

The Myth Figure of Oedipus: Human Responsibility v. Divine Intervention

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Recurring throughout myth (and tragedy) is the notion of divine intervention having significant bearing on the course of human direction, something that creates obvious and significant ramifications for any conception of individual responsibility – or, indeed, autonomy – with regard to ‘actions’ leading to future events. The significance of these actions is contingent on interpretation of human behaviour as either contained within the constraints of a predetermined existence, or subject to the workings of the gods: in the closing lines of *King Oedipus* (tr. E.F. Watling), the Chorus exhorts the audience “Behold, what a full tide of misfortune swept over his head.”¹ Misfortune, clearly, alludes to the impotency of humanity against greater forces.

This notion of power/powerlessness prevails strongly throughout Sophocles’ *Theban Plays* as ambiguity draws together the threads of ‘fate’, defeating human purpose and intentions. To assert the ‘defeat’ of purpose is, however, probably a less-than-accurate depiction of the circumstances in which Oedipus finds himself. There is a clarity of purpose in his mind that leads to his demise: it is, as Vernant writes², that “Except for his own obstinate determination to unmask the guilty party, the lofty idea . . . of his duty, capacities, judgement (his *gnōmē*), and his . . . desire [for the truth], there is *nothing to oblige him to pursue the enquiry to its end.*” (Emphasis mine)

Oedipus’ fate, it seems, subverts his intention. His ‘determination’ is for truth; his pursuit, justice. Yet, recursively, the object of these pursuits is none but himself. Sophocles’ narrative unveils slowly, and of those in the playing space Oedipus is far

¹*Oedipus Rex*, 1526.

²Vernant, J.P. tr. Lloyd, J. *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece*. New York, NY: Zone Books. 1988. Page 116.

from the first to discover the truth. The audience learns of a shepherd requesting exile upon witnessing Oedipus' ascension to the throne³; Jocasta believes before her husband/son does, knowing the truth of the circumstances related to them⁴; and, of course, the Oracle's words go unheeded only by means of Jocasta's misplaced cynicism⁵ – for all that, the audience's response to the Oracle would be one of acknowledgement of that prophecy as foreshadowing an inevitable demise.

Oedipus does not survive his own predications that *someone* is at fault, that someone must be brought to justice. He is, it seems, the model king. The tragic play opens with him addressing those who come to him as “children” – clearly paternalistic, and, as has been noted, “unusual for rulers in Greek tragedy”⁶. Oedipus is established from the earliest possible stage (indeed, the opening words of the play) as a benevolent ruler, proven in the past as he matched wits with the Sphinx, successfully solving her riddle for Thebes. It should be considered a point of no slight importance that – whilst he could resolve *that* riddle – in the hands of prophecy and predetermined demise Oedipus has little in the way of explanation or understanding for much of the play. He is depicted as perhaps not powerless – he is empowered enough to engineer his own demise – but certainly as without full comprehension of his actions.

Vernant remarks that Oedipus' assertion that he will reveal the criminal [εγω φανω]⁷ contains a double meaning unintended by Oedipus but clear to the audience. *Egō phanō* can be read either as “I will reveal the criminal” or “I will reveal *myself* as the criminal”: here, again, we see the duplicity of Oedipus' character and his own uncertainty in direction and meaning. The dichotomy between human responsibility (here that of Oedipus as leader of a people assailed by some god) and divine omniscience is here clearer than ever: we see Oedipus in a position of power, yet he cannot foresee his own empowerment will lead to his demise.

Indeed, Oedipus' empowerment is definitive of his initial circumstances: he had power, a wife, children, and a people whose regard of him should not be understated.

³ *Oedipus Rex*, 758-62.

⁴ *ibid.*, 1061.

⁵ *ibid.*, 709-24.

⁶ Kitto, H.D.F. (ed. Hall, E). *Oedipus the King*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 1994. (First endnote on *Oedipus the King*, p.164).

⁷ *Oedipus Rex*, 131.

Care is taken to address Oedipus as distinct from the gods early in the work⁸, so revered he was amongst his people. . . yet, by the closing lines of the play, the Chorus cites him as an example of “mortal man”⁹ to whose end we must look as an example. Divine intervention, it seems, can fell any mortal: this intervention is the peripeteia of Oedipus’ path through life.

So what of his supposed ‘responsibility’? May Oedipus be held accountable for the ultimate act of ‘human filthiness’¹⁰ he has committed, or is this the fault of divine intervention, and are the gods to be held to blame? Are the two even of mutual exclusion? It is clearly of divine *connection*, though the nature of this connection may be that of foreknowledge alone. What, then, are we to make of Oedipus’ just and compassionate character? Of all the aspects of the tragic mode, reversal and inversion are the most central of qualities – here, Oedipus falls. Yet, from the opening of *Oedipus Rex*, he has already committed his crimes. He is fundamentally at fault from the beginning of the work, though he bears all the markings of a great leader. Oedipus (unknowingly) awaits self-revelation of his crimes – as do those around him. The crimes are undeniably his, though they were antithetical to his intentions.

The divine, however, leads him to his fate. It was Oedipus’ consultation of an oracle¹¹ that lead him to flee from his supposed ‘parents’ in Corinth, setting him on his path to destruction. Subsequent encounters with agents of the divine provide a catalyst the action of the play, as consultation turns to challenge, which turns to questioning, which turns to revelation. And, after this revelation, it was not autonomous action on the part of Oedipus to blind himself – he was directed by Apollo.

Yet, in all this, Oedipus acts of his own accord. Notably, in the first of his crimes – a fit of rage on the road from Corinth, in which he kills his biological father – there *is* no divine direction. Whilst his demise is predicted, Oedipus acts *seemingly without reason* to start a chain of crimes for which he will later be called to account. Indubitably, it is Oedipus who here commits these actions. The catalyst, however, is the suggestion of a stranger that his parents are not truly his own. . . and the consultation of a Delphic oracle.

⁸ *ibid.*, 31.

⁹ *ibid.*, 1527. From Vernant 119.

¹⁰ *ibid.*, 1406.

¹¹ *ibid.*, 788.

A divine conspiracy remains a possibility. If nothing else, it is convenient explanation for irrational behaviours such as the fit of rage that grips Oedipus, his most overt departure from his otherwise-benevolent persona. Even this, however, is justified (after a fashion): it was Laius who struck him first. Whilst the scope of his revenge was perhaps broader than may reasonably be expected, it should be said that he may hardly be found entirely at fault here.

Oedipus is, therefore, blameless from the perspective of human law¹²... yet still guilty in the crimes he has committed against nature and the gods. Ironic, then, that the gods are to be viewed as his co-accused; complicit in his downfall. Immortality is an excuse Oedipus cannot wield – the Immortals' sport does not extend into the human realm without damage, and the play is perhaps aetiological in this sense: explanation of the world's ills can be traced back to divine intervention.

Far from absolving humanity, however, Sophocles instead embroils Oedipus, depicting him as actively obeying divine imperatives even where these exist contrary to logic and reason:¹³

CHORUS [*speaks*]. O, to destroy your sight! How could you bring
Yourself to do it? What god incited you?

OEDIPUS [*sings*]. It was Apollo, friends, Apollo.
He decreed that I should suffer what I suffer;
But the hand that struck, alas! was my own,
And not another's.

This passage is central to understanding the relationship between human responsibility and divine intervention: we witness Oedipus as acting – yes, the action is his – but without autonomy. Instead, he is directed by the god Apollo.

It would appear that there is little semblance of free-will here, yet human responsibility is still requisite. The divine exist to explain that which requires explanation, whilst humans exist to live uncertain lives, anchored only in death: this is the archetype of Oedipus to which we all conform and bear responsibility.

¹²Vernant 121.

¹³*Oedipus Rex*, 1327-32

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