

SOPHOCLES' DEPLOYMENT OF DETERMINISM AND DETERMINATION IN OEDIPUE REX

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ABSTRACT: The myth of Oedipus is vividly used by the poets, dramatists, historians and philosophers to debate on the thesis of determinism and determination. Determinism is a theme often occurring in Greek plays in general and tragedies in particular. Oedipus Rex by Sophocles offers a prominent example of fortune and human freedom. Oedipus is observed to be a puppet in the hands of destiny and 'a son of chance' as far as the fatality before the action on the stage is considered but during the action, he appears to be a determined individual. The same individuality and his voluntary deeds lead him towards his devastation and tragic downfall.

Key-words: Determinism, Determination, The wheel of Fortune Oracles, Sophrosyme, Hubris.

The symposium between the schools of determinism and determination is ubiquitous since centuries through its reflection in literature, philosophy, history and theology. Determinism is a philosophical belief that people are not free to do as they wish because their lives are determined by factors beyond their control. On the contrary, determination is an idea that all events and human actions are determined by human motives, moves and reason. Sophocles deploys the conflict between determinism and determination in the Oedipus cycle, through a string of tragedies met by Oedipus, Jocasta and several others characters. The Wheel of Fortune reduces an emperor to a beggar and elevates a beggar to high stature. The goddess of Fortune, a pale

figure in the Greek Pantheon, ascended to a high and honourable rank in the Roman Empire. Precisely this is the reason why Homer does not pay a tribute to her and Virgil alludes her as all-powerful and unconquerable.

Determinism is a theme often occurring in Greek plays in general and tragedies in particular. Oedipus Rex is a tragedy of determinism and determination of an individual resulting in his doom. Further, celestial arbitration propelled Greek cultural traditions making the Greeks polytheistic. They had staunch faith in the concept that they are constantly being observed by gods. The natural calamities were thought to be the divine punishments for mortal mistakes. The plot of the play is governed by two major oracles; the myth itself starts with a startling prophecy. Jocasta narrates the first prophecy that was told to Laius before the birth of Oedipus. Laius was told only of the patricide, not the incest.

To get rid of the oracle's evil prediction, Laius deserted baby Oedipus in the wilderness, where he could die. But destiny decreed otherwise. He was saved and was brought up by Polybus, the king of Corinth. In the course of time, Oedipus came to know through another Delphic oracle that he would kill his father and marry his mother. It was the triumph of fate, and man with all his resources, could not overcome it.

According to the modern conception of determinism and determination, most of the critics of Sophocles have agreed that Oedipus is morally innocent. If this fact is linked with the fact that Oedipus' doom was inescapable, seemingly, Oedipus was no better than a puppet in the hands of fortune. This would make the play a tragedy of destiny. The Greeks did not consider determinism and determination as clear-cut alternatives. It is wrong to think that as the gods know everything in advance that human actions are predetermined. Even a divine prediction may be fulfilled by an act which is a result of free choice of the individual or an external agency. Hence, gods know the future but they do not order it. According to John Donne (Dixon, p. 95),

“Destiny is the commissary of God, Fate, whom God made but doth not control.” Hegel (Dixon, p. 112) puts forward a rubric to establish a link between a hero’s deeds and destiny- “The ruling powers give to each the lot he deserves for his own action.”

E.R. Dodds compares the prophecy regarding Oedipus with the prophecy of Jesus at the last supper with that of Peter who denied him thrice that night. Jesus knew of Peter’s intention – but he in no way compelled him to do so. Same is the case of Oedipus. A complete negation of human liberty in front of fortune is loathsome to humanistic and Christian wisdom. E.R. Dodds very effectively identifies the elucidation of Oedipus Rex based on destiny as nothing less than a “heresy”. He further notes that though Oedipus’ past actions (i.e. his patricide and incest) were fate-bound, all of Oedipus’ actions on stage are performed as a free agent.

The notion of character as a determining force in Oedipus’ tragedy is part of Sir Maurice Bowra’s interpretation. With Dodds, Bowra agrees that the patricide and incest were fixed in Oedipus’ fate before he was born which the oracle to Laius justifies. But contrary to Dodds, Bowra asserts that all of Oedipus’ other actions prior and during the action on stage were the work of a *daimon* carrying out Apollo's will. It could not be otherwise.

Apollo wavers around the action of the play. Apollo’s oracle to Laius resolved Oedipus’ lying bare at the mountainside just after his birth. As the chorus states, Mount Cithaeron is the holy precinct of Apollo from where the baby Oedipus’ life was liberated and saved. After listening to the comments of drunkards regarding his bastardy, Oedipus, proceeds to Delphi exactly at the same time when his real father Laius has decided to visit Delphi. It is not just by fluke but there is a deeper meaning behind this chance.

Apollo’s priestess does not reply to Oedipus’ query about his real parentage; on the contrary, she briefs him that he will kill his father and marry his mother. This ambiguous knowledge leads him to leave Corinth and prods

him to the destination of his devastation at Thebes. Here Stephen Halliwell (p.188) points out, "The three-way at which Oedipus was provoked to slay Laius is another sacred precinct of Apollo.... Also too coincidental to be anything but divine design: Oedipus arrives at Thebes precisely when the Sphinx was afflicting the land with its riddle – a test of intelligence was irresistible to Oedipus. Too coincidental, furthermore, is Oedipus' arrival to unriddle the Sphinx *precisely the right time* to win Jocasta's hand as reward – neither before Creon announced this prize, nor after someone else had won it....And how to explain the inexplicable delay of the plague until Oedipus' children had reached adulthood and the clues to Laius' murder had grown very cold? Oedipus' triple pollution should have incurred the plague immediately. Apollo, bringer of plague, obviously delayed it to fulfill his own design."

Oedipus' first action is to overcome the plague in consultation of Apollo at Delphi. It was again, the oracle's counsel that Oedipus should curse the murderer of Laius with banishment. Tiresias says, "I am not your slave. I serve Apollo," (467) and that by solving the riddle of the Sphinx, Oedipus has invited disaster on his own. Tiresias' denial to guide him for finding a solution of the plague enrages Oedipus. Besides, Jocasta reveals the location of Laius' murder to disprove the authenticity of oracles in an ironic manner.

Jocasta's prayer to Apollo regarding pacifying the mind of Oedipus is instantly granted by the unexpected arrival of the Corinthian messenger with the news of Polybus' "co-incidental" death in Corinth. Even this is an evil chance that the Corinthian messenger and the herdsman are the same two persons who meet Oedipus to unriddle the mystery of his origin on his dooms day, are the same two saviours of baby Oedipus at the Mount Cithaeron. Apollo's clear warning in the temple of Delphi is "Know thyself," which seems to be coherently related to Jocasta's appeal to Oedipus – "God save you, Oedipus, from the knowledge of who you are" (1068). This may be considered as the proof of Sophocles' purpose to underscore the hidden manoeuvre of the god. Evidently, Sophocles strongly aimed at Apollo's impact on each and every move

of Oedipus. Many critics agree to the influence of Apollo on the actions of Oedipus except his self-blinding.

One cannot be blamed for the deeds performed under some external pressure and as per Greek faith this pressure is exerted by some superhuman powers. Fagles Robert (p.144) illustrates, "When Agamemnon, in Homer's Iliad makes his apologies to Achilles for the harsh treatment which led to the death of so many heroes, and he tries to evade his responsibility he is claiming in other words, that he did not act freely." But Oedipus does not shun his responsibility for his wrongs.

This fundamental theme has been overlooked on the plea that the antithesis between determinism and determination, fortune and co-incidence, bent and revealed universe is categorically designed till Sophocles' time, in the philosophical discussions of late fourth and third centuries. Sophocles' friend Herodotus in his *Histories*, wrote various stories in poetic form such as the myth of Oedipus that talks about the flight from the foretold fortune. Evil was destined for Oedipus, says Herodotus (Dixon.p.91):

"A greater power than we can contradict

Hath thwarted our intents."

As Levi-Strauss has vividly put forward that one of the aims of myth in the preliterate societies is to promote perturbing issues that may call for a better systemization in future.

It is noteworthy that the then contemporary Greek stoic philosophers discussed their views regarding determinism and determination in a vague manner and surprisingly they too exemplified their theories with the oracles predicted to Laius and Oedipus. The stoics believed in determinism.

As Cicero (Long and Sedley, 339), says in *On Fate*, "If it is your fate to recover from this illness, you will recover, regardless of whether or not you call the

doctor. And one or the other is your fate. Therefore, it is pointless to call the doctor.” Chrysippus (Peterboom, 9) criticizes this argument, “For some things are simple, some conjoined. ‘Socrates will die on that day is simple,’ whether he does anything or not, the day of death is fixed for him. But if it is fated ‘Oedipus will be born to Laius,’ it cannot be said ‘whether Laius lies with a woman or not.’ For the events are conjoined and co-fated.” For that is how he refers to it, since it is fated thus, *both* that Laius will lie with his wife *and* that Oedipus will be produced by her.”

Carneades (Peterboom, 9) was of the opinion that “not even Apollo is able to pronounce on any future events unless it were those the cause of which are already contained in nature, so that they would happen necessarily. Therefore, Apollo could not predict anything about Oedipus, there not being the requisite causes in nature owing to which it was necessary that he would kill his father or anything of this sort.”

Alexander of Aphrodisias stated that praise and blame depend on arbitrary actions of the individuals even though they may be capable of controlling the situations. St. Augustine asserts in his *On Free Choice of the Will (De Libero Arbitrio)* that although god anticipates whatever is going to take place, and god’s vision is never false, we are, however, responsible for the kind of free will needed for moral responsibility. He further argues that god’s goodness is harmonizing and because god brings free-willed human beings into existence, who, He foreknows, are going to sin because He feels that their existence is better than their non-existence. This discussion of determinism and determination is seen to be continued for centuries and got reflected even in Milton’s *Paradise lost* where he describes the intellectual bliss of the fallen angels. In the modern age, Bergson, Croce, Frederick Engels have also given their insights to the problem and have added value to the discussion.

In the light of the above discussion, the problem of determinism and determination in Oedipus Rex may be considered. Since his birth, or, in fact,

even before his birth, Oedipus was a victim of fortune. The central idea of the play is that through suffering a man learns to become modest before the gods, and he must accept his own insignificance. Oedipus was at the height of material prosperity, but his *hamartia i.e. hubris* must be punished. The man who had a loving wife, and no less loving children, fabulous wealth and property, honour and reputation, and all that makes life worth living, was reduced to a state of abject shame and humiliation.

But one thing is for sure that Oedipus committed all the loathsome acts in complete ignorance of the fact. He, therefore, has very little responsibility for the unknowingly committed sin. The same thing cannot be said of Laius. The Delphic oracle told him that he should die at the hands of his own child, if he begot any. But he fathered a child with Jocasta and invited his own ruin and eventually the ruin of Oedipus; "The sins of the father visit the child." S.H. Butcher (p.123) states, "Sophocles is first of the Greeks who have clearly realized that suffering is not always penal, that it has other functions to discharge in the divine economy. The suffering of innocent children for the sins of the fathers, which Sophocles touches lightly, is comprised under the law of human suffering, in interpreting which he has made a great step in advance upon Aeschylus." It is this fact that has led quite a number of critics like Freud to believe that the Oedipus Rex is a tragedy of destiny.

The audience is not able to relate with the hero if he cannot be held responsible for his own downfall. If this is the case, the hero should not be preordained for his actions; even Aristotle prescribes *hamartia* for the otherwise noble character of the tragic hero. If we closely observe the plot of the play, we may conclude that the actual action of the play highlights Oedipus as a free agent. It is his decision to leave Corinth; it is his impulsive reaction to kill Laius; it is his decision to accept the intellectual challenge of the Sphinx and answer her riddle; it is his decision to marry a woman at least double his age; it is his decision to consult the Delphic oracle and Tiresius for providing remedy for the plague in Thebes; and last but not the least, it is his decision to

investigate the truth regarding his birth which proves that he has already made the oracle come true. This disclosure is the result of his free will for the investigation.

The theological view says that Oedipus' tragedy was a vindication of the ways of god to man. Sophocles was inherently a teacher. "Remember, you are not a god but a human being," seems to be Sophocles' watch-word. Oedipus Rex emphasized the importance of *sophrosyme* i. e. virtue and condemns *hubris* i.e. pride. It was *hubris* that brought about the downfall of Oedipus, although he was endowed with so many kingly virtues. Oedipus was humbled and reduced to dust. The spectators stood awe-struck before the grand spectacle, and realized the truth that a man, however powerful, was subject to limitations. Oedipus was exalting over his *past* achievements-his emancipation of Thebes, his burning patriotism, his tender solicitude towards his subjects, for, his heroism and his greatness is manifested in diverse spheres. But his grim present laid bare all the human limitations, which completely crushed him. The chorus recognized this truth and said:

"You are my great example, you your life

Your destiny Oedipus, man of misery-

I count no man blest." (1317-19)

Fate did prevail in Oedipus Rex. Yet Oedipus remained a noble man. He committed grievous errors, for which he was alienated from the society. He was abused and condemned, ridiculed and ostracized. But in spite of excruciating suffering, he remained serene. It was the alienation from the society that gave him unbelievable serenity. His pride was humbled down. Like King Lear of Shakespeare, he completely *regenerated* himself. The wheel of Fortune had come to a full circle, but could not completely crush him. Perfect factual knowledge co-incide with

perfect helplessness but philosophical knowledge imparts mental illumination.

H. D. F. Kitto suggests that the virtues and weaknesses of the protagonist amalgamate with other characters giving rise to its inner solution by human impulses. Here Sophocles is not making us feel that fate is not inevitable or a harmful god is leading the happiness. Dorothy Mills (p.392) aptly observes, "He (Sophocles) represents in literature the spirit that Athena Parthenos represented on the Acropolis: a spirit of reverence of the serenity that comes when the conflict is over and the victory is won and of triumphant belief in all that is good and beautiful and true."

In this debate of determinism and determination of Oedipus and Laius with reference to the Delphic oracles given to both of them, this turns out to be tragedy of knowledge as well as ignorance. Laius deliberately ignored the knowledge, he gained through the oracle; on the contrary, Oedipus became knowledgeable only after fulfilling the oracle in complete ignorance of the fact. Laius' knowledge and Oedipus' ignorance intersected each other to give a momentum to the Wheel of Fortune.

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