Determinism in Disguise:
Refutation of the Theory that Sophocles' Oedipus Has Free Will

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ABSTRACT
In Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*, Oedipus, ostensibly having free will, is in essence manipulated by the divinity. For one thing, the gods, especially Apollo, endow him with the unchangeable disposition, namely loyalty to truth regardless of any risk and the inclination to react immediately, to ensure his doomed end; for another, even though the gods have done nothing to human beings yet, the divine authority would function as the effective deterrent against hubris—that is why Oedipus is forbidden by Creon to exile himself unless the divine will is double-checked. Nevertheless, this tragedy is not intended to educate the audience the so-called Greek justice (*δίκα*) that we ought to completely yield to the divine governance. In fact, it accentuates the dilemma of such justice. Furthermore, Oedipus, in fact, incarnates the Athenians spirits at Sophocles' time. Therefore, his miserable reversal insinuates the potential crisis for Athens.

Keywords: *Oedipus, free will, destiny, divinity.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Within the ancient Greek culture, the attempts to figure out the relations among humans, the gods and the fate are universal. Especially in terms of the fields of literature, this kind of inquiry, dating back to as early as the Homeric epic, never ends. This essay mainly focuses on the opinions upon such relations embodied in Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*.

Generally, it is controversial whether the fate of Oedipus is manipulated by the gods: some scholars, the quintessence of which is Sigmund Freud, support the ancient belief that Sophocles' Oedipus does not have free will, and *Oedipus the King* is a tragedy of the god-ordained destiny [1]; while others, like E. R. Dodds, thinks that everything Sophocles' Oedipus does on the stage is within his free will, although some of his past actions, which are not directly performed in the drama, are controlled by the gods [2]. This essay, by carefully investigating the meaning of fate within the contexts of the ancient Greek, contends that Dodds' interpretation, though seemingly plausible by distinguishing what Oedipus does before and after the drama begins, is in fact misleading. Oedipus' actions, within *Oedipus the King*, are in essence intervened by the immortals. However, it does not mean that this essay returns to the cliché that *Oedipus the King* is meant for educating audience to completely yield to the divine will. Instead, this tragedy should not be merely restricted to any fixed educational sense—it is intended to reveal the dilemma for human beings as it is, rather than solving it; and it can also reflect Sophocles' refection of the broader social circumstances of Athens at his time.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Before discussing the relations among humans, the gods and the fate within Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*, it is necessary to precisely define the meaning of "fate" within the contexts of the ancient Greek. Technically, it connotes *Tyche(τύχη), moira(μοίρα) and daimon(δαίμων)*.

Tyche, as is deemed by Ruth Scodel, emphasizes "randomness in events" [3]. Kenneth Glazer visualizes it as "the image of a roll of the dice, the spinning of a roulette wheel" [4]. Within *Oedipus the King*, *T*yche is reflected when Oedipus, during his exile from Corinth, coincidentally approaches a point where three roads meet, unconsciously commits patricide here, and somehow picks the way to Thebes, his real hometown, instead of the other way to Athens.

By contrast, as is considered by E. Ehnmark, *moira* mainly connotes "the scheme of events following an inherent order of cause and effect" rather than a sheer chance or randomness [5]. Glazer compares *moira* to a

cause-and-effect system—it is like "a chain of falling dominoes" during which "once a certain event happens, everything else follows with unstoppable inevitability" [4].

In terms of *daimon*, in literal sense, it merely refers to Greek deities, but, as is referred from Homeric the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, it also has the extended meaning of "what the gods ordain", namely the divine intervention in humans' life. For instance, in *the Odyssey* 5.396, "στυγερὸς δέ οἱ ἔχραε δαίμων" [6], which literally means "the horrible god attacks him", more exactly refers to the horrible fate ordained by the gods falls upon him (my translation is inspired by the entry "δαίμων A.I.2-the power controlling the destiny of individuals" in *Greek-English Lexicon* [7]).

Up to now, there has been a consensus that *Tyche* is linked to *daimon*. In other words, humans' free will, confronted with *Tyche*, is futile, and the randomness, beyond our perception and reasoning, is usually deemed the divine manipulation. For instance, Martha Nussbaum puts it in this way: "if someone who enjoys the extreme of control, prosperity and in general good fortune (as Oedipus) can be so brought low by events and circumstances beyond his control, then no human life seems safe from this possibility." [8].

However, when it comes to *moira*, there are divergent opinions over whether humans' free will is included.

Some scholars insist that *moira* is still within the divine manipulation, namely *daimon*. As is contended by E. Ehnmark, although *moira* connotes "an inherent order of cause and effect", this kind of "order", in essence, requires the divine agency to be effectuated [5]. A plausive model to externalize such relationship between *moira* and the gods might be "the scale of Zeus" in 8.69 and 22.209 of the *Iliad*—Zeus weighs *moira* of men on his golden scale—those on the sinking side are doomed to death [9]. Under the circumstances, without the power of Zeus, *moira* is unlikely to be revealed. This theory supports the ancient belief that *Oedipus the King* is a tragedy of destiny—"the tragic effect. . . lie(s) in the contrast between the supreme will of the gods and the vain attempts of mankind to escape the evil that threatens them", and "the lesson which, it is said, the deeply moved spectator should learn from the tragedy is submission to the divine will and realization of his own impotence" [1].

Nevertheless, other scholars argue that *moira* allows for humans' free will—once we can figure out the relations between what he previously did and what he currently suffers, it is safe to conclude that apart from *daimon*, his free will, more or less, is responsible for his own end. The article of E. R. Dodds titled "On Misunderstanding the *Oedipus Rex*" is a quintessence. It, sharply and directly, refutes the cliché of "the tragedy of destiny" by elaborating that "certain of Oedipus' past actions were fate-bounded; but everything that he does on the stage from first to last he does as a free agent" [2]. More specifically, Dodds equates Oedipus' free will with Oedipus' dispositions—it is "his own strength and courage, his loyalty to Thebes, and his loyalty to truth" that lead to his ruin [2]. Bernard Knox also expresses a similar view that "Oedipus did have one freedom: he was free to find out or not to find out the truth" [10].

Dodds' interpretation, though seeming to be plausive by distinguishing what Oedipus does before the drama begins (fate-bounded) and what he does after the drama begins (as a free agent), is in fact mislead—Oedipus' actions, within *Oedipus the King*, are in essence intervened by the sacred power, though, in appearance, they are caused by his own free will. This essay will offer evidence for that and try to figure out Sophocles' possible purpose of such design.

3. CHARACTER IS DESTINY

There is no denying that two conspicuous aspects of Oedipus' character, namely loyalty to truth regardless of any risk and the inclination to swift and vigorous action, do play a significant role. Nevertheless, they are not the first domino leading to the falling of the whole chain, in other words, not the ultimate cause. In fact, Oedipus' character, though embodied in Oedipus himself, is still predetermined by the gods. In this sense, Oedipus' reversal is still intervened by the divinity. This is exactly what R.P. Winnington-Ingram asserts as "ἦθος ἄνθρωπῳ δαίμων" [11].

For instance, when asked "what spirit urged you to do it (self-blinding)" by the chorus leader, Oedipus replies: "It was Apollo, friends, Apollo that brought this bitter bitterness, my sorrows to completion. But the hand that struck me was none but my own." (Lines. 1329-1332) [12]. Many scholars, including Dodds, misunderstand it as the evidence for Oedipus' free will on account of the words "the hand struck me was none but my own". Nevertheless, they confuse the direct cause with the fundamental one.

"Oedipus' own hand", undoubtedly, is the direct cause of his being blind—no gods are physically present there to blind him. However, it is unreasonable to deem it the fundamental cause—the key to determine whether a cause is fundamental or not is to investigate whether this cause is caused by other causes. Conspicuously, there must be something else responsible for the action of "Oedipus' own hand". Just imagine that if Oedipus were like Hamlet, whose character is to scruple and to suspect, would he still immediately blind himself? Certainly not—it is exactly one significant aspect of his character—to react with no hesitation—that stimulates his self-blinding. However, where does such character come from? Is it controlled by his own free will?

If Oedipus' character can really be equated with his free will, which means he manipulates his own character,

he would not claim that "It was Apollo, friends, Apollo that brought this bitter bitterness" [12]. Instead, he is supposed to say something like "it is all my fault". Therefore, a more reasonable way to interpret his words is to consider that it is no other than the divinity, especially Apollo in this play, that endows him with such character. In this sense, the final cause should be the divine will, and "Oedipus' own hand" is no more than a medium to realize it.

Someone might argue that we cannot take Oedipus' words in a literal way—blaming Apollo for his own bitterness is no more than an ostensible excuse—he doesn't dare to admit that he himself causes the tragedy and, therefore, shifts the blame to Apollo. Whereas this argument is invalid. Oedipus, throughout the play, is not a person inclined to shrink from responsibilities—in the prologue, when recommended by Creon to go inside the palace to hear the news he brought from Apollo's Pythian temple, Oedipus rejects and insists "speaking it to all" regardless of the possible grief he might bear (Lines. 93) [12]; this detail reflects that Oedipus, different from those politicians indulged in power tactics, does not like to hide and cheat.

Furthermore, it is noteworthy that Oedipus attributes his sorrows to Apollo, rather than other Olympian gods. In ancient Greek culture, Apollo represents knowledge, especially self-knowledge—engraved on the temple of Apollo at Delphi is one famous maxim: *know thyself*. Therefore, Oedipus' calling upon Apollo, allegorically, can be equated with calling upon his own character—the persistent pursuit of knowledge and truth. Just like Achilles who is powerful but doomed to die early, it is always dangerous for mortals to possess the divine feature—Menander expresses it as "ὅν οἱθεοὶ φιλοῦσιν, ἀποθνήσκει νέος (he, whom the gods love, dies young)" in his *Twice a Swindler* [13]. Unfortunately, Oedipus is bound to step into that perilous zone—his name *Οἰδίπους*, apart from the meaning of the swollen foot, also implies "to know", since its pronunciation is similar to that of "*οἶδα*(to know)" in ancient Greek.

Freud thinks that: "man has become a god by means of artificial limbs, so to speak, quite magnificent when equipped with all his accessory organs; but they do not grow on him and they still give him trouble at times." [1]. Oedipus' character of "knowing", metaphorically, is his "artificial limb"—Apollo plays a cruel joke on him: he renders Oedipus, in terms of both the name and character, to share the divine element which, at the beginning, helps Oedipus win reputation and power, as is indicated by his capacity to solve the riddle of Sphinx, but eventually causes his miserable reversal.

4. DIVINE AUTHORITY—DETERRENT AGAINST HUMANS' FREE WILL

As is mentioned above, the gods manipulate humans by predetermining their characters. However, there might be another way—the irrevocable divine authority, in itself, functions as a natural deterrent for humans' free well, even though deities have not yet done anything to the mortals.

As is expected, Oedipus, after the discovery of truth, would forlornly exile himself to the trackless mountain. This ending, if it were realized, would have depicted Oedipus as a heroic and solemn image arousing the catharsis of audience. Nevertheless, Sophocles does not satisfy that expectation. In fact, no matter how Oedipus supplicates Creon to drive him away, Creon insists that "I would have done this had not I wished first of all to learn from the god the course of action I should follow" (Lines. 1437-1439) [12]. Under the circumstances, Oedipus is taken back inside the palace, which conspicuously renders him less heroic.

Oliver Taplin points out that some scholars believe "the relevant lines are not authentic Sophocles" [14]. Take Ruth Scodel as example, he contends that "this end, with Oedipus brought back into the house, is somehow wrong. Not just Oedipus, but the whole drama opposes it. . . the end is very much an anticlimax. . . Creon promises Oedipus that he will be exiled when the god permits; the promised conclusion is only delayed. Still, the spectator is deprived of the feeling of liberation which would come with the departure of Oedipus" [3].

Whether such ending is "authentic Sophocles" or not, if without any further archaeological or archival evidence, is utterly beyond our exploration. However, assuming that this text is sound, Taplin offers a possible interpretation: "it must, it seems, be to emphasize the powerlessness of Oedipus. . . He still thinks he knows what is best, and he still wants to have his way, but he is overruled." [14].

Indeed, Oedipus, after knowing his origin and his own miserable reversal, still deems himself to possess, at least, a true insight into the decree of gods and wants to make his own heroic response, namely self-exile. Nevertheless, it later turns out that even such tiny desire cannot be fulfilled as he wishes. Does not it render him much more pathetic?

As is inferred above, worship and fear of the gods act as an invisible restraint for humans' free will— before the implementation of everything, they must first consult deities. That is why Creon reiterates the double-checking of the divine will. In this sense, Oedipus is even deprived of the right to make himself at least a little bit more heroic at the end, and his fragility, in contrast with the divine power, is further highlighted. How can we deem him to have free will?

5. SOPHOCLES' REFLECTION OF "FREE WILL" AND "JUSTICE"

As is indicated by part 3 and 4, Oedipus is still a puppet manipulated by the gods. However, it does not mean that this essay returns to the cliché that *Oedipus the King* is meant for educating audience to completely yield to the divine will. In fact, Sophocles does not want to teach anything, instead, he is just intended to reveal the dilemma for human beings as it is, and to imply his reflection of Athens' rising.

Within *Oedipus the King*, two distinctive attitudes towards the fate are reflected. One is that of Oedipus, namely to act immediately and loyalty to the truth, which has been mentioned above, while the other is that of Jocasta—when the messenger brings the news of Polybus' death but Oedipus still worries about his potential sleeping with his mother, Jocasta comforts him in this way: "Why should man fear since chance is all in all for him, and he can clearly foreknow nothing? Best to live lightly, as one can, unthinkingly." (Lines. 977-979) [12]. Jocasta's attitude, in stark contrast with Oedipus' activeness, is concluded as "living at random" and "evasion of accepting the truth" by Ruth Scodel [3]. It resembles the cliché of submission to the divine will.

If Sophocles were really intended to teach the audience "a just lesson" that we should not struggle with our fate predetermined by the gods, he would have conspicuously praised for Jocasta's attitude, as the antithesis of Oedipus'. However, as is indicated by her committing suicide, Jocasta, just like Oedipus, also ends up in failure. And it is reasonable to deduce that Jocasta's death is intentionally designed by Sophocles—the original Theban mythology does not necessarily appoint her ending precisely, since in Euripides' *The Phoenician Women* Jocasta has a completely different ending: she does not commit suicide after knowing the truth [15].

Such design implies that Sophocles offers no definite answer for how to deal with the fate—neither an active attitude nor a passive one can alter humans' helplessness and powerlessness. Therefore, justice, in Sophocles' mind, is not about making a choice between the two attitudes. Rather, it is about being aware that there is no fixed proper way for us to live in this world.

Furthermore, the dilemma for Oedipus is also the dilemma for all Athenians. In *Oedipus the King*, two significant details both insinuate Athens: the first one is the point where three roads meet each other—the destinations of two of the routes are separately Corinth and Thebes, and the rest is Athens; the second one is the terrible plague in the prologue which is tantamount to the historical event starting in Athens in approximately 430.B.C.—it is chronologically near to the premiered date of Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* which is believed to be around 429B.C. If we integrate the two details together, an interesting fact emerges from the dark: Oedipus, though somehow not choosing the route to Athens in the play, comes to a city that is going to experience the similar plague to that of Athens in real history.

More specifically, as is contended by Bernard Knox, what is insinuated here is the marked fifth-century Athenian spirits, namely "the creative vigor and intellect daring", which resemble Oedipus' characters [10]. Historically, Sophocles really witnessed the zenith of Athens—in 5th century, because of the Athenian spirits mentioned above, Athenians had already made numerous achievements within the military action, the democratic system, commercial activities etc. Gradually, they began to pay more attention to human beings' own power and less to the divine world. W.K.C Guthrie, in his book *A History of Greek Philosophy*, describes that: "from the middle of the fifth century to the end of the fourth . . . the shift of interest (of Athens) which marked the beginning of this period may be described as being from the universe to man, from interesting intellectual questions of cosmology and ontology to the more pressing business of human life and conduct." [16]. However, does it mean that Athenians would no longer have to care about the divinity? Would they really have no restraints and obstacles?

On the one hand, if Athenians continue to act upon their spirits that they take pride of, they are likely to be unjust—under the illusion that they possess the capacity to reason everything, they might be too arrogant to recognize that humans, after all, are restricted by various elements. In *Oedipus the King*, Oedipus has many epithets: he is a plowman who plows a barren field, a hunter who hunters himself, a pilot without a safe harbor and a doctor unable to diagnose his own disease. All these occupations are about pursuing or knowing. It might be an alarm for the real Athenians at that time that they should always be careful of their own pursuit or knowledge. Charles Segal concludes these epithets as "the user of fire"—fire can both light people and burn them, just like the fact that knowledge can both prosper and destroy Athens [17].

On the other hand, however, if they alter their ambition and, instead, are willing to at the mercy of the fate, which would be deemed seemingly more just to the divinity, they might as well end up in chaos, just like the ending of Jocasta. It is exactly the marked Athenian spirits of the fifth century that prosper Athens and distinguish them from others. At that time when the Peloponnesian war, involving numerous belligerent city-states, had just begun, how could they adventure to give up their spirits and to step back?

6. CONCLUSION

Based upon the understanding of "fate" in ancient Greek, the essay refutes the theory that Oedipus has free

will by explaining how the divinity manipulates him: first, deities endow Oedipus with a particular character which is doomed to lead to his end; second, the divine authority itself functions as the effective deterrent against humans' free will. However, such design is not meant to teach the audience a just lesson, but to reveal the dilemma both for Oedipus and Athens.

As is mentioned at the beginning, the relations among humans, the gods and the fate are extremely important throughout the ancient Greek texts. The discussion of them touches upon the position of human's free will which is also one of the cores of the Renaissance and even the Enlightenment. How do the opinions upon human's free will change from the ancient Greek to modern times? What does the ancient Greek bequeath to the later western civilizations in terms of the understanding of human beings themselves? It deserves further research since it helps reveal a complete picture of the way that we human beings gradually get to know ourselves.

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