

Oedipus and Free Will

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‘What is that which has one voice and yet becomes four-footed and two-footed and three-footed?’ So goes the traditional version of the Sphinx’s riddle, which Oedipus solved before entering Thebes in triumph to assume its throne and marry its reigning queen. In their opera, Edmond Fleg and George Enescu give the Sphinx a different question: ‘Name someone or something greater than Destiny’.

Oedipus’ answer in both cases is of course the same: ‘Man’. Yet a vast conceptual divide separates what his answer means in each case. In the traditional version, man simply is the thing which usually goes – in the different stages of his life – from crawling to walking to hobbling with a stick. In Fleg and Enescu’s version, by contrast, man is ascribed a very different kind of quality: freedom of will. If Fleg and Enescu’s man doesn’t like what fate has in store for him, he should be able to do something about it: take away that freedom and therein lies the tragedy.

Sophocles’ *Oedipus Tyrannus* is often conceived by modern audiences as dramatizing a conflict between a free man and his divinely-engineered destiny. This conception is mistaken, however. The ancient Greeks, unlike us, did not have a concept of free will and lacked the notion that human actions are the result of choices which we arrive at freely. According to the ancient Greeks, we act as we do because it is in our nature to act thus.

Most ancient Greek philosophies were built on the idea that everything, from a star to a grain of sand, has its nature, and this nature governs how everything behaves (or exists in the world) from its formation to its dissolution. In many respects, Greek thought resembles modern ways of thinking but with a key difference: the Greeks lacked an idea of a transcendent set of ‘laws of nature’ which could relate the nature of everything to the nature of everything else. That is to say, the nature of an individual object was not understood to be necessarily determined by its relation to everything else.

Human beings were no exception: our natures may be vastly more complex than most other kinds of objects, and are only realized over time through our physical and mental growth, but our actions all arise according to our natures none the less. Thus, in the ancient Greek understanding, our natures also encompass our character, a character endowed by our parentage, environment and, crucially, our education. The purpose of our physical, moral and intellectual education was to lead us out of a state of immaturity and into the process of becoming as fully as possible ourselves.

As it is in the nature of man to reason as well as to feel, Greek philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle thought that human action could (and should) arise from reason as well as from desire. We act as we do on some occasions due to bodily appetites, and on others because we reason that such and such is the best course of action to take. Even here, however, there is no reference to anything like freedom of will. This is because, for Plato and Aristotle, to know a given course of action to be the best course of action did



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not leave us free to deliberate further whether to undertake it. Rather, that knowledge itself constituted the demand that we act accordingly. Thus when we act, we do so because we partake in a desire or appetite for that action to be undertaken. That desire may originate in our body as an appetite, or in reason, guided by truth or virtue; but our acting in either context is still the result of a motivating desire. The idea of ‘will’ here, not to mention free will, is quite extraneous. Character manifests itself, in this picture, in terms of dispositions to act in certain ways – such as being greedy or quick to anger – but also in terms of dispositions to reason clearly and even to favour reason over appetite. It is in this context that we can really understand why Oedipus acts the way he does.

Oedipus is a hero: a man whose nature is more fully developed than ours. He is stronger and taller than most men. (In Ancient Greek drama, actors in heroic roles were given platform soles and conical extensions to their masks; at around seven and half feet they would tower over the other characters.) Heroes are also more courageous and better at reasoning, and thus more disposed toward virtuous courses of action. As a hero, Oedipus acts bravely and virtuously throughout Sophocles’ play, notably when he tries to discover the identity of Laius’ murderer. Where others, such as Teiresias, flinch from revealing the truth, Oedipus bulldozes through the false objections to obtain it. And when he discovers that his beliefs about the world, and his place in it, have been grounded on a falsehood, he continues to act with rightness and resolve to fulfil the demands of the Oracle and restore



Set design detail by Alfons Flores for *Oedipe*

his city to health. His actions are extraordinary, but he is an extraordinary man. As a hero, he couldn't have acted in any other way.

What drives the tragedy is a flaw in Oedipus' character, which has led to the false picture he has of the world. The flaw is his impulsiveness: manifest in the way he kills Laius and his attendants, in the brutal way he bleeds the truth from Tiresias and in the excessively gory manner in which he attempts to make matters right again in Thebes by removing himself from power and all possibility of future political participation. All these actions are impulsive, but they are also courageous, reasonable and virtuous. Even the road-rage incident at the crossroads is understandable: Oedipus knows his life to be in danger and knows what his life is worth.

Had the Sphinx asked Enescu and Fleg's question of Sophocles' Oedipus, then, Oedipus would not have known how to answer. The question would have been meaningless. Man is not greater than destiny because, according to the Ancient Greek view of people and their actions, a man's character is his destiny. But Enescu and Fleg's Sphinx doesn't ask this

question of Sophocles' Oedipus, but of a hero who acts in exactly the same way as his ancestor, while also bearing the additional burden of a concept of free will. Enescu's Oedipus, in addition to his

Oedipe voyageur ou l'Egalité devant la mort (Oedipus the Traveller or Equality Before Death): oil on canvas (c1888) by Gustave Moreau (1826–98) *La Cour d'Or* Museum, Metz/akg-images

worldly troubles, must also entertain the thought that his will is thwarted by the infuriating designs of the cosmos. This is certainly the picture of Oedipus which we find circulating in the modern West. The references are numerous; beyond Enescu's opera we can look particularly to Jean Cocteau's play (and film) whose title – *La Machine infernale* – instantly discloses the metaphysical scenario of an innocent free man pitched against an unfeeling, machine-like universe.

To say that the Ancient Greeks lacked a concept of free will is not to say that they thought the entirety of human action was pre-determined, but that the concept had no role to play in their explanations of why people act and think the way they do. Such explanations only became problematic, in fact, when deterministic explanations of human action moved beyond folklore and began to penetrate philosophy, first in the form of the philosophy of the later Stoics and then again, more powerfully, when elements of Stoicism found their way into early Christianity.

In that sense, the idea of free will arises only when the idea of free action is called into question by the thought that everything we do and think has been pre-determined and could be foretold in its entirety. In Greek thought, until the Stoics, no such concept really existed. It was only in relation to the person of the Christian God, defined as all-knowing and existing outside time, that the idea of a fully determined universe began to take its full shape, answerable not merely to the movement of planetary bodies in space but for the actions of individual human beings.

The notion of man uniquely possessing free will originates as an attempt to marry the Christian idea of God with long-standing considerations about virtuous action and the idea that, for one's action to be virtuous, one must be responsible for one's action in such a way that it would not simply have happened anyway. (There are in fact two distinct ideas here, but I have merged them for simplicity's sake.) The metaphysical framework which allowed for the idea of free will to co-exist with a deterministic view of the universe became a crucial part of dualistic metaphysics, or the division of what there is into the realm of mind and the realm of body. According to the dualistic world view, all bodies in space are subject to deterministic laws of nature, but the mind remains free, guided by reason. Crucially (if somewhat mysteriously), the mind can direct the body to do otherwise than it would by itself.

Most of our everyday thinking about what we do and how we choose to do it is predicated on the idea of free will. More importantly, perhaps, the sensation of our own freedom is an inseparable part of what we refer to when we speak of human dignity. Our sense of self-worth is largely built on the impression that at least some of what we do is basically down to us. Take this away, and we will indeed behave like animals. This is what we find in novels such as William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*, where we learn that human dignity is merely a veneer – albeit one we would really rather not do without. What is remarkable is that Golding's precursor in this line of thinking was published some three hundred years earlier, in the form of *Leviathan*, by Thomas Hobbes.

Hobbes argued convincingly that metaphysical dualism was incoherent and that human activity and behaviour demanded explanations that were different only in complexity, but not in kind, to everything else on (and off) our planet. Human action, according to Hobbes, was never driven by abstract deliberation but always by the

interaction of our primitive drives to survive and flourish with the natural and socially-mediated forces exerted on us through our environment. Clearly, such explanations required no reference to the idea of free will. Indeed, the idea of free will – at least as traditionally conceived – was incompatible with such explanations and should be discarded.

The philosophical scenario here does have the makings of a tragedy. Our common-sense view of the world would be quite unrecognizable were we to dispense with the idea of free will. The judicial system, for one, is dependent on it. Yet in theoretical discourse the picture is quite different. Since Hobbes, few philosophers have managed to resurrect convincingly the concept of free will, and very few, nowadays, are concerned to rehabilitate it. More importantly, modern science is quite clearly on Hobbes's side. This is not because *Leviathan* is required reading for natural scientists (although it probably should be), but because the principle of scientific enquiry is itself necessarily deterministic. Because scientific enquiry is conducted by determining the laws which explain why things are as they are and not otherwise, the overriding picture of the world that modern science is bound to yield is one in which things are necessarily as they are. And the more scientific models of enquiry gain a monopoly on what counts as knowledge, the more the long-held habit of thinking that things might become otherwise than they are – or otherwise than current understanding indicates they are bound to become – finds itself cast onto the epistemological scrapheap.

And therein lies the tragedy. Without dignity, we can readily agree, we are barely human. But dignity appears meaningless without reference to freedom. And freedom, at its root, and both as it relates to the idea of free will and to the wider concept of political freedom, rests on the intuition that things could be otherwise than they are. And it is precisely this intuition which is being squeezed out of the domain of knowledge. This is not the fault of science as such. One should not blame science for being scientific, nor should one want to. But as we increasingly ground our sense of reality in the softer but more insidious cousins of the natural sciences – such as psychology and economics – and withdraw it from traditionally humanistic endeavours, our hard-won concepts of human dignity and freedom will find it hard to survive.

We can take one important lesson from Oedipus. Oedipus' heroism manifests itself in the speed with which he accepts that his understanding of the world is mistaken. In this respect he is like a great scientist, who starts over after discovering some evidence which casts his or her entire theoretical system into doubt. Such moments are devastating – but they are also lie at the heart of human intelligence, in the way we choose to rebuild our understanding. And perhaps human freedom is rooted in the opportunity to reshape our natures that such moments provide. We can give up, or we can continue trying. Had the impulsive Oedipus paused to think after learning the truth, he might have paid more attention to arranging for a decent successor. Oedipus found redemption at Colonus, but Thebes found none in Creon, a leader whom Oedipus must have known would prove a no less disastrous guardian of Thebes than the Sphinx.

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