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Essay

The Riddle of Oedipus

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Abstract: What is the riddle of Oedipus? This paper is an exploration of the philosophy involved in Sophocles' famous play Oedipus Tyrannus. The play involves a riddler who becomes king, a man who is famously good at understanding what others find obscure, and yet is unable to see it when he is confronted by an obvious set of uncomfortable truths about himself. As well as for Oedipus, the play poses a number of different riddles for us: in particular it is a study of responsibility and shame, and of deliberation and choice. Like any work of art, the play does not tell us what conclusions we should reach; but it does show us some questions that need asking, and indeed some riddles that we face.

Keywords: Sophocles; Greek drama; philosophy; ethics; shame; responsibility; deliberation; fatalism; determinism

Εὐριπίδης: "ἦν Οἰδίπους τὸ πρῶτον εὐδαίμων ἀνήρ"—
Αἰσχύλος: μὰ τὸν Δί' οὐ δῆτ', ἀλλὰ κακοδαίμων φύσει.
Euripides: "A happy man was Oedipus at first"—
Aeschylus: No, by God, he wasn't; he was wretched by nature.

Aristophanes, *Frogs*, 1182–1183

I

What is the riddle of Oedipus?

We might say, it is the lethal puzzle that the Sphinx sets him before the beginning of Sophocles' play ("What animal is it that walks on four legs at dawn, on two legs at noon, and three legs at dusk?"), by solving which Oedipus famously explodes that deadly monster, and becomes saviour and king of the city of Thebes, which the Sphinx has been laying to waste and chaos at least since the time when Thebes' last king, Laius, mysteriously disappeared.

Or we might say that the riddle of Oedipus is the new puzzle that he has to solve within Sophocles' play: the detective-fiction puzzle, the whodunnit riddle, of how Laius disappeared, and who his murderer was (or murderers were, 122–124, 139: a key indeterminacy that Dawe rightly dwells on) [1] (pp. 8–9). Understood this way, the OT becomes a Sherlock episode with a plot-twist worthy of the villainous Moriarty: the truth that Sherlock is so busy mining out is the truth that the guilty man is *Sherlock himself* (For the idea of the OT as a detective story—though he rejects it.) (Cp. [2]).

A third possibility: we might say that the riddle of Oedipus is the question *Who am I?*, and that the shape of the play is given by the story of how he, the celebrated and triumphant master of enigmas, succeeds in solving this one too—and thereby entrains his own disgrace and ruin. (Notice here the key importance to the OT's plot of the Delphic oracle: it is in the forecourt of her temple at Delphi that the column stands on which is inscribed the famous advice γνῶθι σεαυτόν—advice which of course has a disastrous resonance for Oedipus.)

Or fourthly, we might say that the riddle of *Oedipus* (italics this time, the play not the character) is the baffling and baffled question *How can he not know?* The play, we might argue, is not a detective story but an *anti*-detective story; it is essentially *not* about discovery

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and detective work and recognition, but about their opposites, hiding and repression and deliberate self-deception. On this reading too we can say that the riddle of Oedipus is the question *Who am I?* But this time, the point is not how astute Oedipus is in finding the answer, but how obtuse he is. And this obtuseness is *motivated* obtuseness. He doesn't want to know about the polluted darkness and the shameful dirtiness in the depths of his own soul; he is, as a doctor might say, resistant to therapy. Perhaps we will then add, following Dodds, that Oedipus is Everyman [2] (p. 48). We're *all* like this, we *all* live in permanent bad faith atop an edifice with crimes and lies and scandals and horrors built into its very foundations. We don't want to know about them any more than Oedipus does: we are just as keen as him to avoid knowing ourselves, and just as definite as him in our preference for the *un*examined life. Because of its dark implications and potential, we all of us resist self-understanding as energetically as he does.

If you don't already know that this is Sigmund Freud's reading of the OT, perhaps you won't be surprised to hear it.

> [The hearer] reacts as though by self-analysis he had detected the Oedipus complex in himself, and had recognised the will of the gods and the oracle as glorified disguises of his own unconscious; as though he remembered in himself the wish to do away with his father and in his place to wed his mother, and must abhor the thought. The poet's words seem to him to mean: "In vain do you deny that you are accountable, in vain do you proclaim how you have striven against these evil designs. You are guilty, nevertheless; for you could not stifle them, they still survive unconsciously in you". And psychological truth is contained in this; even though man has repressed his evil desires into his Unconscious and would then gladly say that he is no longer answerable for them, he is yet compelled to feel his responsibility in the form of a sense of guilt for which he can discern no foundation [3] (p. 278).

A fifth and final possibility is to go meta. It is the rather tricksy and pretentious (*poikilos*) suggestion that the real riddle of Oedipus is the riddle: which of these first four is the riddle of Oedipus? The play, it is suggested, presents us with all these four possibilities, but no clear way of choosing between them—and *that*'s the riddle. That is just the kind of higher-order, audience-bamboozling thing that academics like me love to say; I am, after all, the one who once published a paper on Plato's *Theaetetus* called "The puzzle about the puzzle of false belief".

This fifth suggestion certainly affords us, at any rate, a good way of getting started on the difficulties that the OT presents us with. Moreover, it is of course true of *any* work of art worth engaging with, that—unlike most philosophy except Plato's dialogues, which are (most of them) both philosophy and also works of art—it does not preach. Art does not direct us what to think of it, it comes to us not with a rigidly prescriptive *mode d'emploi* label attached, but with an essential openness to a whole variety of readers and readings.

So there is *something* interestingly right about this fifth alternative (as in fact there is to all five alternatives except perhaps the first, which seems right but not very interesting). This fifth alternative is not an impossible starting-point on the play; but it won't be my final answer. As presented, it is at the very least incomplete. By being meta only about *four* possibilities, the four listed above, it simply misses out a whole range of other possibilities. There may be room for a variety of readings of any great work of art, including the OT, but still there are limits on that variety in each case. In the case of the OT, I say that there can be no adequate understanding of the play that does not see it as also centrally concerned with two further riddles that we have not so far broached at all. These two further riddles are interconnected with each other, and they are themes both in this play from 429 BC, and in Sophocles' much later, and in fact posthumous, meditation on its themes, the *Oedipus Coloneus* of 401 BC; both themes are also certainly there in the *Antigone* of 441 BC—the earliest of the three Sophoclean plays that we now call "the Theban plays" as if they were a genuine trilogy, rather than three separate plays spanning most of Sophocles' enormously long career as a professional dramatist.

The first of these two so-far-unbroached enigmas is the riddle of *fatalism*; the second is the riddle of *shame*. This paper will do no more than set the stage for these two riddles—I do not here consider them in depth. But what I mean by these labels, and what the OT (and perhaps even more the OC) might have to teach us about these two latter, as well as our four earlier, puzzles—not necessarily by *solving* them, of course: this should be at least a little clearer by the end.

II

To begin with, though, it is the fourth of my riddling questions that most insists on our attention. *How can Oedipus not know?* He already has the relevant oracles; and he knows that the child that Laius and Jocasta exposed to prevent it from fulfilling the prophecies had its feet damaged, as his, Oedipus's, feet are damaged—his very name is Swell-foot, Oedipus; and he knows that he has succeeded to a vacant throne that was vacated by the previous king's death in a roadside scuffle—a fracas of a type that he knows he has sometimes been involved in himself; and he knows that he has married a woman, a generation older than himself, who was previously the old king's queen. All this is known to Oedipus already at the beginning of the play; it is known to him before he rather portentously responds to Creon's report back from Delphi with ἀλλ᾽ ἐξ ὑπαρχῆς αὖθις αὖτ᾽ ἐγὼ φανῶ ("Back to its earliest source I'll make this plain", 132). Is there really nothing in his career and his circumstances that might have prompted Thebes' new (or new*ish*: *pote*, 103–104) king at least to take elementary precautions along the way? In one form or another it is a familiar comment on the OT that Oedipus is blind until he sees—and then once he sees, he is blind. (The dramatic contrast with the blind Teiresias is obvious: 371–372, 412–413; cp. 747, 1182.) But still: how *can* he be so blind? And again, how can *he* be so blind, Oedipus the master of enigmas?

To the insistence of this fourth riddling question one possible response is to say that Sophocles is merely incompetent: he presents us with a dramatic situation that simply lacks credibility. And perhaps, it might be said, this is particularly true at and after Teiresias' speech at 447–462, where Teiresias, in his final words in the play, "gives the whole game away", as many critics, including Dawe pp. 11–12, seem inclined to think: "the apparent failure of the highly intelligent Oedipus to grasp what has been said to him is unconvincing; and the structure of the plot suffers from premature disclosure".

How, these critics wonder, can Oedipus possibly miss *this*? How can it be that, even when Teiresias has said *this*, Oedipus still doesn't get it?—

> εἰπὼν ἄπειμ᾽ ὧν οὕνεκ᾽, ἦλθον, οὐ τὸ σὸν
> δείσας πρόσωπον: οὐ γὰρ ἔσθ᾽ ὅπου μ᾽ ὀλεῖς.
> λέγω δέ σοι: τὸν ἄνδρα τοῦτον, ὃν πάλαι
> ζητεῖς ἀπειλῶν κἀνακηρύσσων φόνον
> τὸν Λαΐειον, οὗτός ἐστιν ἐνθάδε,
> ξένος λόγῳ μέτοικος, εἶτα δ᾽ ἐγγενὴς
> φανήσεται Θηβαῖος, οὐδ᾽ ἡσθήσεται
> τῇ ξυμφορᾷ: τυφλὸς γὰρ ἐκ δεδορκότος
> καὶ πτωχὸς ἀντὶ πλουσίου ξένην ἔπι
> σκήπτρῳ προδεικνὺς γαῖαν ἐμπορεύσεται.
> φανήσεται δὲ παισὶ τοῖς αὐτοῦ ξυνὼν
> ἀδελφὸς αὑτὸς καὶ πατήρ, κἀξ ἧς ἔφυ
> γυναικὸς υἱὸς καὶ πόσις, καὶ τοῦ πατρὸς
> ὁμόσπορός τε καὶ φονεύς. καὶ ταῦτ᾽ ἰὼν
> εἴσω λογίζου: κἂν λάβῃς ἐψευσμένον,
> φάσκειν ἔμ᾽ ἤδη μαντικῇ μηδὲν φρονεῖν.

> I will go when I have performed the errand for which I came, fearless of your frown: you can never destroy me. I tell you: the man whom you have been seeking this long while, [450] uttering threats and proclaiming a search into the murder of Laius, is here, ostensibly an alien sojourner, but soon to be found a native of Thebes; nor will he enjoy his fortune. A blind man, though now he sees, [455] a beggar, though now rich, he will make his way to a foreign land, feeling the ground before him with his staff. And he will be discovered to be at once brother and father of the children with whom he consorts; son and husband of the woman who bore him; [460] heir to his father's bed, shedder of his father's blood. So go in and evaluate this, and if you find that I am wrong, say then that I have no wit in prophecy [4].

The second response, then, is to say that Sophocles *does it on purpose*: he presents us with a scenario where we are *supposed* to ask ourselves why Oedipus is so slow to realise the truth—and he wants us to draw an inference something like the Freudian possibility noted before, that of motivated obtuseness. Oedipus, we might say, is slow because he doesn't *want* to know. And this is a slowness very visible in, for example, his response to the words of Teiresias just quoted—which is to go straight after Creon, whom he has already accused (399–403) of putting Teiresias up to making false prophecies against him, Oedipus.

Notice that this line of thought presupposes that Oedipus *does* in fact "get it": he *does* understand that Teiresias, as quoted above, is accusing him specifically; so even at this rather early stage in the plot's development—line 400 or so of a play of 1530 lines—Oedipus already knows that he himself is under suspicion. But his response to the accusation is not to accept it, and acknowledge his own guilt. It is to seek to find out who is guilty of the dark political manoeuvres that, he thinks, must have led Teiresias to make such a wild and implausible allegation. (The association of dark political manoeuvring and financial chicanery with the Delphic oracle is clearly attested in history—there is a reason why Delphi was so rich, just as there is a reason why, as my father used to say, "You never see a skint bookie". Such suspicions go all the way back to Homer: see, most obviously, Agamemnon's savagely accusatory response to Calchas at *Iliad* 1.106–112.)

But a third response to "How can Oedipus not know sooner?" is to say that actually Oedipus isn't slow at all. It genuinely is *not* glaringly obvious to him, at least not till quite late in the play, what is the real and awful truth about his situation. And this is not a failure of intelligence on his part—though it is certainly deeply ironic for the master of enigmas to fail so drastically to understand the riddle of his own life.

In Section III I examine these alternative responses in turn.

III

On the first of these three answers to "How can Oedipus not know?" the development of Sophocles' play is full of *aloga*: of plot-holes. If we are to be anything like psychologically realistic, a defender of this view might say, then we must concede at once that there's no chance at all that Oedipus would fail to check out who killed Laius and who he's marrying before it is too late.

One round way with this appeal to psychological realism is E.R. Dodds's. In an otherwise quite brilliant essay, Dodds takes up a question rather of the same sort as my "How could he not know?", which he disarmingly phrases as "the moralist's" question "Could not Oedipus have escaped his doom if he had been more careful?" To this question, Dodds ([2], p. 40) retorts that

> we are not entitled to blame Oedipus either for carelessness in failing to compile a handlist [of things he must not do] or for lack of self-control in failing to obey its instructions. For no such possibilities [as this carelessness and this lack of self-control] are mentioned in the play; and it is an essential critical principle that *what is not mentioned in the play does not exist*. These considerations would be in place if we were examining the conduct of a real person. But we are not:

> we are examining the intentions of the dramatist, and we are not entitled to ask questions that the dramatist does not intend us to ask.

It is plain by the end of this quotation that, at any rate on this score, something in Dodds's argument has gone badly wrong. For the argument ends up giving any dramatist *carte blanche* to introduce any improbability or incoherence she likes into her plot. On Dodds's account, apparently, the author can evade any plausibility-objection at all simply by retorting that we are asking questions that she does not mean us to ask. As a principle of literary criticism this is obviously hopeless, because absurdly over-permissive to the author.

Apparently what produces this abortive result is, at least partly, Dodds's insistence that "what is not mentioned in the play does not exist". Of fiction in general, this just seems untrue. In the sixty chapters of *Pride and Prejudice* Napoleon is not mentioned a single time;[1] but it would make obvious nonsense of the plot of Jane Austen's novel (set as it is in southern England in 1813) to suppose that Napoleon does not *exist* in *Pride and Prejudice.* The default[2] assumption, about what lies outside or around the explicit narrative framework of any fictional tale, is that that framing background is as far consistent with the explicit narrative as it needs to be to make that narrative possible; otherwise, that background is exactly as it is in the real world. Likewise when we come to psychology, an author can if she wishes stipulate that her characters have this or that quirk or flaw, and so long as the author holds our patience, we will happily entertain her stipulation; but again, outside and around this explicit stipulation, our default assumption will be that the *background* psychology of her characters is as consistent with the stipulated quirk as it needs to be to make that quirk possible, and otherwise, exactly like the psychology of real-world people.

So when we engage imaginatively with a fiction, our default assumption is not Dodds's fantastical assumption that anything beyond what the author intends (whatever *that* may be, and however we are meant to work *that* out), or beyond what the fiction explicitly tells us is there, *simply does not exist.* Rather, our default assumption is (in a word) realism: it is that everything beyond what the fiction explicitly states is as close as it needs to be to the fiction to make room for the fiction, and otherwise as close as possible to how things actually are. And realism here includes *psychological* realism; which means that there is not the (surely theoretically disastrous) gap that Dodds imagines between "examining the conduct of a real person" and "examining the intentions of the dramatist". The intention of the dramatist was never (for heaven's sake) to get us to examine *his intentions*. It was to get us to examine the product of those intentions, the conduct of the character that he has created; and to examine that conduct, so far as possible, *just as if it were a real person's.*

If we take such a dim view as is currently being suggested of the (im)probabilities involved in the plot of the OT, but still wish to salvage anything of aesthetic or dramatic value from it, then the question "How can he not know?" cannot be answered in Dodds's style. How else might we answer it, and still make some kind of sense of a play that seems, on the present sceptical reading, to be little more than a Thomas-Hardy-esque[3] catalogue of feeble coincidences and unconvincing oversights?[4]

Well, I think we will need to invoke the aid of the second answer. As I put it above, we will need to see the play not as a detective story but as a kind of anti-detective story. Everyone knows all along how it's going to end; the answer to the riddle of Oedipus (who he really is) is *blindingly obvious*; it takes a lot of effort *not* to see it. And so the whole construction of the play is about hiding the awful truth for as long as possible. It's about being in denial, and this denialism is, if you like, an image of all human life. We all prefer the unexamined life. We are all Oedipus. We are all polluted. And we are all trying to hide this fearful self-knowledge from ourselves for as long as we can hold out. So if there is a riddle in the play, it is the meta-riddle of how Oedipus and Jocasta, and everyone else, can fail to see the answer to the riddle for so long; and that meta-riddle turns, with Sartrean swiftness, into a denunciation of the audience themselves—*vous vous trompez, messieurs-dames: vous aussi.*

Against this combination of the first and second responses, a defender of the third response should, I think, push back rather hard. She should ask: what exactly are the holes in the plot supposed to be?

That Oedipus hasn't tried hard enough before now to find out who killed Laius? But it isn't obvious that that was negligent of him. Remember how he succeeded to the throne. He didn't straightforwardly succeed straight after Laius's death under normal peacetime conditions. There was a long period of chaos induced by the Sphinx; there was a chaotic interregnum after Laius's disappearance, which only ended when Oedipus came along and successfully challenged the Sphinx (130–131). With him as the hero of the hour, the instrument of national salvation for the city, it was entirely natural for Thebes to crown him king. And it was entirely natural for him then to focus on the business of ruling, reconciling, and restoring order, not on stirring up old troubles and strifes by inquiring into the mysterious disappearance of the previous king—until the plague that Sophocles' play begins with brought that mystery back to everyone's attention. It was natural too for Oedipus, once enthroned, to marry Laius' widow; doing so was an obvious and traditional way to legitimate both himself as king, and her as previous and now-restored queen of the realm.

Or is the complaint that Oedipus should have taken more seriously the prophecies about killing his father and marrying his mother? But remember, he *did* take them seriously: the only reason he even bumped into Laius was because he was running away from his supposed parents, Polybus and Merope, the rulers of Corinth—and running away precisely to prevent the fulfilment of the prophecy (794 ff.). Remember here the famous Levantine fable of the road to Samarra, retold by Somerset Maugham in these words:

> There was a merchant in Baghdad who sent his servant to market to buy provisions and in a little while the servant came back, white and trembling, and said, Master, just now when I was in the marketplace I was jostled by a woman in the crowd and when I turned I saw it was Death that jostled me. She looked at me and made a threatening gesture, now, lend me your horse, and I will ride away from this city and avoid my fate. I will go to Samarra and there Death will not find me. The merchant lent him his horse, and the servant mounted it, and he dug his spurs in its flanks and as fast as the horse could gallop he went. Then the merchant went down to the marketplace and he saw me standing in the crowd and he came to me and said, Why did you make a threating gesture to my servant when you saw him this morning? That was not a threatening gesture, I said, it was only a start of surprise. I was astonished to see him in Baghdad, for I had an appointment with him tonight in Samarra[5].

The grisly logic of fate on display in this story is likewise on display in the *Oedipus Tyrannus*. The key thing that Oedipus does to *avoid* his fate is the very thing that brings his fate upon him; and likewise for Laius and Jocasta, when they have Oedipus exposed. "Why didn't they do more to avoid their fate?" is a natural enough question, of course. But the traditional, and unsettling, reply to that is that it doesn't matter what you do to evade it: even if you run to Samarra, your fate will catch up with you anyway. So if we want to challenge Sophocles on his plot-construction by adducing this kind of *alogon*, I think the logic of the narrative of the OT does at least hint at what his rejoinder will be. He is likely to reply that even if there are steps that Oedipus, or Jocasta, or Laius could have taken that they failed to take, still in the end such steps would have made no difference; because the house of Thebes is doomed *anyway*, and the more ingeniously you try to evade fate, the more ingeniously fate will catch up with you.

It is worth stressing here a point on which (this time) I entirely agree with E. R. Dodds: the *Oedipus Tyrannus* is not in the least a play about *determinism* [2] (p. 42)[6]. Determinism is the thesis that every action whatever that we perform, every thought and feeling whatever that comes to us, is in every case alike an inevitable consequence of the way the whole universe is and always has been set up. This blanket ascription of puppet-status to everything is a thesis that makes drama impossible, because it makes action and

deliberation impossible—and action and deliberation are, as Aristotle says in the *Poetics*, the soul of drama. (Rightly for once, unlike so much else in the *Poetics*.) Rather, the *Oedipus Tyrannus* is a play about *fatalism*—by which, in this context, I mean the thesis exhibited in the fable of the road to Samarra: the thesis not that *everything* is determined, but that there is *a small range of particular upshots* that are determined[7]. However everything else may turn out—and fatalism in this sense does not at all deny that it may turn out in all sorts of ways—*those* ends are certain: the servant's death in Samarra, Macbeth's death at the hands of no man of woman born, the Nazgul king's death at the hands of a woman, and so forth. The difficulty for individual deliberators is, then, just to discern which if any of the upshots relevant to them are the fated ones. And discerning this can be very difficult indeed.

Similarly we might ask: is it meant to be a plot-hole that Oedipus should have been more impressed by, should have had a larger place in his memory for, that lethal scuffle at the crossroads? But remember, such things happened all the time in his chaotically violent pre-Homeric era. There would have been lots of occasions on which Oedipus, or any other traveller at the time, might have killed some stranger who, if his luck was out, might turn out to have been his father. On this kind of issue, information was likely to be drowned by noise.

As it also was on a fourth kind of complaint, namely that Oedipus fails to respond adequately to the dire prophecies. Insofar as this fourth complaint is fair at all—and see above for some reasons why it isn't fair—it misses the point (a point also missed by Dodds) [2] (p. 41). that, especially once he was king of Thebes, there would have been lots of alarming prophecies in Oedipus' in-box. We should remember the cynical saying that if you make enough predictions, you'll be right eventually; ancient Greek oracles were like this, and everyone knew it (and as Dodds 1966: 47 points out with a reference to Thucydides on the early phases of the Peloponnesian War, the knowledge was particularly salient in Athens in 429 BC). We should remember too how the Chorus bewail the decline in the credibility of oracles at 906–910. The question facing Oedipus was which prophecies to dismiss, and which to credit. Cp. Jocasta's advice not to pay oracles too much attention at 976–983; and at 964–972 Oedipus himself dismisses the prophecy that he would kill his father:

> φεῦ φεῦ, τί δῆτ᾽ ἄν, ὦ γύναι, σκοποῖτό τι965τὴν Πυθόμαντιν ἑστίαν ἢ τοὺς ἄνω
>
> κλάζοντας ὄρνεις, ὧν ὑφηγητῶν ἐγὼ
>
> κτενεῖν ἔμελλον πατέρα τὸν ἐμόν; ὁ δὲ θανὼν
>
> κεύθει κάτω δὴ γῆς. ἐγὼ δ᾽ ὅδ᾽ ἐνθάδε
>
> ἄψαυστος ἔγχους: εἴ τι μὴ τὼμῷ πόθῳ
>
> 970κατέφθιθ᾽: οὕτω δ᾽ ἂν θανὼν εἵη ᾽ξ ἐμοῦ.
>
> τὰ δ᾽ οὖν παρόντα συλλαβὼν θεσπίσματα
>
> κεῖται παρ᾽ Ἅιδῃ Πόλυβος ἄξι᾽ οὐδενός.
>
> Alas, alas! Why indeed, my wife, should one look to the [965] hearth of the Pythian seer, or to the birds that scream above our heads, who declared that I was doomed to slay my father? But he is dead, and lies beneath the earth, and here I am, not having put my hand to any spear—unless, perhaps, he died out of longing for me: [970] thus, indeed, I would be the cause of his death. But as the oracles stand, at least, Polybus has swept them with him to his rest in Hades. They are worth nothing [4].

In sum, Oedipus's epistemic situation was rather like that of the US President confronted by the intelligence reports before 11/9/01 (or again, like that of the Ukrainian President confronted by warnings of a Russian invasion on 23/2/22). Perhaps *this* reported threat is the one to take seriously? Or perhaps *that* one? Or perhaps all of them are nonsense? The difficulty is that we (the intelligence services, or the government) are constantly

bombarded with alarming possibilities; we have to decide, in real time, which of them if any are worth worrying about, and in the face of sources that of course *want* it to be hard for us to tell which ones to take seriously.

And yet I still want to say *both* that Oedipus is not obtuse in how he responds to the riddle in front of him; and *also* that there is something deeply and flagrantly lacking about his response. How is it possible for me to say both? Isn't that a straight contradiction? I don't think so.

IV

> In 1889, 24-year-old Ilia Gurliand noted these words down from Chekhov's conversation: "If in Act One you have a pistol hanging on the wall, then it must fire before the end of the last act". [7] (p. 203)[8]

Chekhov's Gun is the familiar rule for playwrights that nothing should appear in the development of the plot that is superfluous to the play; if there is a gun on the stage, it must *mean something* that there is a gun on the stage. Broadly speaking—and allowing for the deliberate laying of false trails even in story-telling—Chekhov's Gun is a good principle *for understanding fictional narratives*, such as Sophoclean dramas. However, obviously enough, Chekhov's Gun is not a good principle at all *for understanding real life.* Because in being participants in real life we are precisely *not* being participants in a tidily organised narrative where every detail means something: to imagine that we are is to succumb to superstition, conspiracy theory, or both.

"*Oedipus [Tyrannus]*", writes Roger Dawe, "is not concerned with gradual disclosure of the story to the audience, but with gradual disclosure to Oedipus" [1]. The audience, from their perspective, know all along what is going to happen to Oedipus. But Oedipus, from *his* perspective, is not trying to understand a fictional narrative, a Sophoclean tragedy; he is simply trying to understand his own life. The difficulty that he faces is the one that Kierkegaard identified when he famously said that "Life can only be lived forwards, but can only be understood backwards". Just so: and the contrast between Oedipus and us who watch the play is that we, unlike him, already know his story backwards; that for us his future is *set*—by our knowledge of the myth, and by the words of Sophocles' script—whereas for him his future is open.

The terrible thing about conspiracy theories and superstitions is, of course, that sometimes events can at least appear to vindicate them. So for Oedipus, as indeed for any of us, there is always an in-principle possibility that our life might turn out, in very fact, to have the shape of a Sophoclean tragedy. And precisely that is the horror that envelops Oedipus as the play progresses: that the ridiculously small circles of understanding traded in by superstition and conspiracy theory alike—those circles *close in on him.* From Oedipus' own point of view, within the play, this was in no way inevitable; from the audience's point of view, outside the play and watching it, it was in every way inevitable. The pity and terror of *Oedipus Tyrannus* lies in the looming and inexorable convergence of these two perspectives. And Oedipus is both Everyman—because this convergence could happen to any of us—and not Everyman—because despite the superstitions inherent in a blanket-application of a narrative perspective to life, what happens to Oedipus is not *the inevitable* truth about *all* of us; it is *a* truth that *could* turn out to be true of *any* of us. Sophocles' achievement in the play—and the reason why the OT is something radically new in the history of Greek drama, why it represents a new level of self-consciousness in play-writing—is not merely to write a tragedy, but to show the gap between real life and tragedy, and to force us to imagine what it might be like if, for some real character, that gap simply collapsed.

Where this, and where the play, leaves Oedipus; how if at all he is supposed to respond to his own tragedy; how regret, shame, and guilt are or should be measured out for him; in what sense he is himself responsible for his calamity, and in what sense it is right to say, fatalistically, that he is merely the sport of the gods, the plaything of Olympian spitefulness; to what extent, after that calamity, his life is and must be simply *ruined*, and what if anything he can reasonably hope to salvage from his own ruin: these are the great questions that the

OT leaves us with[9]. As I called them at the outset, they are the riddle of *fatalism*, and the riddle of *shame*. But "leaves us with" is the *mot juste*; the *Oedipus Tyrannus* only raises them. For one still-extant deeper exploration of these riddles, by a much older Sophocles, we may turn to the *Oedipus Coloneus.*

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Notes

1 Yes, I have checked. It didn't even take that long: Project Gothenburg is a wonderfully searchable resource.

2 The *default* assumption. There are cases of fiction where this default probably doesn't apply, not at any rate with full force: most obviously science fiction and the wilder kinds of fantasy. But at any rate the default clearly *does* apply to the case that we are considering here, *Oedipus Tyrannus*—and, I would say, to *Pride and Prejudice* too.

3 Regular readers will be aware of my dislike of Thomas Hardy's novels (or most of them; perhaps I make an exception for *Tess* and *The Mayor*). In this instance I am thinking particularly of the hopelessly implausible *Return of the Native* and the preposterous and (in more than one sense) hysterical *Jude The Obscure.* If this seems like blasphemy to some, my main defence is that another prominent disliker of Thomas Hardy's novels was Thomas Hardy.

4 Douglas Cairns: "The sequence of events onstage encourages us to think that Sophocles' disposition is also Apollo's design, that Apollo has indeed been ἄγχιστος throughout and that now, with the entry of the Corinthian Messenger, he delivers his lysis. The coincidence of the Corinthian Messenger's arrival is determined by the coincidence of Polybus' recent death. Coincidentally, the Corinthian Messenger is also the shepherd who first received the infant Oedipus from his Theban counterpart and gave him to his adoptive parents. Coincidentally, the Theban shepherd who gave the child away is the survivor of Laius' party who has already been summoned (859–61) for reasons that now no longer matter. One cannot equal many, says Oedipus at 845, but here four roles are played by two men. Coincidence? These are daring dramatic expedients that test the limits of plausible plot construction" [5] (pp. 119–171, 133). Quite so. They are also, as Dodds points out, practical short-cuts of the kind that play-directors are always taking. And in the darkness of the theatre we accept such short-cuts knowingly, even without having read Bertolt Brecht; there really are times when drama makes a very explicit request for the suspension of our disbelief, and in so doing comes to seem more like a pageant than a realistic depiction of real life If Dodds's focus on the playwright's intentions is justifiable anywhere, it is here.

5 Somerset Maugham, "The Appointment in Samarra": https://www.k-state.edu/english/baker/english320/Maugham-AS.htm (accessed on 10 August 2024).

6 For a different view about this issue, and much criticism of Dodds, see Douglas Cairns [5].

7 So my thesis is that OT is not about determinism (all events whatever are necessitated by their causes) but rather about fatalism (*some* outcomes are fixed irrevocably, other things float free relative to those ends, but will always change in whatever ways are necessary to ensure the happening of those outcomes). Something similar seems to be implied by David Kovacs' use of the metaphor of a chess-player [6]. Whether Kovacs is aware of John Hick's use of the same metaphor in *Evil and the God of Love* I have not had time to establish.

8 See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chekhov's_gun#cite_note-13 (accessed on 10 August 2024).

9 On all these questions I think E. R. Dodds is extremely good; he seems, for example, to be one principal source of Bernard Williams' famous insistence on the reality of moral luck. Compare and contrast (as I recall, Nakul Krishna has spotted this parallel, or influence, too): "Morally innocent though [Oedipus] is and knows himself to be, the objective horror of his action remains with him and he feels that he no longer has any place in human society. Is that simply archaic superstition? I think it is something more. Suppose a motorist runs down a man and kills him, I think he *ought* to feel that he has done a terrible thing, even if the accident is no fault of his: he has destroyed a human life which nothing can restore. In the objective order it is acts which count, not intentions". Dodds, "On Misunderstanding the 'Oedipus Complex", 44; and Williams: "The whole of the *Oedipus Tyrannus*, that dreadful machine, moves towards the discovery of just one thing, that *he did it*. Do we understand the terror of that discovery only because we residually share magical beliefs in blood-guilt, or archaic notions of responsibility? Certainly not: we understand it because we know that in the story of one's life there is an authority exercised by what one has done, and not merely by what one has intentionally done". Bernard Williams ([8], p. 69); cp. His "Moral luck" in [9].

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