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The Importance of Oedipus: Infamous Complex or Existential Hero?

Shoshana Primak

The concept of free will is practically inescapable in modern day philosophy. Indeed, questions regarding the power of free will are of no shortage in philosophy: While one philosopher might assert that humans have absolute free will, another may accept free will as present but questions how powerful it is, while a third explores the implications of a deterministic universe in which there is a complete absence of free will, and so it goes on until an entire library can be filled with texts that deal exclusively with freedom. I make note of this modern captivation with the concept of free will not because I intend to add this work to the aforementioned figurative library, but to remind my reader of a simple, chronological fact: the ancient Greeks did not have a concept of free will, nor did they care to question the significance of such a notion. It is of the utmost importance that this fact be viewed not as a mere triviality; rather, this knowledge *must* be taken into account when considering any aspect of an ancient Greek text that, to the modern eye, appears to be concerned with a battle between free will and Determinism. To make an argument in which an ancient Greek author is portrayed as a supporter of the concept of absolute free will is an anachronistic fallacy and must be disputed as one. Resultantly, although Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus* looks to the modern eye to be a play centered around issues of Determinism and free will, it is no such thing; instead, the play addresses questions of choice, agency, and most of all, meaning. Through the lens of Albert Camus' philosophy of the absurd, and backed by a philological investigation of the presence of 'fate' in the Sophoclean universe, I will argue that that Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus* gives a firm answer to if and how man can go on living in a world that he has discovered to be meaningless.

Before examining the implications of Camus' notion of the absurd on the text, one must first address the concept of fate as it is portrayed in the play. Along with having no specific concept of free will, "the Greeks did not develop a notion of a universal, all-determining fate before the third century B.C." and as such, the characters of *Oedipus Tyrannus* "are not mere puppets of the gods; no figure in Greek tragedy is" (Segal 75). While fate appears to be similar to the concept of Determinism, fate from the ancient Greek perspective does not create a framework in which all things are fixed, thereby making it a concept

distinct from Determinism. Taking this distinction into account, it becomes apparent that while certain circumstances within the lives of Oedipus and Jocasta (his 'mother-wife') are fixed, the extent to which they are fixed is very specific: the only fated certainties in their lives are that Oedipus will kill his father and that he will bed his mother. Aside from those two absolutes, any and all other choices made by Oedipus and Jocasta are their own, meaning they are responsible for any actions they take to attempt to circumvent the prophesized events, as well as for any of their reactions to the prophesized circumstances as they occur.

To further prove that the concepts of fate and Determinism are distinctly different in the ancient Greek perspective, it is useful to investigate the difference between the Greek words *moira* and *tyche*. The distinction between *moira*, or 'fate,' and *tyche*, 'fortune,' in Sophocles' *Tyrannus* is subtle yet demonstrable, and by investigating the instances in which each word is used, one is able to emphasize the way agency works within a universe that deals with fate. It is worth noting right away that *tyche* is used eleven times in Tyrannus, while *moira* is used only five times, which immediately displays the more important nature of the latter. To define each word more fully, *tyche* means 'chance or fortune,' and can be used in two ways: it can refer to the kind of random, uncontrollable events and occurrences of life, or to the result of positive or negative fortune (or 'luck') that one has had. In *Tyrannus*, *tyche* is primarily used to refer to a random event or circumstance, and each instance in which it is used is very simple. Overall, these instances of *tyche* are worth looking at because they are simple, as that simplicity displays the heightened importance of those instances in which *moira* is chosen over *tyche*.

While *moira* means 'fate,' the word's original meaning was one's 'part' or 'portion,' which developed into a use in which one's fate or destiny is one's specifically designated, or 'doled out,' portion in life. Unlike the varying ways in which *tyche* is translated throughout *Tyrannus*, *moira* is translated as 'fate' or 'Destiny' every time it is used in *Tyrannus*, and always either directly or contextually refers to specific, prophesized events. By juxtaposing the cases in which Sophocles uses *moira* against those in which he uses *tyche*, the greater importance of those cases in which *moira* is used becomes readily apparent, as it is those cases (and only those cases) that deal with over-arching, unchangeable moments of fate. In this way, the themes of agency and choice are

brilliantly showcased through the hero's actions, as we see Oedipus and his fellow characters make their own choices in every case other than those involving *moira*. Armed with this doubly secure knowledge that these characters have agency in every case other than those which are fated, one is enabled to make an argument for Oedipus as an absurd hero.

In addition to having a general understanding of the effect of fate in *Oedipus Tyrannus*, then, it is also necessary for the purpose of this essay that one has a basic understanding of Albert Camus' notion of the absurd. Camus defines the absurd as the simultaneous experience of two conditions: first, that human beings are always seeking meaning, purpose, and value in the world, and second, that the world is empty of meaning, purpose, and value. Camus identifies two common responses to the discovery of the absurd: physical suicide and philosophical suicide. Logically speaking, Camus views these two responses to the realization of the absurd as creating a false dilemma. While both physical and philosophical suicide attempt to get around the absurd by rejecting one of its conditions, Camus argues that there is a third option: embracing the two conditions of the absurd to take the role of the absurd hero. Before each of the three responses can be applied to characters within *Oedipus Tyrannus* in any worthwhile way, each must first be examined solely with reference to Camus' philosophy.

Beginning with the first reaction, physical suicide is the taking of one's own life in an attempt to avoid the absurd. Camus views physical suicide as a confession of one's confusion caused by the inability to understand or bear the world they live in: "Dying voluntarily," he says, "implies that you have recognized, even instinctively, the ridiculous character of that habit, the absence of any profound reason for living, the insane character of that daily agitation, and the uselessness of suffering" (Camus 5-6). By "that habit," Camus is referring to condition one, that man habitually searches for meaning, purpose, or value in life. When one commits physical suicide, then, one is attempting to eliminate the absurd through the elimination of the first condition, as one cannot seek meaning in life if they are dead. While this approach embodies a sort of pseudo-logic it is ultimately arbitrary, as one does not eliminate the absurd by dying, they simply eliminate themselves. Having displayed the failure of the first response, Camus goes on to describe the second, which he deems philosophical suicide. Camus sees philosophical suicide as something born of "hope," which he

identifies as the appeal to another world, a world in which there is meaning, purpose, or value (Camus 32). Whether that appeal is a religious appeal to an afterlife or an appeal to a different fate is irrelevant: Camus rejects hope in any case, arguing that it is simply an illusion created in an attempt to reject the second condition of the absurd by insisting that the (or perhaps more correctly, a) world is not devoid of meaning.

Knowing, then, that neither physical nor philosophical suicide allows one to negate the truth of the absurd, Camus presents a third option: the absurd hero. Confronted with the reality of the absurd, the absurd hero looks at the world around him with startlingly, unsettling clarity and asserts that "What I believe to be true I must therefore preserve. What seems to me so obvious, even against me, I must support" (Camus 52). In this assertion, the absurd hero reveals a characteristic need to unveil truth wherever possible, no matter the cost to himself or to humanity as a whole. To avoid such a truth is to go against one's own mind, a contradiction that leads to a complete lack of selfhood, which is the only circumstance the absurd hero deems unacceptable. Testing this resolve, "at a certain point on his path the absurd man is tempted [and] he is asked to leap. All he can reply is that he doesn't fully understand, that it is not obvious. Indeed, he doesn't want to do anything but what he fully understands" (Camus 53). In all of this, the hero shows himself to possess three qualities that Camus designates as necessary conditions for any such hero: revolt, freedom, and passion.

Revolt is defined by Camus as the "constant confrontation between man and his own obscurity, the certainty of a crushing fate, without the resignation that ought to accompany it" (Camus 54). The absurd hero acknowledges that he will never find meaning, yet he finds himself continuing to search for it regardless, thereby revolting against the very system he so adamantly defends. Not to be mistaken for hope, revolt offers the hero no false comfort; he fully understands that his search for meaning will not be a fruitful one, but that is not enough to stop him from continuing it.

Following revolt, Camus' section on freedom offers perhaps one of the most important concepts for the purpose of this paper, which is his assertion that he, and as a result, his philosophy, has "nothing to do with the problem of metaphysical liberty" (Camus 57). Camus does not make a universal statement regarding the possession of free will in all men, but cares only for the specific instance of freedom of choice when

one is faced with the absurd. As he points out, "if the absurd cancels all my chances of eternal freedom, it restores and magnifies, on the other hand, my freedom of action" (Camus 57). Man is free to choose in the present moment because in the absurd, there is no future: If nothing is absolute, nothing is guaranteed, and one is free to act of their own accord. Of course, there is a time limit on this freedom, as it applies only in the ever-changing present moment.

This human limit of time, then, is where passion enters into the equation. Within the context of the absurd, one cannot measure a life by its quality, as quality is weighed by value, which, by the very definition of the absurd, does not exist. Therefore, one must weigh a life by its quantity, but that quantity is not simply a sum of the years one lives; rather, it is the sum of experiences one endures throughout the span of his conscious life (i.e. the time during which he recognizes the absurd). While each of the qualities alone help guide an individual to the path of the absurd hero, it is only in their combined presence that one can truly achieve the goal of the absurd hero: to live without appeal, in complete and total acceptance of the truth of both conditions of the absurd.

To establish the absurd within Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus*, one must recognize the connection it has to fate. While it is not always the case that the absurd is created by an instance of supreme fate, it is so in the case of *Oedipus Tyrannus*. The key to understanding how the absurd works in the play is viewing its nuances: While on the one hand, "the Sophoclean hero acts in a terrifying vacuum, a present which has no future to comfort and no past to guide, an isolation in time and space which imposes on the hero the full responsibility for his own action and its consequences" (Knox 5), it still remains an absolute truth that a central event in Oedipus' life is fated. In other words, Oedipus, and all other characters within the play, are fully responsible for their actions because without the knowledge of the past or the promise of the future, the hero's actions become their own and only their own, as there is no way to know any other reason for those actions. That they are "isolated in time and space" is incredibly important, as it stands to emphasize the philosophical point that there is no way the hero could argue that 'they would have acted differently if not for X,' as any such argument is irrelevant seeing as X is present in their reality and therefore is something they must be responsible for.

Additionally, it is significant to refer to two arguments E. R. Dodds makes about the nature of Sophocles' beliefs: First, that Sophocles "did not

believe (or did not always believe) that the gods are in any human sense 'just,'" and second, that Sophocles "did always believe that the gods exist and man should revere them" (Dodds 185). It is interesting that Dodds presents these two points, as they almost mirror Camus' interpretation of the absurd. The first belief presents a world in which man is by his very nature incapable of finding meaning in the world. For Sophocles, this is because man cannot *understand* that meaning, but for a philosophical point, his complete inability to understand the divine meaning or purpose for things is equal to a complete lack of meaning at all. Still, the second belief pushes man to continue to worship the gods regardless of one's inability to understand that divine meaning. From a logical standpoint, one would only do this if one at least in part believed that one would eventually understand the gods' intentions, or if one believed that one would be able to live a meaningful life by living in the way that the gods intended. These logical reasons cannot, however, be the case for following the second belief, as the first belief asserts that Sophocles fully accepted that man is unable to see or understand the meaningful nature of their lives *even if* such meaning exists. From these two points, Oedipus' reality is clearly absurd; regardless of any actions he takes, he will always act out the fated events of the prophecy, while still being A: held responsible for those actions, and B: being completely and totally able to make choices as an individual agent so long as they do not contradict the prophesized events specifically. Thus, as Camus phrases it following his incredibly brief allusion to Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus*, "[the absurd] makes of fate a human matter, which must be settled among men" (Camus 122). With this context regarding fate and the absurd in hand, one can move to the effect of the absurd on the characters of the play themselves.

To properly analyze the importance of viewing Oedipus as an absurd hero, one must first identify the play's depiction of the two faulty responses to one's realization of the absurd, both of which are taken by Jocasta. While it is characteristic of Sophocles that nearly every character other than the protagonist appeals to hope, and while the many characters of *Oedipus Tyrannus* are no exception to this, it is most useful to view Jocasta as an example of both responses. In doing so, it becomes abundantly clear why Jocasta first appeals to hope in an attempt to escape the absurd, and follows that failed appeal by appealing to exile, which is to say, committing suicide.

In attempting to convince the hero to stray from his chosen path, appeals to reason where reason

cannot be found become the norm. Jocasta, for instance, repeatedly tries to 'reason' with Oedipus as she begs him to stop seeking the truth, but she can ultimately do no more than *hope* he will cease his attempts to do so, specifically because she cannot supply him with any real reason to do so. Even before Jocasta fully understands why it is so troublesome that Oedipus has begun to seek the truth, she prays to Apollo, complaining that "Oedipus is chafing his mind too much, / One agony after another. It makes no sense: / He weighs this strange news / Against old prophecies and lets anyone who speaks / Frighten him. Nothing I say can raise his hopes" (Sophocles 99). While this is not necessarily a primary example of Jocasta appealing to hope, it is nevertheless a perfect example of a Sophoclean phenomenon Bernard Knox speaks of. Throughout plays such as *Oedipus Tyrannus*, Knox says, "the hero, as his friends and enemies see him, needs to learn, to be taught" (Knox 15). This, of course, implies that there is something to be learned, a knowledge to be taught. In actuality, there is no meaning within the confines of the absurd, which means that there is nothing for the hero to learn from his hope-struck friends or enemies. Still, Jocasta pushes Oedipus to accept hope at every turn, culminating in an exchange between the two as Oedipus insists on asking questions about the identity of the herdsman who rescued Jocasta's baby. While this passage will be further utilized in identifying Oedipus as an absurd hero, it is equally important to note Jocasta's reactions to his search for the truth: "By all the gods, if you care for your life, / Stop these questions. Have I not suffered enough?" (Sophocles 106). This request for Oedipus to abandon his search for answers is repeated no less than six times in their short exchange, as Jocasta relentlessly chases after the last, fading images of her false hope, grabbing at the imagined reality she so vigilantly built in an attempt to protect herself from the meaningless reality of the absurd.

For Jocasta, "a world that can be explained even with bad reasons is a familiar world. But, on the other hand, in a universe suddenly divested of illusions and lights, man feels an alien, a stranger. His exile is without remedy since he is deprived of the memory of a lost home or the hope of a promised land" (Camus 6). Indeed, Jocasta needs her false hope to continue living, and she would have been able to retain it had Oedipus chosen to stop searching for the truth. Even if she somehow knew the truth (that Oedipus is the very son she sent to certain death as a baby) so long as Oedipus did not manage to find definitive proof, she

would have gone on living in her false reality for as long it would have taken for the plague to kill all the people of Thebes, herself included. Held against the rather thorough examination of philosophical suicide, then, Jocasta's physical suicide is a much more straightforward issue. Upon the realization that her hope-induced reality has been shattered, Jocasta seems to ask herself a question: Once one recognizes the absurd, "is one to die voluntarily or to hope in spite of everything?" (Camus 16). For Jocasta—who only sees these two possibilities, and therefore can only act on one or the other of them— she must necessarily pick the first, as she knows Oedipus is but a conversation away from finding concrete evidence of what has truly occurred in their family, and as such can no longer choose the second option of hope. Jocasta's physical suicide is worth viewing only insofar as it is clearly a direct consequence of the downfall of her hopefulness. It is worth noting once more that the downfall of her hopeful reality was in no way inevitable; again, while Oedipus was destined to kill his father and bed his mother, he is in no way fated to discover the truth—that is a choice he pursues independent of the dictates of fate.

Finally, then, one may turn to an examination of Oedipus himself. As explained in the section regarding the qualities of an absurd hero, Oedipus must display revolt, freedom, and passion in order to become an absurd hero; furthermore, he must do so in such a way that it is apparent that he fully recognizes the presence the absurd in his reality. Importantly, as scholar Richard Buxton points out, "in the Sophoklean dramatic universe man does not passively accept his limitations: he demands, affirms, strives" (Buxton 37). While there is no neat and perfect parallel to be made from Buxton's words here to Camus' three qualities of the absurd hero, there does not need to be: they are, in essence, making the same point. The Sophoclean hero—in this case, Oedipus—acknowledges his limits, understands that he is only human and as such can see no meaning in the world, and continues living regardless.

Knowing this, an argument for Oedipus as an absurd hero has already begun; one must simply turn back to the previously mentioned exchange between Jocasta and Oedipus regarding the herdsman. While Jocasta begs for Oedipus to cease his search for the truth, repeating her argument six times in less than twenty lines, Oedipus remains firm in his answer, telling Jocasta "You'll never persuade me to give up the truth" (Sophocles 106). At this point in the text, Oedipus is in no way certain of the terrible nature

of the truth he is going to hear, but his certainty of what that truth will be only grows as the plot moves forward. As the herdsman stands in front of Oedipus and begs to be allowed to withhold the truth, Oedipus' resolve holds firm. As the Herdsman protests, crying out, "No! I am on the verge of saying terrible things," Oedipus responds calmly, "And I of hearing them. But hear them I must" (Sophocles 111). Oedipus is so close to unveiling the truth in this moment, a truth he knows in the deepest realms of his heart and mind will ruin him, and still he insists that it be told, thus exhibiting the quality of revolt. In the face of an undeniable truth, all the while knowing exactly what that truth is, and never once denying that truth by appealing to the hope for a different reality, Oedipus continues to search for meaning in his life.

Beyond his clear revolt, Oedipus displays his freedom and passion in his self-blinding. Oedipus' self-blinding must be investigated through the use of two similar but ultimately independent questions: first, did the hero exhibit madness in blinding himself, and second, why did he not kill himself instead. Beginning with the question of madness, it is certainly something Oedipus is accused of by all those left alive to say it. And yet, as Buxton notes, "the overall picture drawn by Sophokles of Oedipus before and after the self-blinding is emphatically not that of a deranged man. The reasons given by Oedipus for putting out his own eyes have, indeed, an inexorable logic" (Buxton 24). Indeed, Oedipus' actions cannot be written off as those of a mad man— as Oedipus himself points out, he blinds himself not out of madness, but for a specific purpose: he cannot look upon what he has done (Sophocles 118). While he is able to accept that life is meaningless due to the horrible unavoidable circumstance of fate that the play is concerned with uncovering, he exhibits freedom outside of that meaninglessness in his choice to blind himself. His blinding was not fated, it was a choice he made through his own agency.

Recognizing, then, that Oedipus alone is responsible for his blinding, one is able to ask why blinding is his chosen recourse to begin with, as opposed to, for instance, suicide. E. R. Dodds posits that Oedipus does not commit suicide because "suicide would not serve his purpose: in the next world he would have to meet his dead parents. Oedipus mutilates himself because he can face neither the living nor the dead" (Dodds 183). This cannot be disputed; as mentioned previously, it is something Oedipus himself says when he is accused of having gone mad by all those who are left to see what he

has done. Dodds' point as a whole, however, avoids an important question: why would Oedipus not blind himself and then kill himself? Oedipus appears to believe that by blinding himself in life, he will be unable to see in the afterlife as well as in life, so why wait to die? If he cannot face the living or the dead, and he must eventually face the dead, why not escape one half of that torment? By remaining alive, though blind, Oedipus acknowledges that his life is entirely devoid of meaning, while still proving that he has the freedom to choose to continue it on his own terms. In doing so, Oedipus displays passion for the present moment as he does whatever he needs to do to remain alive while also refusing to deny the absurd.

As it is at this point abundantly clear that Oedipus embodies the traits of Albert Camus' absurd hero, one is inclined to ask a final, rather appropriate question: Why does that matter? Camus' philosophy came about some two thousand years after Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus*, so what merit can be gained by viewing the second through the lens of the first? The answer can be found in the immediate repudiation of free will and Determinism in the beginning of this paper. When the concepts of free will and Determinism as the modern reader knows them today are (rightfully) removed from the universe of *Oedipus Tyrannus*, one is left with a conflicting message of agency and choice, of responsibility and reason. As a result, the choices Oedipus makes stand to affect not only his own life, but more importantly they reflect on the issue of happiness in the lives of all members of humanity. By achieving greatness in the face of the absurd, the play presents a beautiful framework in which the two themes of fate and choice are not made to be in any way exclusive: In fact, it would be impossible to have one without the other, for if Oedipus were aware of every minute detail of his fate, he could not have achieved greatness in getting to it. Likewise, if he did not persevere in the face of what he sees as impending doom, he would not have discovered that, until he acknowledged the reality of the absurd, he was always blind to the truth of the world on the inside.

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Shoshana Primak is a graduating senior double-majoring in English and Philosophy. Her research was completed in Summer 2019 under the mentorship of Dr. Kevin Kalish (English) and was funded through the Adrian Tinsley Program for Undergraduate Research summer grant. Shoshana plans to pursue a PhD in Philosophy following graduation, and she intends to continue making connections between her undergraduate fields for the rest of her academic career.