dover, 1950, I, p. 50.

¹¹ Karl Jaspers, *Philosophy, Volume 2*, transl. E. B. Ashton, Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press 1970, p. 178.

¹² Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism and Humanism*, transl. Philip Mairet, London, UK: Methuen 1966, p. 41.

¹³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy Out of the Spirit of Music*, transl. Shuan Whiteside, London, UK: Penguin Books 1993, p. 46. [Henceforth cited as *BT*] and p. 47 respectively.

¹⁴ Julian Jaynes, *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind*, New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin, 1990.

freedom.¹⁵ Conscience also involves compassion for others and the recognition of one's guilt for the suffering one may have caused them. And this was also the driving force of Oedipus' inquiry, when he wanted to save the city of Thebes from the plague. "I would be blind to misery not to pity my people kneeling at my feet" (*OTK* 14-5), he exclaims in his opening speech of the play. And later on, he states despairingly: "Now I've exposed my guilt, horrendous guilt" (*OTK* 1516). In short, Oedipus' love for the city and his altruism were the driving forces behind his self-imposed trial.

I concur with Bernard Knox who argued that the hero's main concern was not so much finding the murderer of Laius than "establishing his own identity."¹⁶ Oedipus refuses several suggestions (from Tiresias, Jocasta and the shepherd) to drop the investigation, to be content with the situation and to leave it as it is. Never satisfied with half-hearted measures, he does not retreat behind the veil of excuses or lies, as many others in his place would have done in order to save their skin. The killing of Laius is a consequence of Oedipus' hot-headed temperament, additionally, augmented by pride, all of which resulted in a collision with the authoritarian and intransigent old king. His murder was not a premeditated action driven by greed, lust for power or by the prospect of some other personal gain. In modern times, the court verdict would have probably been one of manslaughter, and the punishment would have been reduced in view of Oedipus' good past deeds and remorse. Cursed with upholding honesty, he was harsher on himself than any court would have ever been. One wonders how many contemporary world leaders would have in a similar situation the integrity and the courage to be as honest as Oedipus had been. Sadly, their response would most probably consist in denying all allegations and even calling the allegations hoaxes or witch-hunts. And most disturbingly of all— they would get away with it!

Facing one's dark deeds and taking responsibility for them is a very frightening experience. At some point fear overwhelms the hero:

¹⁵ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, transl. John Macquarrie & Edward Robinson, Oxford, UK: Blackwell 1962, p. 335.

¹⁶ Bernard M.W. Knox, *Oedipus at Thebes: Sophocles' Tragic Hero and His Time*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998, p. 13

Oedipus is beside himself. Racked with anguish, no longer a man of sense, he won't admit the latest prophesies are hollow as the old— he's at the mercy of every passing voice if the voice tells of terror. [*OTK* 1001-5]

Frederick Ahl notes that the number of instances the word *phobos* (fear) and its derivatives appear in fifty-three instances in all of Sophocles' extant plays, and of these, seventeen ones occur in Oedipus, nine of which are contained in Oedipus' dialogue with Jocasta, when his identity as a murderer is about to surface.¹⁷

Literal and metaphorical references to eyesight appear throughout *Oedipus Tyrannus*. Clear vision serves here as a metaphor for insight and knowledge. In a symbolic act, horrified by his insight and guilt-stricken Oedipus blinds himself, and in the case of Oedipus this is a consequence of having consciousness and conscience. By contrast, Homeric heroes had no conscience and felt no pain that resulted from feelings of guilt. According to Bruno Snell's interpretation, the Iliadic man did not regard himself as a source of his decisions as he was unaware that he could think and act of his own volition and spirit. The thoughts were given to him from without, from the gods, and therefore he bore no responsibility or guilt for his actions.¹⁸ Nietzsche, originally a classical scholar, was well aware of the redeeming power of ancient Greek gods in relation to human existence and writes:

In this way, the gods served to justify men to a certain degree, even if he was in the wrong they served as causes of evil—they did not, at that time, take the punishment on themselves, but rather, as is nobler, the guilt.¹⁹

He also knew the peril of consciousness and warned:

Ultimately, the growth of consciousness becomes a danger; and anyone who lives among the most conscious Europeans even knows it is a disease.²⁰

¹⁷ Frederick Ahl, *Sophocles' Oedipus: Evidence and Self-Conviction*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press 1991, p. 156.

¹⁸ Bruno Snell, *The Discovery of the Mind in Greek Philosophy and Literature*, New York, NY: Dover Publications 1982, p. 123.

¹⁹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, ed. Keith Ansel-Pearson, transl. Carol Diethe, Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press 1994, p. 70, second essay §23.

²⁰ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science: With A Prelude in Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs*, transl. Walter

And this tragic disease may well form the kernel of humanity.

In summary, *Oedipus Tyrannus* is not a tragedy of fate, as it has been often assumed, but rather a tragedy of self-knowledge, of vision and blindness, of free will and of conscience. The human condition is inherently tragic and paradoxical, and it is knowledge that makes it so. At the heart of Oedipus' character lies the ambiguity and paradox. Revered as "king of the land, our greatest power" (OTK 16) and the "best of men" and "savior" (OTK 57, 59), he declares himself being a "murderer" and a defiler (OTK 1491, 1493). Perhaps the key to appreciating *Oedipus Tyrannus* can be found in Sophocles' earlier play *Antigone* where the words are found:

Wonders are many, and none is more wonderful than man. [SA 332]²¹

This formidable line, possibly the most awesome in the entire Western Canon, encapsulates this paradox of humanity.

Initially, Oedipus is blind not only regarding his own identity, but also regarding the one of those he loves. Later, anxiety blinds him as to the illogical basis of some of his self-accusations. For Søren Kierkegaard, however, truth was subjectivity and it was related to existential inwardness.²² And ultimately, it is to this inwardness that Oedipus is faithful. As he loses his physical sight, his insight awakens. Sudden insight into the nature of his identity is the most poignant moment of dramatic *peripeteia* (reversal), which coincides with *anagnōrīsis* (recognition).²³ Human beings' spirituality and compassionate humanity can shine forth only after abandoning the concreteness of their existence

and attachment to possessions (including power). Oedipus is a man who is true to himself and who by destroying his well-being, he becomes who he is. He chooses self-destruction over self-betrayal when he refuses to cover up his crime. Accompanied by much suffering, he forges his self-identity that is immune to corruption. He deliberately ignores Creon's offer to discuss the oracular message in private and calls an assembly of people to be witnesses to the proceedings as he publicly presides over his own trial. By freely taking responsibility for his deeds, Oedipus becomes like a modern Sartrean hero who is condemned to be free. Magnanimously, he accepts being the wretched creature that he is. Although he loses all earthly privileges and possessions, he does not lose his own self. Oedipus, bold and honest, maintains his identity and integrity despite a kaleidoscopic change of circumstances. With courage he faces loss and sorrow and in *Oedipus at Colonus*, he arrives at the other side of despair. He reaches the transcendence that is akin to Ludwig van Beethoven's late quartets.

Happiness might be incompatible with virtue, and noble deeds are often accompanied by much suffering. But the freedom to be oneself may be more precious than power or status, or even happiness itself. Buddhists believe that suffering is caused by ignorance, but perhaps the reverse is also true, and suffering caused by knowledge of truth may be more difficult to bear. This latter point is in line with Tiresias' warning:

How terrible – to see the truth when the truth is only pain to him who sees. [OTK 359-60]

In this interpretation pain and suffering are unavoidable consequences of consciousness and conscience, and of love and guilt from which only death can set man free. In a final speech, the Chorus proclaims:

People of Thebes, my countrymen, look at Oedipus.
He solved the famous riddle with the brilliance,
he rose to power, a man beyond all power.
Who could behold his greatness without envy?
Now what a black sea of terror has overwhelmed him
Now as we keep our watch and wait the final day,
count no man happy till he dies, free of pain at last.
[OTK 1678-84]

Perhaps it is the pain and suffering of Oedipus, a brilliant and magnanimous man who pursued truth to the point of his own distraction, that has been moving audiences for two-and-half millennia.

Kaufmann, New York, NY: Random House 1974, §354, p. 300.

²¹ Sophocles, "Antigone," in *The Plays and Fragments, Part III*, transl. Richard C. Jebb, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press 1914, here line 332. The original Greek text reads: *Polla ta deina kouden anthropou deinoteron pelei*. "Deina" is an antithetical word, which means both wonderful and it also means terrible.

²² Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript, Vol. 1*, transl. Howard V. Hong & Edna H. Hong, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 1992, pp. 189-251.

²³ Aristotle, *Poetics*, transl. Richard Janko, Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company 1987, pp. 94-5.

A Postscript

The writing of this essay was completed during the Coronavirus Pandemic that swept the world in the early 2020. As citizens worldwide are ordered to stay at home to save their own life and to protect the lives of others by halting the spread of this modern-time plague, we have an opportunity to contemplate our own existence. Although the world seems to have come to a halt, thinking has not. And humans turn, as is usual in a crisis of that magnitude, to the great works of literature for guidance and consolation. Albert Camus' *The Plague*

is one such work.²⁴ The novel's chief protagonist, Dr Rieux, approaches the boundary situation with a quiet sense of duty, diligence, and understated heroism. Unlike his ancient Greek counterpart, he has no time for braggadocio or hubris. He simply does what needs to be done. To such contemporary Dr Rieuxes I dedicate this essay. Now, more than ever, it is the time for honesty, kindness, and compassion. The survival of humankind may depend on it.

²⁴ Albert Camus, *The Plague*, transl. Stuart Gilbert, London, UK: Penguin Books, 1960.