

Finding Ourselves in Oedipus Again and Again

Ten views of human agency

By William Eaton

This paper will explore the extent of human agency: our capacity to make effective choices, choices that advance our true interests. It will do this by considering at least ten different readings of Sophocles's Οἰδίπους Τύραννος (Oedipus Tyrannus, Oedipus the King or Oedipus Rex). Interposed between the readings will be contemporary examples of agency, or of our lack thereof, and discussions of the possible significance of the paper's explorations. I do not, however, want discussions of significance—or of how we may be going to hell in a handbasket—to interfere with what could be greater goods: an opportunity to rummage through a great text and in centuries of rich commentary on it; the mental exercise and diversion offered by divergent possibilities.

The **first alternative** (no surprise): Oedipus's life was dictated by his fate. Perhaps he was able to make superficial choices—to leave home, solve a riddle, marry a queen—but none of these choices could help him escape killing his father and having sex with his mother. In a more modern vein we might say that his free will was simply too limited for him to be able to make effective choices and make a success of his life. It made no difference how much he knew or didn't, or how strong, clever, courageous or well born he was. Above all, such gifts allowed

him to feel a false sense of control as he proceeded to do what he had to do and should never have done.

Freud proposed that Sophocles's play was "an immoral work: it absolves men from moral responsibility, exhibits the gods as promoters of crime, and shows the impotence of the moral impulses of men which struggle against crime."¹ In such a reading, if Oedipus had not gotten into a fight with his father at the crossroads, Oedipus would have killed him some place else.

From a sociological perspective, we could use this particular reading of Sophocles's play to call attention to the extent to which human agency—most simply, the ability to make choices, good or bad—is itself a fiction; our lives are a series of only choices. Our most significant actions are governed by forces—the gods or God, the corruption of our will (original sin), erotic and destructive *Triebe* (Freud's drives/instincts), capitalism, genetics, demographics, etc.—forces that are larger than we are, however much some of them may also be the products of our own actions or imaginations. If we "enjoy" some measure of free will, and if we use bits of information to do our enjoying—to choose, say, Democrat or Republican, cemetery or crematorium, whether to keep reading a socio-literary paper or no—these capacities serve above all to obscure from us our more fundamental incapacity: how our lives are dictated; in every significant instance we respond in the only way we can. But this, as this paper shall review, is only one of the ways human beings have or could read Sophocles's play, and thus, too, only one of the ways that with the play's help we can think about our agency and about the contributions of knowledge and ignorance to our agency (or lack thereof).

A **second alternative**, to get us warmed up: character is fate. It may well be that this was the conclusion of most of the Greeks who, in the midst of plague and civil war, attended the

¹Freud, *Introductory Lectures*, Lecture XXI, 331. *N.B.*: Freud's interpretation of Sophocles's play is a key component of the extraordinary contribution Freud made to how we think about ourselves, but let us note that this interpretation is far from how the mature Oedipus himself interprets his actions.

Several scholars have well argued that in fact Freud's interpretation is less of the play itself than of how during Freud's youth the play was presented on Paris and Vienna stages and of how the audiences of that time reacted to these presentations. *Cf.*, Knox's Introduction to *Oedipus the King*, 131-33, and for a more extensive presentation: Richard Armstrong, "Oedipus as Evidence".

A helpful review of Freud's conception of the Oedipus complex may be found in an article by the French psychoanalyst Roger Perron, available in English via "eNotes.com". In addition to Lecture XXI, English texts containing Freud's discussion of the play and the Oedipus complex include *The Interpretation of Dreams*, chapter 5, section D; a letter to Wilhelm Fleiss of October 15, 1897 ("Letter 71" in *The Origins of Psycho-Analysis*); and "A Special Type of Choice of Object made by Men".

first performances of *Oedipus the King*. Did it not call attention to fatal flaws of “tyrants,” leaders, powerful men—i.e., excessive self-confidence, acting without fully considering the possible consequences? Notwithstanding Sophocles’s play, it wasn’t too long after its debut that Athenians fell victim to the charms, arrogance, egoism, and scheming of Alcibiades, who devised and championed the disastrous Sicilian Expedition and then fled to the Spartan side. And the “brains, force and influence” definition of “*tyrannos*” reminds me, too, of Robert McNamara and others of the “best and brightest” who, along with President Lyndon Johnson, have been assigned much of the responsibility for the United States’ disastrous involvement in the Vietnam War.²

Nonetheless (or therefore?) this particular reading of the play seems to have fallen into disfavor. The classical scholar Bernard Knox observes in his introduction to Robert Fagles’ translations of *The Theban Plays*, “Critics have tried, with contradictory results, to find some flaw in Oedipus’s character that will justify his reversal.” But I believe that much remains to be found in the character-is-fate reading.

For example, a standard assumption of a theater-goer or reader of Sophocles’s play is that there was a confrontation at a crossroads—where Oedipus killed his father, not knowing who he was. (A brief summary of the story may be found in this companion piece: “[The Plot of Sophocles’s ‘Oedipus the King’](#).”³) But imagine that instead of Oedipus that putative crossroads, there was a woman or man of a different character (e.g., an intellectual, artist or religious person), or someone who lacked the stature and physical strength of Oedipus. Imagine a child, or a person of a different social class, not raised as a king’s son but, say, as a slave or artisan. Most, if not all, such people would not simply have acted differently than Oedipus acted at one of the great crossroads of his life; most of these people would not even have perceived there was a crossroads or a confrontation.⁴ Here comes a band of men one of whom is obviously of great

² See David Halberstam, *The Best and Brightest*.

³ Text of this “companion piece” may also be found by searching the Web for “scribd eaton0824”.

⁴ From a Freudian perspective, while sons must perceive their fathers to be in the way, this does not mean that fathers are in the way for anyone else. Indeed many a son must have had an opportunity to appreciate that others have found his father helpful even as and in ways that he, the son, did not. Or it may seem that the father—perhaps a coach, teacher, beloved boss, volunteer—was helping others *instead of* helping the son. (*N.B.*: Sons may also feel similarly about mothers, and daughters about mothers and fathers, *u.s.m.*) Given a psychoanalytic perspective we can also propose that generous acts are often born of ungenerous—hostile—feelings. A father’s generosity to others may in some cases be an attempt to compensate for how at home he belittles his son (or wife, daughter).

stature and status. “I” do not need to even think about stepping aside, I am stepping aside. These others are not in my way because in fact our ways are so different our paths do not cross, and the differences between us are so ingrained in me that in fact they are not cause for reflection. In stepping aside “I” feel proud to be in the presence of a superior and to be demonstrating to him my self-knowledge and *sophrosyne*—my self-control, knowledge of my place.⁵

I recognize that we are here conflating character and social status—all be this with the belief that social status is a large component of character. Persisting, we might imagine Oedipus as a contemporary white-collar worker running into a senior manager of his or her organization in a bathroom or on a commuter train. For such a worker, the crossroads could seem a great opportunity, not to defeat another but rather to elicit a powerful person’s assistance. In his *Autobiography* Benjamin Franklin tells how, running into a more powerful person, he asked to borrow a book from him, understanding that thereby he might make a valuable “friend”—a person who would be pleased to run into him in the future, seeing Franklin as a person of culture and breeding, and as a person in his debt.⁶

These various responses and appearances of our person of a different “character” would also affect the behavior of the powerful man Laius and his attendants. One reason there would be no confrontation in the alternative scenarios outlined above is because Laius and his men would not have perceived any possibility of a confrontation. Seeing a girl coming toward them, one of the older men says to one of the younger, “Run pick some flowers for her.”

For the vast majority of people who might have passed Laius on the plains west of Athens there would have neither been a crossroads nor indeed any event. There might have been a bird singing in a tree. There might have been the forgotten space of undistinguished time.⁷ Again, in this reading it is Oedipus’s character—or, rather, the combination of his character and his father’s—that creates both the crossroads and the confrontation, and thus the tragic event that takes place there. From this perspective, if an Oedipus (or any of us?) is to

⁵ Regarding the ancient Greek virtue of *sophrosyne* see Helen North, *Sophrosyne: Self-Knowledge and Self-Restraint in Greek Literature*.

⁶ Franklin, *Autobiography*, from Part 3.

⁷ N.B.: Even in *Oedipus the King* there is no actual confrontation at a crossroads; the confrontation is offered as an inconsistent memory of its two putative survivors.

enjoy agency it would not lie in our responses to specific phenomena, but rather in any efforts we might make to shape or reshape our characters, or to shift our social position.

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For millennia people have been fascinated by the story of Oedipus, a hero, Knox writes, “who in his vigor, courage and intelligence stands as a representative of all that is creative in man.”⁸ For its part, Sophocles’s Chorus calls Oedipus a man “beyond all power,” “towering over us all,” outranging all men. He is able to impose his will on powerful others and twice save his people from suffering.⁹ And, nonetheless, he makes a complete mess of his life. “Of all men, Oedipus should have succeeded,” the classical scholar Cedric Whitman writes, “but of all men he particularly did not.”¹⁰ If his life was not in fact a series of only choices, this seems only the greater tragedy. If he *could have* acted differently, he failed to. If he enjoyed some measure of agency, it did not come with a capacity to make what I am calling “effective choices”: choices that advanced his true interests.

So much for human agency? Or so much for the agency of powerful, or powerful and hotheaded, people? After Oedipus stands “revealed at last, cursed in my birth, cursed in marriage,” the Chorus concludes:

O the generations of men, the dying generations—adding the total of all your lives I find they come to nothing . . . Does there exist, is there a man on earth who seizes more joy than just a dream, a vision? And the vision no sooner dawns than dies blazing into oblivion.

⁸ Knox, Introduction to *Oedipus the King*, 150. As regards the resonance of the story, I would call attention to *The Arab Oedipus*, edited by Marvin Carlson, which contains plays based on the Oedipus legend by four Arab playwrights: Tawfiq Al-Hakim, Ali Ahmed Bakathir, Ali Salim and Walid Ikhlas.

⁹ Unless otherwise noted, quotations from *Oedipus the King* and from *Oedipus at Colonus* are from Robert Fagles’ translations. Quotations of Sophocles by others (e.g., by E.R. Dobbs) are left as these others offered them. Here the “towering” phrase is from line 1327 of Fagles’ translation; “beyond all power”, line 1680; “outranged all men,” line 1120. See also Tiresias’s speech to Oedipus at the beginning of the play, in which Tiresias calls Oedipus “our greatest power!” and “first of men” (lines 16 and 41).

¹⁰ Cedric Whitman, *Sophocles*, 122.

You are my great example, you, your life, your destiny, Oedipus, man of misery—I count no man blest.¹¹

When I began studying Sophocles's play, George W. Bush, Richard Cheney, Karl Rove and Donald Rumsfeld were king. From this perspective, Oedipus seemed to have several virtues. Yes, he did not just steal or squeak out an election; he gained power by killing the reigning monarch and taking the monarch's widow for a wife. But he was capable of seeing the interests of all the Theban people as his own and risked not only his reputation but also his life in efforts intended to promote the citizens' well-being. Time and again Oedipus showed a capacity that, over the centuries, we Americans have come to esteem as much if not more than any other. Instead of passively accepting his lot, he took vigorous and consequential action to eliminate obstacles and solve problems.

The ancient Greeks used the word *tyrannos* rather differently than we use "tyrant".¹² "Tyrannos" referred to people who succeeded by brains, force, and influence, people not unlike our vaunted entrepreneurs and "self-made men". Oedipus Tyrannos was someone able to use his brains, force, and influence (or social status) to realize his will: to get what he wanted. He wants to leave home; he does. He wants to defend his *amour propre* and show his strength at the crossroads; he does. He wants to solve the Sphinx's riddle, become a king, and have children; he does. He wants to find out the truth and save his city from the plague; he does. He wants to punish himself for all the errors he has made, how blindly he has acted; he does.

And what is the result? What is the result from Oedipus's own perspective? In terms of the standards he set for himself and what he set out to achieve in his life—to avoid killing his father first and foremost—Oedipus cannot and does not consider his life a success. And his downward mobility is impressive: the natural son of one king and adopted son of another becomes a blind beggar. And there is the fact, let's call it, that his initial disinterest in knowledge, his disinterest in learning what had happened to the king whose place he had taken, led Thebes to fall victim to a plague, which was followed, many years after his abdication, by civil war.¹³ In

¹¹ *Oedipus the King*, lines 1308-09 and 1311-20. Here and throughout, for the purposes of quotation, I have not duplicated Fagles' versification, but have presented the text as prose. This has occasionally involved changes of capitalization or punctuation.

¹² Knox, "Sophocles' Oedipus", 5.

¹³ N.B.: In Sophocles's version or versions of the legend, it is only long after the action of *Oedipus the King*, in the continuation of the story in *Oedipus at Colonus*, that Oedipus becomes a blind beggar and civil war breaks out.

Plato's *Gorgias* Socrates argues that it is futile for people lacking an accurate idea of the good—of their true interests—to gain power or real wealth, as they do not know what to do with power or money.¹⁴ Or, rephrasing: what can it possibly mean to have power over other people if one does not have power over oneself, if one does what one pleases but not what is in one's true interests?¹⁵ In what sense could one be said to command a ship if one could not tell south from north? Oedipus is a case in point—his life an unbroken string of successes, of realizations of his will, that lead him to disaster and heartbreak.¹⁶ (*N.B.*: Readers becoming concerned by the number of scantily defined terms being trotted out—from “knowledge” and “ignorance” to “choice,” “effective choices”, and “true interests”—are urged to consult the companion piece [“Terminological Challenges.”](#)¹⁷)

¹⁴ See, for example, *Gorgias*, 521B: “Don't say that anyone can strip me of whatever goods I may possess, so that I won't have to tell you again, ‘But if he takes them, he won't know how to use them. Since he took them unjustly, he will use them unjustly and to no good end.’” A tyrant or rich man may often do whatever he thinks he would like to do, and he may get others to assist him in this, but if he uses this capacity above all to show that he possesses this capacity or in an attempt to sate insatiable desires, then he reveals above all his ignorance and his inability to control himself.

I was led (many years ago) to use the example of Oedipus to discuss human agency when I read the following in an article on the *Gorgias* by one Kevin McTighe:

[G]iven the statements:

1. Oedipus wants to marry Jocasta.
2. Jocasta is Oedipus' own mother.
we would still hesitate to infer that:
3. Oedipus wants to marry his own mother.

We know that was the furthest thing from his mind. Thus it is the attitudes and beliefs of the agent about the object of his desire which we assume govern his desire. He wants Jocasta only under certain descriptions which he himself thinks true of her. But he does not necessarily want her under *any* description which just happens to be true of her.

This observation may apply to love as well as to choosing more generally. Source: “Socrates on Desire for the Good and the Involuntariness of Wrongdoing: *Gorgias* 466a-468e,” 205-06.

¹⁵ There is a certain conflation of two meanings of “power” here. We and ancient Greeks have often thought of power as referring to an ability to get other people to do one's bidding, but Socrates is defining the term in a more basic way: capability to realize one's will (to advance one's true interests), be this with the help of others or not.

¹⁶ Among our own “Greek” tragedies the story of Lyndon Johnson, the Great Society, the Gulf of Tonkin and the Vietnam War stands out. See, for example, David Grubin's documentary *LBJ*, made for “The American Experience” television series. In the film George Reedy, one of Johnson's long-time aids, says: U.S. Senate Staff, White House Press Secretary: “Hubris, as the Greeks would put it. ‘Whom the gods would destroy, they first make mad.’ Now, this was a man that was so big, that reached so far and made it and then let the whole thing crumble.”

¹⁷ Text of this “companion piece” may also be found by searching the Web for “scribd eaton0824” and selecting from the hit list.

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As shall be seen, this paper is more about raising questions and appreciating possibilities than about finding “the answer.” If Oedipus did enjoy some measure of agency, would we be better off without agency? Does Sophocles’s play suggest that some or all human beings are too ignorant or too disinterested in knowledge to make good use of whatever free will they possess? (“What good were eyes to me?” Oedipus asks after putting them out.¹⁸) And could we say that our “true interest” is to know and fulfill our destinies—and however terrible or simply fatal our destinies might be? And can we say that this is what Oedipus did: come to know and fulfill his destiny, and with a rare vigor? Or was Oedipus’ great, all-too-human mistake resisting—refusing to hear and see fully things he did not want to hear and see; attempting to exercise a good deal of agency and autonomy, and so struggling against himself, his fate, his life? “The *Oedipus Tyrannus* is a so-called tragedy of fate,” Freud wrote.

Its tragic effect is said to be found in the opposition between the powerful will of the gods and the vain resistance of the human beings who are threatened with destruction. Resignation to the will of God and confession of one’s own helplessness is the lesson which the deeply moved spectator is to learn from the tragedy.¹⁹

We have hardly exhausted the possible questions. Among the choices I am making in this paper is to consider Oedipus representative not just of “tyrants”, of the powerful, but of all human beings. And so if from a given perspective Oedipus appears to have been unable to make effective choices for a particular reason, such as lack of knowledge of his circumstances—of the people he was dealing with—this becomes a question for us all: are we, too—as a species, a culture, as individuals—hampered in this way? For example, given that Oedipus’s youth is spent in blinding, destructive ignorance, and then, when in middle-age he gains a glimmer of understanding, he immediately puts out his eyes, a question becomes: to what extent are we human beings interested in knowledge, as opposed to finding ways to cling to our ignorance, to “blind faith”?

¹⁸ *Oedipus the King*, line 1472.

¹⁹ Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Chapter V, section D.

We can take this a step further. A reading of Pascal's wager would be that believing in a false or non-existent god is better than not believing in any gods at all.²⁰ Perhaps this makes sense *except* at those moments when we discover or feel that our faith has been misplaced. But do we then, like Oedipus, become blinded by disillusionment, by lack of faith in ourselves above all? And do we then, *inter alia*, lose track of the fact that blindness—in particular blind faith—was what we were committed to in the first place?

To prefer the imaginary is not only to prefer a richness, a beauty, an imaginary luxury to the existing mediocrity *in spite of* their unreal nature. It is also to adopt “imaginary” feelings and actions *for the sake of* their imaginary nature.²¹

Could we say that it would have been easier (and better?) for Oedipus to live out his destiny if he never had any interest in knowledge (e.g., of his destiny, his parentage, what happened at some crossroads long ago)? Certainly in our culture we have the idea that it is easier to live, and perhaps also to be successful, if one pays little attention to one's potential limitations (e.g., a limited social standing or not so good looks in a world in which the well born and good looking are more likely to thrive socially and professionally). It seems easier, too, to pay little attention to the human predicament in general—to mortality, the conflicts of self-seeking and dependence (the challenge of being a social animal), the atomization of modern life, the threats that human activity now poses to so many living things, *homo sapiens* included. We will come soon enough to Aristotle's discussion in the *Nicomachean Ethics* of the connection between knowledge and agency. For the moment, are we being pushed to conclude that acting in

²⁰ Pascal's wager: Since the existence of God cannot be proved or disproved through reason, and since in Pascal's view there is much to be gained from assuming that God exists and little to be gained from assuming that He does not, a rational person should assume that God exists and live accordingly. See *Les pensées*, item 397. Note that different editions and translations of the *Pensées* group and number the items differently. I am following the system used by Michel Le Guern in editing Pascal's notes for Gallimard in 1977. One often sees this famous *pensée* referred to as number 233, the number it was given in Léon Brunschvicg's widely used edition, published at the beginning of the twentieth century as part of les *Œuvres complètes*.

²¹ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Psychology of Imagination*, 210-11. From the original, *L'imaginaire*, 283. The passage continues: It is not only this or that image that is chosen, but the imaginary state with everything it implies; it is not only an escape from the content of the real (poverty, frustrated love, failure of one's enterprise, etc.), but from the form of the real itself, its character of *presence*, the sort of response it demands of us, the adaptation of our actions to the object, the inexhaustibility of perception, the independence, the very way our feelings have of developing themselves.

ignorance, for all this may mean acting without agency, works best—except every once in a while, when it leads to disaster?²²

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*A*s has been noted, this paper is exploring such questions by reviewing ten or more different “alternatives” or readings of the Oedipus story as presented in Oedipus the King. Some of these readings are well-known, some of them more original (inspired by the present focus on agency). The alternatives are being signaled with boldface—**first alternative, second alternative** . . . A companion piece “[We are all rash](#)” also presents three temptations and four “phenomena”. In the midst of all this numerology, and at the end of the present text, I will offer a writer’s (parochial?) view of what could be the most courageous response to the view of the human predicament offered by this array of alternative readings of Sophocles’s play, and by the feeling of human limitation, voire helplessness, contained within it.²³ Again, this will not be “the answer”: how human beings should live. I expect that readers who make it to the end—or to the end of this paper—will feel the futility of trying to answer such fundamental questions. May they also find a kind of pleasure, or sense of connectedness, in wrestling with purported answers.

Walking on a beach I distinguish several kinds of beach walkers. There are those who are headed somewhere or who are playing ball or engaged in conversation. They little notice their surroundings. And there are those looking intently for precious (or saleable) things: large, intact shells, sand dollars, starfish. And there are those, like me at times (when my son and I are not playing ball). The people making up this third group find stones and bits of shells, driftwood, discarded bits of plastic—things they were not looking for but which, at the moment, in a particular light, speak to them. And it is this—the fact and the strength and tenuousness of the communication—that is treasured.

²²I am struck by the alternating intervals of peace and madness in the Oedipus story, the latter being brief, wildly destructive, excruciatingly painful and of great literary and emotional interest, and the former being long and plain. In a fit of madness, Laius and Jocasta try to kill their son, and then there are fifteen or twenty years of peace. Along comes the ruthless, voracious Sphinx and the senseless fight to the death at the crossroads, and then peace reigns again for fifteen or twenty years. To be broken by plague and one horrific day of shame, suicide and self-mutilation. Whereupon, for some odd reason, Oedipus is allowed to live on peacefully in Thebes, for many years treated with kindness, his daughters dear to him, his two sons well liked. (As per Edith Hamilton, *Mythology*, 383.) Then Oedipus is expelled, left to wander, a blind beggar. His sons, battling for power, set off a civil war, and on our story goes.

²³Text of this “companion piece” may also be found by searching the Web for “scribd eaton0824” and selecting from the hit list.

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The **third alternative**, which I think of as the “heroic” reading: Sophocles’s play is not about a victim of fate or of a particular character, but about a grand, courageous pursuer and bearer of knowledge, of self-knowledge above all. In a highly regarded 1966 article which dismissed determinist readings of the play (e.g., Freud’s), the classicist E.R. Dobbs stressed that *Oedipus* is “a play about human greatness”.²⁴

Oedipus is great, not in virtue of a great worldly position—for his worldly position is an illusion which will vanish like a dream—but in virtue of his inner strength: strength to pursue the truth at whatever personal cost, and strength to accept and endure it when found. “This horror is mine,” he cries, “and none but I is *strong* enough to bear it.”

[W]hat fascinates us is the spectacle of a man freely choosing, from the highest motives, a series of actions which lead to his own ruin. Oedipus might have left the plague to take its course; but pity for the sufferings of his people compelled him to consult Delphi. When Apollo’s word came back, he might still have left the murder of Laius uninvestigated; but piety and justice required him to act. He need not have forced the truth from the reluctant Theban herdsman; but because he cannot rest content with a lie, he must tear away the last veil from the illusion in which he has lived so long. Teiresias, Jocasta, the herdsman, each in turn tries to stop him, but in vain: he must read the last riddle, the riddle of his own life. The immediate cause of Oedipus’s ruin is not “Fate” or “the gods”—no oracle said that he must discover the truth—and still less does it lie in his own weakness; what causes his ruin is his own strength and courage, his loyalty to Thebes, and his loyalty to the truth. In all this we are to see him as a free agent: hence the suppression of the hereditary curse. And his self-mutilation and self-banishment are equally free acts of choice.

Certain of Oedipus’s past actions were fate-bound; but everything that he does on the stage from first to last he does as a free agent.²⁵ (My underscoring.)

²⁴See Dobbs, “Misunderstanding the *Oedipus Rex*”, 40:

If Oedipus is the innocent victim of a doom which he cannot avoid, does this not reduce him to a mere puppet? Is not the whole play a ‘tragedy of destiny’ which denies human freedom? This is the second of the heresies which I set out to refute. Many readers have fallen into it, Sigmund Freud among them (*The Interpretation of Dreams*); and you can find it confidently asserted in various popular handbooks, some of which even extend the assertion to Greek tragedy in general—thus providing themselves with a convenient label for distinguishing Greek from ‘Christian’ tragedy.” (My underscoring.)

I would note a point that Dobbs, as a defender of a true faith, skips over: By definition, and notwithstanding whether we consider them correct or not, determinist misreadings and indeed any misreading are also readings, and the fact that a scholar of Dobbs’ stature felt it necessary to condemn a given (mis)reading attests first and foremost to its prominence and endurance.

“This horror is mine, and none but I is *strong* enough to bear it.” A rich phrase and so evocative of Oedipus’s kingly personality, the strength he finds, the pride he takes in the scale and seeming uniqueness of his predicament.²⁶ Presumably this has also informed Dobbs’s reading of the play—*homo sapiens* is the species that does not passively accept its lot! Even if this resistance leads us to our ruin, there is nobility here. And certainly as spectators and readers of Sophocles’s play we may admire the courage and strength Oedipus displays when he decides to pursue the truth and also in the act of blinding himself. (A lesser man would have taken to drink, ended up on skid row?²⁷)

²⁵ “Misunderstanding the *Oedipus Rex*”, 41. By way of evidence, Dobbs cites lines 1230ff. of the play, “where the Messenger emphatically distinguishes Oedipus’s self-blinding as ‘voluntary’ and ‘self-chosen’ from the ‘involuntary’ parricide and incest.” In the companion piece “[Terminological challenges](#)” I discuss Aristotle’s distinction, in Book 3 of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, between voluntary and involuntary acts. (Text of this piece may also be found by searching the Web for “scribd eaton0824” and selecting from the hit list.)

²⁶ I am interested as well in the fact that this is a claim that all of us—kings and commoners—might make in certain painfully low moments, a claim that I know I have made, and I assume others have as well. My first wife, raised Catholic, used to say self-mockingly, “We all have our cross to bear.” Of course suffering comes to all and to some more than others, but when the weight is heavy on our shoulders we may feel how it is adapted to our shoulders in particular, how our shoulders are particularly adapted to it.

²⁷ *N.B.*: Some of the lions of literary studies—e.g., E.R. Dobbs and Lionel Trilling—have scorned those who mistake literary characters for people or who invite us to find pedagogic purpose in tragedy. Perhaps in another lifetime I will have an opportunity to explore such issues at greater length. I would begin with this observation: One of the main things involved in the “suspension of disbelief” in our experience of literature is that we take the characters to be real people, and it is on this basis that we become involved in their struggles and progress, that we take their thoughts seriously and that we are susceptible to learning from their experiences. This is not to say that Sophocles’s Oedipus, for example, is or was a person, or that Sophocles intended to teach us x or y or anything at all, but rather that our experience of the play involves and depends on our imagining Oedipus to be a person (and this with the help of Sophocles), and on our finding aspects of the play that speak to our lives. It is on such bases that the present work makes use of Sophocles’s Oedipus.

As regards Trilling, see *Sincerity and Authenticity*, 78. For another argument against the approach of critics such as Dobbs and Trilling, see Stanley Cavell’s essay on “King Lear”: “The Avoidance of Love,” especially these sentences (from pages 40 and 41 of *Disowning Knowledge*):

I think that one reason a critic may shun direct contact with characters is that he or she has been made to believe or assume, by some philosophy or other, that characters are not people, that what can be known about people cannot be known about characters, and in particular that psychology is not appropriate to the study of these fictional beings or that psychology is the province of psychologists and not to be ventured from the armchairs of literary studies. But is any of this more than the merest assumption; unexamined principles which are part of current academic fashion? . . . Of course, to account for the behavior of characters one is going to apply to them predicates like “is in pain,” “is ironic,” “is jealous,” “is thinking of . . .”

And,

Our subject is agency rather than heroism, however. And thus *Oedipus the King* may lead us to think in particular about what role knowledge, or ignorance, plays in allowing or preventing us—all of us, Oedipus included—from making choices. Pursuing this line of thought, I will first take from Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* a fourth and a fifth alternative, and then, after a few more general reflections, return to a question raised earlier: why, immediately after gaining a glimmer of an understanding of his situation, did Oedipus put out his eyes?

In Book Three of the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle proposes that if one lacks sufficient information regarding what one is choosing or if one lacks the mental capacity to evaluate this information in a rational manner, one is incapable of making a choice, or of exercising agency. (See the companion piece “[Terminological Challenges](#)” for a brief review of this subject.²⁸) Bringing this back to Oedipus, we can see that when he killed his father, had sex with his mother and stuck his mother’s pins into his own eyes, Oedipus was (a) not in rational frame of mind and (b) did not understand what he was choosing to do. Thus, our **fourth alternative** is that Oedipus lacked agency because of the mental state he was in when he made some of the most crucial decisions of his life. A human being cannot be expected to make a rational decision—a “real choice,” let’s call it—right after finding out that he has killed his father and had sex repeatedly with his mother, sired children with her. In such circumstances one does not stop acting, of course, but one cannot be expected to enjoy agency. (*Cf.*, the drunken person who “decides” to drive herself home from the bar.)

The **fifth alternative** is that Oedipus lacked agency not because he was in no state to make use of whatever knowledge he had, but because he lacked knowledge *tout court*. Specifically, he lacked knowledge of himself, his circumstances and the consequences of his actions. His ignorance deprived him of agency or, if one prefers, of the ability to make beneficial use of such agency as he enjoyed. I am assuming this point is quite clear as regards the killing and the sex. Oedipus did not know who he was in relation to the person he killed or the one he made love to. As regards the self-blinding, I would call attention to Oedipus’s ignorance of the

How could any serious critic ever have forgotten that to care about specific characters is to care about the utterly specific words they say when and as they say them; or that we care about the utterly specific words of a play because certain men and women are having to give voice to them?

²⁸ Text of this “companion piece” may also be found by searching the Web for “scribd eaton0824” and selecting from the hit list.

consequences of this action. He understood that he was going to poke his eyes out, but he had little idea what it would mean to be blind—how he would in time become a beggar and how even without eyes he would nonetheless still be able to “see” (perceive) many aspects of his present circumstances and past deeds. (Sophocles hardly ignores this point since the wise man of his piece, Tiresias, is blind.) If you do not know what you are choosing, it is hard to say you are making a choice. (Or in choosing blindness could Oedipus have indeed been thinking that he was choosing Tiresian wisdom?)

To help readers get a better handle on this alternative, and to recall again that we are using *Oedipus the King* to ask questions about our predicament and possibilities, herewith two contemporary examples, involving less extraordinary human beings. First, imagine a hypothetical yet quite typical young male athlete who, in choosing which sport to play, in being recruited to play either of two sports, has some idea of how much he might earn as a professional in each sport, a rather less developed idea of the likelihood and long-term impact of the injuries and bodily wear and tear he might experience while playing these sports, and next to no way of evaluating the relative importance *for him* of a few years of high income and celebrity versus a quieter life during which he earned less money but preserved his health through middle age.²⁹ Secondly, one day while I was working on this section the tabloids reported that an aging former child star, herself the daughter of a movie star, had been arrested for trying to buy crack cocaine. This was presented as the sorry culmination of many years of struggling with substance abuse. One can imagine this woman in her youth excited to become a celebrity like her dad, and as a result of this excitement and this choice—this “only choice”?—losing whatever hope she may have had for a reasonably happy life, not because she became an actress, but because she entered

²⁹ In 2011 the *New York Times* reported that a dozen former National Football League players were suing the League because they were repeatedly administered a painkiller before and during games, worsening high-risk injuries such as concussions. From reporter Ken Belson’s story:

“We took it like clockwork,” said [Joe] Horn, a receiver who played 12 years with the Kansas City Chiefs, the New Orleans Saints and the Atlanta Falcons and who says he now experiences bouts of dizziness and blackouts. “They don’t meet with you to tell you what will happen five years later. Had I known that there were going to be complications, I wouldn’t have taken the shots.”

Of course, from another perspective, this is just talk, after the fact. One might imagine that back in the day Horn and other players took these pills knowing fairly well the consequences, but they downplayed them in their minds or preferred them to other consequences: giving up their football careers and football salaries. It is also possible that these were only choices, the players not being able to imagine themselves not playing football and not seeing other ways to earn living wages.

the profession too young and with insufficient appreciation of the risks involved and insufficient capacity for coping with them.³⁰

From the perspective of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, such people cannot be said to be involved in choice-making at all. In the case of the athlete, imagine that he opts for football, becomes a star, and after some number of victories, Pro Bowl appearances and concussions, he passes the rest of his life in a deep depression caused by neurological damage, a depression from within which he is unable to recognize, let alone take satisfaction from, his previous accomplishments, talent, celebrity. We might say that both the young athlete and the young movie star—though, like Oedipus, already blind—further blinded themselves, but without choosing blindness and for all the blinding agents (concussions and cocaine) took years to do their work.

I would also note that this fifth reading of the play—the ignorant or ever blind Oedipus—does not necessarily conflict with the third reading: the heroic one. For example, Dobbs recognizes that “the *Oedipus Rex* is a play about the blindness of man and the desperate insecurity of the human condition”.³¹ Similarly, in his introduction to *Oedipus the King*, Knox writes: Oedipus’s “new knowledge, won at such a terrible price, makes clear what it was in the hero that brought about the disaster. It was ignorance.” And, “In spite of his name, *Oidipous*, with its resemblance to the Greek word *oida* (“I know”)—a theme that Sophocles hammers home with continual word-play—Oedipus, who thought he knew so much, did not even know who his mother and father were.”³²

It is not hard to find the ignorance theme in Sophocles’s text. Tiresias calls Oedipus “all unknowing,”³³ and, for his own part—before he learns that the king and queen of Corinth were

³⁰ One of the *leitmotifs* of the present paper is that much of our behavior is motivated not by what we know, but by an attempt to deny this ignorance. In considering the cases of the young actress and the young athlete, it is worth considering, too, how contemporary Americans in many walks of life embrace opportunities for celebrity. We might wonder if, among other rewards, celebrity does not offer the seduction of being known in some superficial way by others, instead of having to face what one knows about oneself. Further, in the being known we are often able to lose track of the fact that not only do we not know ourselves and perhaps cannot know ourselves, but also rarely want to.

³¹ Dobbs, “On Misunderstanding”, 46.

³² Both quotations are from Knox’s Introduction to *Oedipus the King*, 152.

³³ *Oedipus the King*, lines 473-74.

not in fact his birth parents and thus that it was while having sex that he got the best look at his mother's eyes—Oedipus, our “man beyond all power,” confesses:

Apollo told me once—it is my fate—I must make love with my own mother, shed my father's blood with my own hands. So for years I've given Corinth a wide berth, and it's been my good fortune too. But still, to see one's parents and look into their eyes is the greatest joy I know.³⁴

Something in these lines bares deceptions many of us have experienced, for example when we have been deceived by a colleague or lover (or if terrible family secrets come to light). We recall looking into the other person's eyes, or observing his or her behavior, and seeing so clearly a person who—we now feel—was not there. I am reminded of a *bon mot* attributed to Jacques Lacan: Love is giving something you haven't got to someone who doesn't exist.³⁵

* * *

Readers will have been noting that this is an interdisciplinary paper, mixing sociology and philosophy with literary criticism, with a little bit of psychology and intellectual history thrown in for good measure. And there may be some feeling that, from the perspective of literary criticism at the very least, there is something fundamentally wrong with this paper because one of these nine or ten or twelve readings of Sophocles's play, or another reading that is not being considered, must be right and/or tell us the truth about human agency. The other readings must simply be wrong. Certainly this is the impression that has been given by the most prominent scholars of Sophocles and Greek tragedy, with of course the added assertion by each scholar that it is he who, perhaps with help from the interesting misinterpretations of his predecessors, has come to the truth.

We might pause to poll ourselves: which of the five alternatives offered so far seems right? Is it possible that the right reading or a righter one could still await somewhere among those readings remaining in the present paper or elsewhere? But let us instead take a Sophoclean view of the matter. As one scholar, Cedric Whitman, puts it, Sophocles believed “[a]ll the knowledge which the best of good will can attain is too late, and the only truth is, we know no

³⁴ *Oedipus the King*, lines 1090-96.

³⁵ Lacan as quoted in Adam Phillips, “On Love,” *On Flirtation*, 39.

truth.”³⁶ Such a view militates against a one-right-reading view of any text—of the text that is our life experiences most of all. We can have interpretations, insights, glimmers of understanding—we can even put our faith in the exploration of possibilities or in mental exercise—but, as Dobbs observed, “In a sense every [person] must grope in the dark as Oedipus gropes, not knowing who he is or what he has to suffer; we all live in a world of appearance which hides from us who-knows-what dreadful reality.”³⁷

As with any great work, contemporaneous and later interpretations of *Oedipus the King* have clashed, scholar disagreeing with scholar and generation with generation. At roughly the same time that Freud was developing his notorious interpretation, and presumably in some response to this reading, a German classicist, Tycho von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, proposed that “complicated psychological motivation lies entirely beyond the possibility of ancient tragedy, and especially of Sophocles.”³⁸ The latter half of the twentieth century brought us the heroic reading, Oedipus’s pursuit of self-knowledge at all costs. (After Hiroshima and the Holocaust, the pursuit of self-knowledge seemed about all that was left.) But during the Enlightenment—when rising classes and a new culture were trying to gain legitimacy by heaping scorn on their predecessors—Voltaire and others belittled Sophocles and mocked Oedipus’s ignorance. If only Sophocles and Euripides “étaient nés dans un temps plus éclairé,” Voltaire wrote. If only they had been born in a more enlightened time, such as Voltaire’s.³⁹ (It is hard to

³⁶ Whitman, *Sophocles*, 122. Statement comes in the context of a close reading of Sophocles’s “Trachiniae”. In the first two chapters of his book Whitman reviews some of the past many centuries’ prominent interpretations of Sophocles’s work, although he leaves out several that the present piece will touch on: Freud’s, Voltaire’s and Dacier’s.

³⁷ Cf., Plato, *Gorgias* 447B-C, where Callicles says that the famous teacher of rhetoric Gorgias makes a show of answering questions, anyone might put any question to him. Chaerophon then asks Socrates what question he should ask. “Ask him who he is,” Socrates says.

The quotation in the text is from Dobbs, “On Misunderstanding”, 46, and in fact completes the sentence begun by words quoted earlier: “the blindness of man and the desperate insecurity of the human condition”.

³⁸ Von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, *Die dramatische Technik des Sophokles* (1917), as quoted in Whitman, *Sophocles*, 23.

³⁹ Voltaire, “Lettre contenant la critique de l’*Oedipe* de Sophocle”. More: “[J]’ai reconnu qu’on peut sans péril louer tant qu’on veut les poètes grecs, mais qu’il est dangereux de les imiter.” (I realized—i.e., when he was writing his own play based on the Oedipus legend—that, while there is little risk in praising the Greek poets, it is dangerous to imitate them.) “Les vers de Sophocle sont d’un déclamateur, et ceux de Corneille sont d’un poète.” (Sophocles’s verses are ranting; those of Voltaire’s contemporary Pierre Corneille were written by a poet.) *Note: Here and elsewhere I am responsible for the English glosses of Voltaire’s phrases.*

know which is more shocking: Sophocles’s bad luck or the fact that for so long the Enlightenment’s press releases were taken for disinterested statements of truth.)

These examples do not of course prove that there is not one right reading of *Oedipus the King*—nor one right view of human agency. But to me the evidence favors a Bakhtinian view of literature and life. (Or must we call this the Bakhtinian “reading”?) E.g.:

The world of culture and literature is essentially as boundless as the universe. We are speaking not about its geographical breadth (this is limited), but about its semantic depths, . . . The infinite diversity of interpretations, images, figurative semantic combinations, materials and their interpretations, and so forth.

[T]here can neither be a first nor a last meaning; it always exists among other meanings as a link in the chain of meaning, which in its totality is the only thing that can be real.⁴⁰

I would also stress that the readings of *Oedipus the King* that are being presented in this paper are being used not for a literary purpose but for a sociological or ethical one: as a way of ruminating about human agency, about what we might be able to do besides playing out the string, living the lives to which we have been born. If because of our lack of free will or lack of knowledge, our agency is severely limited, then ethical questions are purely academic; answers to them would not stand a fair chance of helping us to live in a better way, to be better people.

* * *

And so now, for the sixth, seventh and eighth alternatives, let us return to the question of why Oedipus blinded himself. This may lead us to wonder if such choices as we seem to make—our reactions, we may need to call them—speak more of our agency or of our lack thereof.

A contemporary poem begins with the title “One Day the Doctor Tells You You’re Blind”

to the truth. It’s physical; something about the retina, rods, and cones. . . .
All your life you’ve been compensating, convincing yourself you could see what you could not. Suddenly you’ve got questions about religion and politics and art, but what

⁴⁰ “From Notes Made in 1970-71”, *Speech Genres*, 140, 146.

you finally ask is about treatment. No, he says,
there's little medical science can do. . . .

In a way,
it's a relief, isn't it. Now you can get down
to the business of apologizing, to everyone,
for what has been in fact an honest disability,
one that shouldn't keep you from playing piano
or doing the things you would ordinarily do,
but which has gradually and progressively
made you the truthless husk of a man you
always knew, somehow, at your core, that you
are.⁴¹

In Fagles' version of Sophocles's text, the messenger reports that Oedipus, having taken his now dead mother-wife down from where she had hung herself in a woven noose, ripped from Jocasta's robes the long gold pins that had been holding them. In the ancient Greek theater men spoke the women's parts and one actor played several roles, changing masks as he changed parts. But a modern director could have Oedipus's action involve a disrobing, an exposing of his now dead mother, exposing her to the audience in all her nakedness. In any case, lifting his lover-mother's pins high, "looking straight up into the points, he digs them down the sockets of his eyes, crying, 'You, you'll see no more the pain I suffered, all the pain I caused!'"⁴²

As a rule this is understood to be a rash, impassioned act of self-mutilation, of self-punishment or even of revenge of one part of the self on another. We can be sympathetic. Oedipus has just found out that he has killed his father and fathered children in the "same wide harbor" in which he himself was born.

Is there a man more agonized? More wed to pain and frenzy? . . . O Oedipus,
name for the ages . . . How, how could the furrows your father plowed bear you,
your agony, harrowing on in silence O so long?⁴³

We can understand why he pokes his eyes out: it's like he has no other choice.

"Too long," Oedipus says to his eyes, "you looked on the ones you never should have seen, blind to the ones you longed to see, to know! Blind from this hour on! Blind in the

⁴¹ Todd Boss, "One Day the Doctor Tells You You're Blind". *I thank Mr. Boss for granting me permission to quote at length from his poem in the present paper.*

⁴² *Oedipus the King*, lines 1402-07.

⁴³ *Oedipus the King*, lines in the midst of 1331-39. The second set of ellipses spans these phrases: "one and the same wide harbor served you son and father both; son and father came to rest in the same bridal chamber."

darkness—blind!”⁴⁴ In *Oedipus at Colonus* Sophocles’s Oedipus, or another of Sophocles’s Oedipuses, proposes, years later, that he blinded himself because he could not find anyone to help him do what he really wanted: to be stoned to death.⁴⁵

This is our **sixth alternative**: Oedipus’s most significant actions are the emotional reactions of a human being who—like most humans or like a few?—lacks sufficient agency because he lacks self-control, is prey to his own emotions (to his physiology or endocrinology?). In *Oedipus at Colonus*, Creon tells Oedipus, “[B]lind rage has always been your ruin.”⁴⁶ Leading classical scholars have categorically rejected trying to make the Oedipus (or Creon) of one Sophocles play be consistent with the characters of the same name in another Sophocles play. For example, Bernard Knox writes, “Each play is a completely independent unit and, in fact, though a character may appear in all three (Creon, for example), the point of view from which he is seen differs from one play to another.”⁴⁷ Nonetheless, I believe Creon’s observation quoted here well encapsulates one reaction that readers and spectators have had to the behavior of the Oedipus of *Oedipus the King*.

I am reminded, too, of modern-day adolescents who pierce their flesh—earlobes, noses, cheeks, belly buttons, vaginal lips. I am not thinking of people who wear earrings, but of those who pierce their bodies in many places. Although this behavior may be dictated to a goodly extent by fashion and the desire to conform, there is also a sense that for some of these young people, as for the middle-aged Oedipus, self-mutilation seems one of the only ways to feel some autonomy or make a claim of autonomy.

Apollo, friends, Apollo—he ordained my agonies—these, my pains on pains! But the hand that struck my eyes was mine, mine alone—no one else—I did it all myself!⁴⁸

⁴⁴ *Oedipus the King*, lines 1407-09. This is a speech of Oedipus’s as reported by the Messenger.

⁴⁵ *Oedipus at Colonus*, lines 483-86.

⁴⁶ *Oedipus at Colonus*, line 976.

⁴⁷ Knox, “Greece and the Theater”, 30.

⁴⁸ *Oedipus the King*, lines 467-71. Cf., Merton, “Unanticipated Consequences,” 895:

The intended and anticipated outcomes of purposive action . . . are always, in the very nature of the case, relatively desirable to the actor, though they may seem axiologically negative to an outside observer. This is true even in the polar instance where the intended result is “the lesser of two evils” or in such cases as suicide, ascetic mortification and self torture which, in given situations, are deemed desirable relative to other possible alternatives.

A forthcoming alternative has *Oedipus the King* being about “the dialectic of resistance and disclosure.” There it will be self-knowledge that is being resisted, and we might say here that self-knowledge is among the things a self-mutilator is fighting with. But the word “resistance” can also be used in the sense of political resistance or, more basically, in the sense of resistance to social forces or to authority—to refer to just saying no in one way or another (no to drugs, no to war, no to sex or puritanism, no to one’s parents or one’s boss). In the midst of the Sixties, I believe, the sociologist Alvin Gouldner proposed a variation on Descartes’ *cogito*: I resist, therefore I am.⁴⁹ The economic forces that have me working for a corporation that appears to be trashing the globe and its citizens, that has me sending out résumés looking for such work—this is just my fate. But the fingers that send e-mails urging legislators to adopt a “millionaire’s tax,” stop hydrofracking or preserve family farms—these are mine alone.

And so the **seventh alternative** is paradoxical or absurdist. As with our similar actions, so those of Oedipus’s actions that seem to make a particular claim of agency—his leaving home, his search for self-knowledge after decades of denial, his self-blinding—were in fact responses to his lack of agency, and underscored this lack by their futility.⁵⁰ Here again we have sub-possibilities, one given to us by Oedipus himself, and the other one (which I find particularly meaty) offered by a consideration of ancient Greek law regarding parricide. For his part, Oedipus in certain phrases frames his self-blinding as, *inter alia*, a sort of hedonistic decision. He doesn’t want eyes because “Nothing I could see could bring me joy.”⁵¹ (Similarly there are times when many of us stop reading the news. It’s too awful. Or we don’t go home for the holidays: too stressful. Given our lack of control over our circumstances—be these world events, holiday traffic or family dynamics—we choose to do as little as possible. If we do go home, we may rely on temporary blinding agents—alcohol, a long run, a loud television in the middle of the room.)

The other possibility is that Oedipus’s self-blinding—far from being hedonistic, masochistic, a sign of weakness or absurd—was rational and self-protective. In ancient Greece

⁴⁹ As quoted by Bennett Berger, *An essay on culture*, 138.

⁵⁰ After the 2008 financial collapse, a former banker become president of a woman’s organization devoted to helping Wall Street employees dislocated by the collapse said, as it were to these former employees: “You’re going to have to sit down and have five drinks and really try to get your head around this.” Louise Story, “On the Street, a Time to Pivot”.

⁵¹ *Oedipus the King*, line 1473.

the punishment for murdering one's father or another close relative was death. In the *Laws* Plato writes, It

has been plainly set forth by priests of old; they have pronounced that the justice which guards and avenges the blood of kindred, follows the law of retaliation, and ordains that he who has done any murderous act should of necessity suffer that which he has done. He who has slain a father shall himself be slain at some time or other by his children . . . for where the blood of a family has been polluted there is no other purification, nor can the pollution be washed out until the homicidal soul which the deed has given life for life, and has propitiated and laid to sleep the wrath of the whole family. These are the retributions of Heaven, and by such punishments men should be deterred. But if they are not deterred, and any one should be incited by some fatality to deprive his father or mother, or brethren, or children, of life voluntarily and of purpose, for him the earthly lawgiver legislates as follows: There shall be the same proclamations about outlawry, and there shall be the same sureties which have been enacted in the former cases. But in his case, if he be convicted, the servants of the judges and the magistrates shall slay him at an appointed place without the city where three ways meet, and there expose his body naked, and each of the magistrates on behalf of the whole city shall take a stone and cast it upon the head of the dead man, and so deliver the city from pollution; after that, they shall bear him to the borders of the land, and cast him forth unburied, according to law.⁵²

From this perspective, Oedipus might have (consciously or unconsciously?) made a clever choice—to mutilate himself in an attempt to avoid being stoned to death. This hardly seems what we would like to call a “free” choice, but insofar as Oedipus’s attempt was successful (he did not end up being stoned to death), we could say that he made use of the information at his disposal and of his rational faculties; he used his courage and wits to triumph over his circumstances.

Thus is offered a whole ’nother view of human agency and human behavior, our **eighth alternative**: we are relentlessly opportunistic, Oedipus along with us. We rarely think about what “the good” or our true self-interest may be; we take our goals, catch as catch can, from the circumstances in which we find ourselves. We find ourselves dealt a certain set of cards and among certain people who are playing a certain game. We think little if at all about whether this is the game we want to or should play, if this is really our table, our people, or whether we want to or should be playing cards at all, . . . We make our next move, trying to get a pair or a flush, turn a trick, or whatever seems to be the goal at hand.

⁵² Plato, *Laws*, Book IX. *N.B.*: From this perspective a lawyer for Oedipus could argue that his killing of his father was retaliation for his father’s previous murderous, if unsuccessful action against Oedipus himself.

Bringing this back toward Oedipus, I note that in Sophocles's presentation of the Oedipus legend we do not see Oedipus deliberating about what the good in the abstract might be. (And indeed, isn't such deliberating quite rare, in theater and in life? Shakespeare's tragedies would seem to offer exceptions to prove the rule: we spend much more time considering what we are going to do than why we should or should not do it. Prior to choosing a course of action we do not hear Oedipus discussing or ruminating about what his true self-interests might be, what the optimal outcome might be. He is a "man of action." We might speculate that such a "capacity" or lack of capacity is vital to leadership and dynamic action, be it by political leaders, CEOs, entrepreneurs, doctors, parents and so forth. It is said of certain people that they were born to lead, and one thing this seems to mean is that given a choice between not leading and leading a group of people over a cliff—or given, say, a choice between not being reelected and making it easier for your country's manufacturers to move to low-wage-paying countries with minimal environmental regulations—a leader leads.

Told that he is fated to kill his father and sleep with his mother, or not wishing to give in to the urge to do these things, Oedipus makes what, on the surface, seems to be quite a good play: he runs away from home. Confronted at a crossroads by someone older and weaker, he, perhaps with less good sense, chooses to—or simply does—fight back.⁵³ Further down the road, approaching a voracious monster with a riddle, Oedipus is, we might say, too clever or too caught up in the moment to ask where his interest lies: in beating a hasty retreat or in trying to solve the monster's riddle and so get past him and into Thebes? Oedipus is entirely focused on coming up with an answer, and perhaps he succeeds therefore, thanks to this focus. Finding Thebes in need of a strong and clever leader and with a queen in need of a husband, he seems not to have even paused and wondered if this was the right job, right bed for him. (Men are accused of thinking with their "dicks". I take this to be an anti-agency view; the men's dicks are doing the choosing for them, i.e., instead of their rational faculties. But what about Jocasta and her agency? Did she as a woman of her times have no choice, not even to say, "You know, maybe it's just your age or the scars on your ankles, but you remind me somehow of my son"? Perhaps for this widowed queen marrying Oedipus was an only choice.)

⁵³ According to Whitman (*Sophocles*, 29), the Greek word ὑβρις (hubris) originally "meant assault and battery, and it . . . never quite lost the overtones of physical violence, even when it later was associated with the overweening arrogance of the rich and mighty."

Discovering that his particular series of opportunistic decisions has worked out rather badly, Oedipus does not question his whole decision-making process or wonder if his current evaluation of his circumstances and of the consequences of his actions must be as poor now as it had been previously. He simply looks at his cards—parricide, father of children by his own mother—and decides that the best response is to blind himself.

From this perspective, we might say that Oedipus's problem, and the opportunist's problem, is that s/he is just reacting. S/he has no capacity or inclination to stop and try to conceive where his or her true interests may lie. "Stop—in the name of god, if you love your own life," Jocasta tells him, wanting him to stop trying to find out what had happened in the past.⁵⁴ But we might say that stopping would have been too difficult. It would have confronted him with that most unsolvable riddle: What should I do? Or—better?—What should *we* do?⁵⁵

On two occasions in the play Oedipus is referred to as the helmsman, and this may connect some spectators and readers to the later Stoic idea of *recta ratio*, and its intimations of steering the proper course through stormy waters, a helmsman steady on the tiller. But of course, and, as suggested earlier, a helmsman who doesn't have a good idea of where to go—and worse, who does not realize his insufficiency . . . Well, what are we going to claim here? Let us take it on faith that the craft in which we are currently floating—the leaky, wind-blown craft that is this paper—let us assume that it is currently headed too close to whirlpools of nihilism, of claiming that human beings cannot know the good, cannot know what is in their interests. From this perspective what "grounds" do we have for claiming—or rather, in what churning water are we claiming—that it is worse to be in another boat, under the strong command of a helmsman who is sure of what he's doing and that he will bring us through safe? Some of those on this latter, strongly commanded ship can see that in fact it is passing too close to Scylla and that Scylla is getting ready to start devouring one life (or marriage, investment bank, nation, set of illusions) after another, but, . . . Supposing the other alternative is that other boat on its way to the whirlpools of nihilism?

⁵⁴ *Oedipus the King*, lines 1162-63.

⁵⁵ It might be said that the fact that Oedipus (a king's son) was so able to get what he wanted proved a great obstacle, since he did not know, and would not stop to wonder, if getting what he wanted was necessarily a good thing.

As a father one of the things I quickly “learned”—that is, learned because it was something I already “knew,” it was part of my character—was that nine times out of ten it is better to be authoritative and wrong than to waffle, however well such waffling may reflect one’s actual state of mind. A child gains strength and confidence from feeling that his or her parents are strong and confident, and in the short run the illusion will often do as well as the reality. And it is easier to disagree with, to push off in a new direction from something rigid than from mush. But . . . We would seem—back to our particular reading of Pascal’s wager—on the verge of proposing that it is better to pretend that one’s know-how is knowledge than to try to live “truer” to one’s ignorance. But the problem arises when that lonely one in our “nine of ten” appears—as indeed it should appear roughly one time out of ten. One’s craft and everyone in it are headed straight for Scylla, or Charybdis, and our ever-strong and self-confident helmsman does not realize it and will not let go of the tiller. At such moments one has the supremely Oedipal realization that one has been living a lie, one has allowed oneself to be duped, one wanted to be duped, and so duped one was. (*Cf.*, the financial crisis that went public in 2008, and the role of Alan Greenspan and other leaders in leading us toward it.)⁵⁶

* * *

From one perspective, this is not and cannot be a very optimistic paper. Although some of Sophocles’s contemporaries thought of him as an easygoing, happy man, his works do not encourage an optimistic view of human agency.⁵⁷ This may be—may well be—because human experience in general does not encourage an optimistic view of human agency, but Sophocles’s perspective must also be a reflection of his times and of the agency, or lack thereof, that he observed and felt for himself (presumably, not as a playwright, but as a citizen). Like American “baby boomers,” Sophocles began life (c. 497 BC) when his society was near a peak, flourishing in ways that it would never flourish again. We may say that he made his way through

⁵⁶We have waded into what Aristotle called “general ignorance”: our ignorance of our true self-interests (what it would be worth achieving, our “best interests”, “the good” in Platonic terminology). The subject must be left to the many other papers and books that have taken it up. A few paragraphs of my own on this subject appear in the essays “Philosophy and Death” and “The King’s Therapy”.

⁵⁷ E.g.: Phrynichus, an Athenian comic poet, wrote an epitaph for “Blessed Sophocles, who lived a long life, a happy man and a clever one.” Quoted in Knox, “Greece and the Theater,” 26-27.

devastating decline and collapse writing furiously. (By one count he wrote more than 100 plays.) *Oedipus the King* was first performed around 429 B.C. This was when plague struck Athens, and, as Thucydides wrote, “People in good health were all of a sudden attacked by violent heats in the head,” which symptoms could be followed by internal inflammation, discharges of bile, retching, ulcers, unquenchable thirst and severe diarrhea, which latter brought on the weakness that, a week after the onset of the disease, resulted in death in most cases. As Athenians became afraid to visit one another, many died of neglect. And, on the other hand, Thucydides says,

death was the consequence [for] such as made any pretensions to goodness: honor made them unsparing of themselves in their attendance on their friends’ houses, where even the members of the family were at last worn out by the moans of the dying, and succumbed to the force of the disaster. . . . The bodies of dying men lay one upon another, and half-dead creatures reeled about the streets and gathered round all the fountains in their longing for water.

As for the living, their “true interests,” we might say, were at least temporarily redefined.

Men now did just what they pleased, coolly venturing on what they had formerly done only in a corner, seeing the rapid transitions produced by persons in prosperity suddenly dying and those who before had nothing succeeding to their property. So they resolved to spend quickly and enjoy themselves, regarding their lives and riches as alike things of a day.⁵⁸

Add to this the fact that by this time Athens had gotten itself engaged in the Peloponnesian War, at the end of which Athens—the strongest city-state in Greece at its outset, and the preeminent city-state of world history—was reduced, or had reduced itself via arrogance, cupidity and shortcomings of its system of government, to poverty and subjection, its glory now living on in reactions, ruins and fragments—*Οἰδίπυος Τύραννος* hardly least among them.

By comparison, as I am writing this paper in New York City in the early twenty-first century, can I possibly feel, or sense in the air, the level of fear, insecurity, anger and despair that Sophocles must have felt or sensed? The civil war we are in the midst of is ostensibly non-violent, and the winning side—capital and its spear carriers—are so far in front that many of those who are losing do not even realize there is a war going on. The plague we are living through—environmental degradation and consumer capitalism—is not leaving bodies rotting in the street, or at least not in my uber-wealthy corner of the United States.

⁵⁸ Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*, 2.47-2.54.

We are also living at the end of one of the more optimistic periods in human history, what began with the name of the Enlightenment, became the Industrial Revolution and on from there. The sociologist C. Wright Mills has summarized the goal of this period in what we can call Oedipal terms: “the control through reason of man’s fate.”⁵⁹ In other words, for the past several hundred years human beings have been seeking, much as Oedipus did, to use mental capacities to gain surcease—for example, in the modern case, by prolonging individual lives and making living conditions more comfortable for those in the wealthy corners. As this period grinds to a halt—or already imploded in the Holocaust? or with the incineration at Hiroshima of 70,000 people in less than a minute?—we may at times find ourselves wondering if a larger effect of our breathtaking theories and masses of information has not been to paper over, or reduce to bytes, the limits of our understanding and our resistance to seeing ourselves and our predicament clearly. Did the Enlightenment raise our sights, allowing us to realize how much agency we in fact could enjoy, or, in raising our sights, has it led us to overlook how hampered we are both by the limits of our knowledge and understanding and by how little we really want to know, how we will not look clearly and steadfastly at what we are doing and who we are?

When the youthful Oedipus came to his crossroads he sought with all his might to best the strong men he found there. Similarly, for millennia human beings have sought to impose their wills on others, to exploit, domesticate or eliminate them. And subgroups of our species—e.g., white male Westerners—have sought to exploit, domesticate or eliminate other subgroups—e.g., black Africans, Native Americans, women. Over the centuries, and particularly recently, this approach has led to astounding increases in “tyrannical” powers—in the technology, force and influence of some *homo sapiens* and of the species as a whole. If in fact viruses and bacteria have nonetheless been winning the Darwinian war and will overwhelm us in the end, still we have bested many of the various species we have met at our crossroads. If these species still exist it is on our farms and gardens, in our laboratories and zoos.⁶⁰

⁵⁹ “The Conservative Mood”, 208.

⁶⁰ As regards the bacteria, in *Full House* Stephen Jay Gould argues that they are “the dominant life forms on earth”. Bacteria are more numerous, have survived on earth much longer, are capable of surviving and do survive in a much wider range of environments and on a much wider range of energy sources, and are more diverse, with the result that the “total bacterial biomass may exceed all the rest of life combined, even forest trees.” (See pages 175-95.)

But along with all this “progress”—or all this winning, let’s call it—in the past few centuries an overlapping collection of environmental, spiritual and emotional concerns have grown rapidly, as has a quite altered view of human beings’ place in the universe. (I.e., we’ve gone—we’ve shifted ourselves—from central to insignificant.⁶¹) A growing number of human beings have begun questioning the value, if not the necessity, of our imposing our wills on others.⁶² There are now millions of Westerners who see some aspects of human “flourishing” as themselves noxious and who, at least in their writings and conversation, value the preservation as well as the “ethical treatment” of other living things over and above some activities that might seem to promote human flourishing (e.g., destruction of rain forests to increase crop land; medical experimentation on animals). As in the Oedipus legend the killing of Laius led eventually to plague in Thebes and emotional crisis in the home of the king, so it is thought by some that the imposition of our will is leading not only to environmental plague but also to

⁶¹ In *Full House*, Gould, quoting from an observation of Freud’s, writes:

We had once thought that we lived on the central body of a limited universe until Copernicus, Galileo, and Newton identified the earth as a tiny satellite to a marginal star. We then comforted ourselves by imagining that God had nevertheless chosen this peripheral location for creating a unique organism in His image—until Darwin came along and ‘relegated us to descent from an animal world.’ We then sought solace in our rational minds until . . . psychology discovered the unconscious.

Gould goes on to note that Freud left out the revolutionary discoveries of geology and paleontology, after which the history of the Earth was no longer coextensive with the story of human life (the Biblical conception of the Earth’s history). Gould continues:

If we are but a tiny twig on the floridly arborescent bush of life, and if our twig branched off just a geological moment ago, then perhaps we are not a predictable result of an inherently progressive process . . . ; perhaps we are, whatever our glories and accomplishments, a momentary cosmic accident.

You might say that the goal of *Full House* is to take we humans down yet another peg in arguing, as described in the previous endnote, that not *homo sapiens* but bacteria are “the dominant life forms on earth”. (See pages 17-18 for the above quotations.)

⁶² There have been many rich explorations of this theme by thinkers and scholars working in a range of fields, including anti-colonial, African-American, environmental, feminist and gender studies. The work of the French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas also comes to mind. To quote from just one example here, Jessica Benjamin’s *The Bonds of Love* (221):

The vision of recognition between equal subjects gives rise to a new logic—the logic of paradox, of sustaining the tension between contradictory forces. Perhaps the most fateful paradox is the one posed by our simultaneous need for recognition and independence: that the other subject is outside our control and yet we need him. To embrace this paradox is the first step toward unraveling the bonds of love. This means not to undo our ties to others but rather to disentangle them; to make of them not shackles but circuits of recognition.

spiritual sickness.⁶³ We have learned so well how to be “tyrants,” and we have been so captivated by this capacity and by its blinding power, we have avoided wondering about the extent to which exploiting, domesticating and eliminating—or trying to control fate—is an appropriate response. “Destroyer and destroyed,” Oedipus calls himself (in one translation).⁶⁴

* * *

This brings us to the **ninth alternative**: Oedipus’s ignorance was not accidental but intentional, and Sophocles’ play is about “the tragedy of self-consciousness, of self-recognition,” the breakdown of our all-too-human willed ignorance.⁶⁵ The quoted phrase is from the classicist Martin Mueller, and I am pleased to thank him and his essay “The Children of Oedipus” for calling my attention to this reading. Mueller’s essay in turn makes use of: a comment in Aristotle’s *Poetics*; Voltaire’s acerbic dismissal of Sophocles’s play; and, above all, the French philosopher Paul Ricœur’s use of the Freudian concept of “resistance” in an otherwise non-Freudian (or non-Oedipal-complex) reading of Sophocles’s play.

Let us take these in chronological order, but begin before Aristotle, with Sophocles. One of Mueller’s arguments is that Aristotle, Voltaire, Freud and Ricœur can help contemporary readers get back in touch with the “Sophoclean dialectic of truth as resistance and disclosure.”⁶⁶ For example, Sophocles has Oedipus ask what, right after the murder of Laius, stopped Creon from “tracking down the killer then and there?”

⁶³ See, for example Claude Lévi-Strauss: “l’espèce humaine vit sous une sorte de régime d’empoisonnement interne” (the human race is in the process of poisoning itself). Lévi-Strauss seems to have made some version of this statement on several occasions, as well as in *Saudades do Brasil*.

⁶⁴ *Oedipus the King*, Oedipus the King, translated by Stephen Berg and Diskin Clay.

⁶⁵ Mueller, “Children of Oedipus”, 109-10.

⁶⁶ Presumably, the word “disclosure” here comes from the English translation of Freud’s *The Interpretation of Dreams*, chapter 5, section D: “The action of the play consists simply in the disclosure, approached step by step and artistically delayed (and comparable to the work of a psychoanalysis) that Oedipus himself is the murderer of Laius, and that he is the son of the murdered man and Jocasta.”

“The singing, riddling Sphinx,” Creon answers. She “persuaded us to let the mystery go and concentrate on what lay at our feet.”⁶⁷ Since Oedipus’s scarred, lame feet are the essential clue to his identity, here is resistance and disclosure at play.

Secondly, for his part, Aristotle recognizes the improbability of Oedipus being so long ignorant of the manner of Laius’s death. He excuses this improbability on the grounds that it lies “outside the action,” in the backstory, as we now call it.⁶⁸

So then, skipping a few centuries, we come to Voltaire. How could Oedipus, Jocasta and the chorus be so dumb? Voltaire asked in his letter about the play. How could Oedipus not have known, or at least previously wondered about, how his predecessor, Laius, died? How could he not have known where the murder was committed? “[J]’avoue que je ne connais point de terme pour exprimer une pareille absurdité.” (I swear I don’t know how to put into words such an absurdity.) Apollo had already declared that Oedipus would kill his father and marry his mother. Someone had already said that his putative father, Polybus, was not his real father. When he was an infant his mother had had his heels pierced; he still has scars as a result. “[N]’y-t-il pas un aveuglement ridicule à en douter?” Are we really supposed to swallow such blindness lock, stock and barrel? “Si seulement la juste envie d’Oedipe de se connaître n’était pas accompagnée d’une ignorance ridicule de lui-même.” If only Oedipus’s desire to know himself had not been accompanied by such a ridiculous lack of self-knowledge.⁶⁹

It should be said that when Voltaire wrote this letter he was busy writing his own play based on the Oedipus legend, and perhaps his criticism should be taken as a sign that this work, which has hardly come to surpass Sophocles’s, was not going that well. Barely twenty years old, Voltaire commits the standard error of headstrong young readers: imagining that his reactions to a text are not a product of it; not giving the writer sufficient credit for his work. Mueller’s broader-minded view is that Voltaire’s critical remarks on Sophocles’s play “came so close to

⁶⁷ *Oedipus the King*, lines 147-49.

⁶⁸ Aristotle, *Poetics*, Section 3, Part XXIV: “Accordingly, the poet should prefer probable impossibilities to improbable possibilities. The tragic plot must not be composed of irrational parts. Everything irrational should, if possible, be excluded; or, at all events, it should lie outside the action of the play (as, in the Oedipus, the hero’s ignorance as to the manner of Laius’ death)”.

⁶⁹ Quotations in this paragraph are from Voltaire, “Lettre contenant la critique de l’*Oedipe* de Sophocle”. I have provided the English: glosses of Voltaire’s phrases.

grasping its essential point that his failure to do so strikingly proves how alien the Sophoclean dialectic” had become to succeeding ages.⁷⁰

This is the perspective that Ricœur revives in *De l'interprétation: Essai sur Freud* (in translation: *Freud and Philosophy*):

[A]t the beginning of the play Oedipus calls down curses upon the unknown person responsible for the plague, but he excludes the possibility that that person might in fact be himself. The entire drama consists in this resistance and the ultimate collapse of this presumption. . . . [T]his presumption is no longer the culpable desire of the child, but the pride of the king: the tragedy is not the tragedy of Oedipus the child but of Oedipus Rex.⁷¹

And so we come again to Mueller's conclusion:

Oedipus Rex is the drama of the process of truth. Sophocles's creation does not aim at reviving the Oedipus complex in the minds of the spectators; on the basis of a first drama, the drama of incest and parricide, Sophocles has created a second, the tragedy of self-consciousness, of self-recognition.⁷²

I have underscored the word “tragedy” here to help distinguish this reading from the “heroic” one. It is of course possible to imagine a spectator leaving the theater more elated than sad or frustrated by Sophocles's play, and why this is will be touched on at the very end of the present piece, but insofar as we, nonetheless, experience the play as a tragedy, it is certainly not because Oedipus' search for self-knowledge seems so heroic to us, and more likely because we feel the pain of self-consciousness and self-recognition. This experience will be doubly painful and discomfiting for us insofar as the particular production (or translation) and our openness to it leads our minds and hearts away from a legendary Greece and a legendary figure and toward a sense of universal human experience.

Talking with people about their families and observing families, it is easy to get the sense that Freud was on to something: “Oedipal” conflicts, and unresolved Oedipal conflicts hardly least of all, play a major role in human existence. And thus we have some sympathy with Freud's proposal regarding the play, as made in a letter to his friend Wilhelm Fleiss and in one of his *Introductory Lectures*:

⁷⁰ Mueller, “Children of Oedipus”, 109-10.

⁷¹ Ricœur, *De l'interprétation*, 496.

⁷² Mueller, “Children of Oedipus”, 109-10.

I have found love of the mother and jealousy of the father in my own case too, and now believe it to be a general phenomenon of early childhood. . . . If that is the case, the gripping power of Oedipus Rex . . . becomes intelligible.

The auditor [or male auditor, we would say] reacts to the play as though he was obliged to remember the two wishes—to do away with his father and in place of him to take his mother to wife—and to be horrified at them.⁷³

But this is not the universal human experience that either I, Ricœur or Mueller has in mind. The idea here is not that life—social life and mortality and reproduction—blinds us and propels us to do things that, were we willing and able to see more clearly, we might not do. This is true enough, but the rather different idea of this ninth alternative is that we forever run the risk of having our blinders removed, however temporarily, and of glimpsing not only this aspect of our predicament, but also the human predicament more generally, and the various roles we play in response to it. (And, *n.b.*, glimpsing is not the same as understanding—and this is another source of anxiety.) Again, in this reading the tragedy lies not in our behavior, but in self-consciousness and its signal product: rare moments like that one day in in the midst of Oedipus’s middle age, moments when we try to see all that we might.

Of course the present paper, like many another work of scholarship or imagination, would like to see itself as just such a moment, and thus I would be in bad faith were I not to recognize that there is also something quite un-terrible, quite un-tragic—something invigorating and satisfying—about “moments” (or stretches of time) when we try to make full use of our capacity for self-consciousness. (With the self of the present paper not being my particular self, but what we might call our species self.)

Working on another essay, on psychotherapy, I found, in my pocket, as it were, the analogy of struggling to fine-tune a faint and distant radio signal and finally succeeding. Now to be able to hear—to have worked so painstakingly and successfully to be able to hear, and to be hearing from so far away, something so special. News of the universe, news of the soul. In such a circumstance, it might well *not* be the contents of the news, of the broadcast, that would be exhilarating or soothing, nourishing. Indeed, the content might not be altogether pleasant or easily digestible. Or, in Oedipus’s case, the content could be shameful, repulsive, incriminating. In the midst of all this, the strength, the feeling—the astonishment?—would come rather from

⁷³ Freud, letter to Wilhelm Fleiss of October 15, 1897 (“Letter 71” in *The Origins of Psycho-Analysis*); and *Introductory Lectures*, Lecture XXI, 331.

being, and at long last, and however feebly, connected. To say yes, yes—it is no wonder that I am suffering!⁷⁴ (In what sense, we might ask, is reaching such a conclusion a tragedy?)

* * *

There is an idea, and it cannot be called a bad idea, that a paper should first say what it is going to say, then do the saying, and then, in conclusion, say what it has said. This is a program that I feel on the verge of accomplishing. I have said the paper would consider at least ten different readings of Sophocles’s *Oἰδίποσος Τύραννος*, focusing on what might be learned thereby about human agency or our lack thereof. With the tenth alternative, just ahead, this task will be accomplished, and I am here recalling that this has been our goal.

And yet I feel that many readers will have a certain sense of dissatisfaction—that this is all. As if I had said we were going to take a stroll to a cliff, and we did indeed take a stroll to a cliff, but . . . Here we are, at the edge of the cliff.

What is wanted as an outcome of and justification for intellectual work is the answer. How should I live? How should we live? And though I gave my little warnings that no such answer would be forthcoming and that readers might find themselves reminded of the futility of trying to answer such fundamental questions, . . . Still, this cannot be satisfying. Among other things, our reading and writing and thinking and choosing is driven by our belief that there *is* a right answer. There must be one!

What to do, what am I going to do, what should I do, given my current situation, how to proceed? By pure aporia or rather by assertions and counter-assertions invalidated as I go, or sooner or later. . . . There must be other approaches. If not, there would be no hope. But there is no hope. By the way, before going any further, forging ahead, I should say that I am using the word “aporia” without knowing what it means.⁷⁵

⁷⁴ Warner, *The King’s Therapy: An exploration of what The King’s Speech says about psychotherapy and our need for help*, forthcoming. E-mail eaton0824@gmail.com for a draft.

⁷⁵ Samuel Beckett, *L’Innomable*, 7-8. *N.B.*, This is my translation of a French text that the author has himself translated. See Beckett, *The Unnamable*. The ancient Greek word ἀπορεία (aporia) literally means “without resources”. (See also *aporein*: to be helpless.) Plato uses ἀπορεία to describe a state in which, after diligent intellectual exploration, one no longer even knows what one *wants* to say. Aristotle—more optimistic?—used the noun and cognates to refer to puzzles or problems that he would then seek to solve.

Does it help if I recall that this paper was embracing a Bakhtinian approach by which one interpretation, or “right answer,” can only give way to, or give birth to, other, different ones? Does it help if I say again that this is what a study of the history of readings of Sophocles’s play suggest: dialectic does not bring us to the truth, but is a potentially infinite process (and a highly diverting one besides!).

* * *

I am not an expert in Sophocles’s biography, and what I have learned above all is that not that much is known about him. Therefore, in offering in the following last (!), **tenth alternative** I will be engaging in some legendizing, not unlike Sophocles own work with Oedipus.

In my legend, Sophocles had his Oedipal moment or Oedipal years: years in which, as a result of the implosion of his once great society, he glimpsed human limitation and the human predicament, if not in all of its horror, then in a good deal of it. In my legend, too, Sophocles had one of the standard human responses to such an experience, and to the more general human experience of answerlessness. A Freudian might call this an obsessive-compulsive response: an attempt to create false orders as a bulwark against the disorder around and inside oneself. In Sophocles’s case, of course, this attempt was combined with the talents of a great artist and took the form of great artistry.

To explain these assertions, as with the previous “ninth alternative,” I am going to quickly leapfrog from one writer and time period to the next, though always with an eye on Sophocles. The “frogs” here are not Aristotle, *et al.*, but: the literary critic John W. Aldridge, Ernest Hemingway, Freud and Freud’s Viennese Jewish contemporary Stefan Zweig.

In “Afterthoughts on the Twenties and *The Sun Also Rises*,” Aldridge wrote:

Language is a provisional barricade erected against the nihilism that threatens to engulf Hemingway’s characters, the nihilism that is always seeking to enter and flood the human consciousness. Hemingway at his best offered us a portrait that did not need to be painted of a condition we recognize everywhere around and within us, and he gave us as well our only means of defense against it—the order of artistic and moral form embodied in language that will not, in spite of everything, give up its hold on the basic sanities, will not give up and let out the shriek of panic, the cry of anguish, that the situation logically calls for. That, and

not any of the bravura exploits behind his celebrity, constituted his heroism, and that was the lesson in heroism he had to teach.⁷⁶

From this perspective, as Hemingway is the hero towering over the wounded and floundering characters of his novel, and of his life and times, so Sophocles is the great hero towering above the tragedy he brought to the ancient Greek stage, and this at a time when Greek civilization was beginning to go down to defeat at its own hands. As Aldridge outlines in Hemingway's case, so a part of Sophocles's heroism lies in giving "artistic and moral form" to human tragedy. But I would also say that even more, and in both his and Hemingway's cases, we may be impressed by the authors' willingness and ability to present human blindness and unhappiness without themselves blinking.⁷⁷

I would not have us underestimate the courage and strength of character this involves. For an Athenian of great psychological insight, attempting to live and to portray human character and behavior while his society was losing itself to war and disease, demagoguery, treason and incompetence— It must have been excruciating. Some of us today might—with a sense of being in similar straits—shout: "It is excruciating!" More dispassionately we may note a parallel between Sophocles's experience and that of Freud and Zweig. The latter two men lived through the political, economic and moral collapse of another great, cosmopolitan city and rich empire. They, too, saw shattered the hopes for the daring science, culture and government of their society. "Against my will I have witnessed the most terrible defeat of reason and the wildest triumph of brutality in the chronicle of the ages," Zweig wrote in the early 1940s, not long before he committed suicide. "Life, as we find it, is too hard for us," Freud wrote between the two world wars, in the midst of rising Austrian anti-Semitism (and long after theorizing about the Oedipal complex), and in the midst of the sort of endless military campaign he engaged in, trying to impose on his colleagues his particular conceptions of the human psyche.⁷⁸

⁷⁶ Aldridge, "Afterthoughts on the Twenties and *The Sun Also Rises*", 129.

⁷⁷ Going back to Hemingway's novel now, almost 100 years after its publication, one is struck by how trivial and banal the human beings are, and by the evocation of anti-Semitism, of willful prejudice. In comparison to them, Oedipus, Tiresias, the old shepherd and perhaps even Creon and Jocasta are people or characters of much greater depth. But the superficiality of Hemingway's characters, Robert Cohn excepted, is as integral to his vision as human depth is to Sophocles's. Would we say, though, that if life is suffering, we would rather suffer as deeply as one of Sophocles's characters, rather than vapidly?

⁷⁸ For more on what I am calling Freud's "military campaign", see John Kerr, *A Most Dangerous Method: Freud, Jung and Sabina Spielrein*.

“Not to be born is best,” Sophocles writes. “Pitiful, you suffer so, you understand so much,” his Chorus tells his lead character. “I wish you had never known.”⁷⁹ Doing our part to pave the way toward a next reading of this great play, can we say that these are the words of a human being who never stopped trying, if not to know, to keep our eyes open?

⁷⁹ Zweig, *The World of Yesterday*, vi. Freud, “Civilization and Its Discontents”, 22. Sophocles, *Oedipus the King*, lines 1388 and 1481-82.

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