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Oedipus' Moral Responsibility in Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus*

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Abstract:

This paper critically examines the issues of moral responsibility in Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus*. This play has generated different interpretations from Greek antiquity till now. Attempts have been made to decide Oedipus' moral standing, which has equally brought about different analysis, one of which considers Oedipus guilty of patricide and incest and holds him responsible for his actions. Other interpretations see Oedipus as a mere puppet in the hands of the gods. Generally, the tragic play of Sophocles, like other Greek myths, presents man as having no power or self-will to control his life events; he does not have the capability to exercise his free will. From the start of the play, the Greek god Apollo plays a vital role of ensuring the fulfilment of Oedipus' destiny by his interference through oracles. This notion has led to the question of whether Oedipus is morally responsible for the events of his life or not. Therefore, this study subjects Oedipus Tyrannus to literary analysis in order to address this issue.

Keywords: Sophocles, *Oedipus Tyrannus*, moral responsibility, free will

1. Introduction

Oedipus Tyrannus (Οἰδίπους Τύραννος) popularly known by its Latin title *Oedipus Rex*, adapted by Ola Rotimi, a Nigerian playwright, as the *Gods Are Not to Blame*, is one of the famous tragedies written in antiquity. *Oedipus Tyrannus* is among the series of plays written by Sophocles of Colonus, Greece, who lived between 496 and 405 BC. It is assumed that Sophocles must have written over a hundred tragedies, but only seven have survived to the modern time. The play was first produced in Athens around 430 B.C. during an annual religious and cultural festival held in honour of the Greek god, Dionysus, at the Great Dionysia. The play has predestination and fate as its central theme. This theme has been a subject of controversy. Generally, Greek myths present the future of individuals as so rigorously predetermined in all its details by an antecedent external agency that his personal volitions or desires have no power to alter the course of events. In *Oedipus Tyrannus*, fate is a destiny that overrules personal will, but as argued by some scholars such as Erse (1993) and Griffiths (1999), fate does not overrule moral responsibility for actions because an individual has decisions and choices to make.

Oedipus Tyrannus has generated various interpretations from different readers, especially in the analysis of Oedipus' character. For instance, Dodds (1966:37-38) gives three impressions of the play from three groups of readers. The first group presents a fatalistic and deterministic view that analyses Oedipus' character and considers him a bad man who deserves the punishment meted out to him by the gods. Here, Oedipus' treatment of Creon, Jocasta's brother, is considered cruel. The fatalistic view sees *Oedipus Tyrannus* as 'a tragedy of destiny' and considers Oedipus as nothing but 'a puppet in the hands of the gods who pull the strings that make him dance.' The second group gives an analytical impression created by Aristotle, portraying Oedipus as 'not altogether bad, even in some ways rather noble; but had those ἀμαρτία (hamartia - tragic flaw or judgment error) that all tragic heroes have.' The third group sees Sophocles as a 'pure artist' who was not interested in justifying the gods but rather took the myth of Oedipus as he found it and used it to make an existing play. Since fate is the central theme of the play, it will be of interest to examine the concept of fate in Greek mythology before engaging in a detailed analysis of the tragic play.

2. The Fates in Greek Mythology

The concept of fate was an important aspect of ancient Greeks' life and often occurred in classical Greek literary works. The ancient Greeks acknowledged the important role of fate in shaping and determining human life as a reality beyond the control of an individual. The term 'fate' signified a petrifying and unstoppable force. The Greeks believed fate to be the will of the gods that could not be thwarted and attributed the inability of both mortals and immortals to change determined outcomes of events to three sisters known as Μοίραι (Moirai) Fates.

The Greeks believed that the Goddess of Necessity, known as Themis, had three daughters - Clotho, Lachesis and Atropos, with a collective name: The Fates. The Greeks believed that these three sisters skilfully structured and controlled the metaphorical thread of life of every human from birth to death. Both the gods and men had to submit to them with the exception of Zeus, the king of the gods. According to Greek mythology, it was the responsibility of Clotho, whose name meant the Spinner, to weave the thread of life; Lachesis, whose name meant Apportioner or Allotter of Lot, measured the length of the thread; while Atropos, meaning Unturnable, cut this thread with her great shears (Plato, *The Republic*, 617c-d). These three goddesses of fate personified the inevitable destiny of

man by assigning to every person his or her fate; and no matter what a man did, the fates would always prevail. Even Zeus could not alter fate.

The representation of fate in Greek myths shows its inevitability. Those who attempted to circumvent their destinies usually ended up fulfilling it in an ironic way. For example, in the myth of Achilles, the son of Peleus and Thetis the Nereid, Thetis, in an attempt to secure immortality for her infant son, rubbed Achilles with ambrosia and placed him in the hearth fire to make him immortal. In another myth, Thetis bathed him in the River Styx. The water made him invulnerable except for his heel by which he was held by his mother. While Achilles was growing up, the Greek armies were preparing for their attack on Troy in Asia Minor. Thetis, aware that her son was fated to lead a glorious but short life if he took part in the war coming soon, dressed him as a woman and sent him to Skyros to live among the women in the court of King Lycomedes (Homer, *Iliad*, Book I: 14 footnote). This was done to protect and avert the pronounced fate of Achilles. The Greeks, who had been cautioned that they could not conquer Troy without the aid of Achilles, sent Odysseus, the king of Ithaca, to find him. Odysseus, disguised as a peddler, went to Skyros bearing a shield and a spear among his goods. When Achilles betrayed his identity by seizing the weapons, Odysseus persuaded him to join the Greek expedition to Troy. Achilles fought many battles during the Greeks' ten-year siege of Troy. When the Mycenaean king, Agamemnon, seized the captive slave Briseis from him during the war, Achilles withdrew the Mymidons from battle and sulked in his tent. The Trojans, emboldened by his absence, attacked the Greeks and drove them into headlong retreat. But when Patroclus, a friend of Achilles' who had led the Mymidons into battle, was slain by the Trojan prince Hector, the grief-stricken Achilles returned to battle, slew Hector, and dragged his body in triumph behind his chariot. After killing Hector, Achilles led the Greeks to the walls of Troy where he was mortally wounded in the heel by Paris. Thus, it was his fate to die to prove the mortality of man (Homer, *Iliad*, Book XXIV). It is from this notion of inevitability of outcome of fate that the term 'fatalism' derives.

Fatalism is a philosophical concept that means all events take place according to a predetermined and inevitable destiny that cannot be controlled or influenced. It is often used interchangeably with predestination while it is frequently confused with determinism. Determinism, unlike fatalism, is a doctrine which claims that events are determined by the events that precede. The fatalism school of thought does not agree with the idea of causal chain of previous events. It opines that preceding events have no causal connection with the events that follow. Thus, according to fatalism, a fated event occurs not according to natural law but in accordance with some mysterious decree issued by some supernatural power from the beginning of creation. Determinism emphasizes that every event has its determining conditions in its immediate antecedents, which may and may not include human will. Fatalism, like predestination, reflects the belief in a supernatural power that predetermines events without recourse to natural law or order. Fatalism further shows that man is powerless to control or influence the future or his own actions (Richard, 1962:56). In a nutshell, the main tenet of fatalism is that everything that will ever happen will happen outside the control of man. Determinism, on the other hand, is the notion that every event has a cause. The main difference between fatalism and determinism is that determinism operates within the framework that actions are part of the causal scheme in which actions and effects are linked. Fatalism, on the other hand, implies that actions are not capable of affecting the outcome of life events.

Fatalism and determinism, presuppose that humans seem not to have any control over the events of their lives. At this point then, the question is 'is there room for free will at all?' Free will is the ability of an individual to make choices without constraint by any metaphysical mental factors or forces. Scholars like Richard (1962) and Kane (1966) have tried to reconcile determinism with free will, leading to two philosophical camps, namely: the incompatibilists and compatibilists.

According to incompatibilists, determinism is incompatible with free will. They reject the thesis of determinism, arguing that, if determinism is true, there can be no free will or freedom. In other words, the incompatibilists believe that the concepts of free will and determinism cannot be true at the same time. The incompatibilists hold two major opinions: metaphysical libertarianism and hard determinism. Metaphysical libertarianism claims that determinism is false and free will is possible, while hard determinism asserts that determinism is true and, thus, free will is not possible. It also posits that indeterminism is equally incompatible with free will. Therefore, either way, the idea of free will is not possible. If the world is deterministic in nature, then, man's feeling of freedom of choice is a mere illusion.

The incompatibilists also use the theory of causal chain to support their claim. They deny the notion that freedom of action consists simply in voluntary behaviour and maintain that free will means that man must be the *causa sui*. To them, if determinism were to be true, then all of man's choices are caused by events and factors outside his control. They further argue that being responsible for one's choice is the first cause of all the choices and this first cause is accepting that there is no antecedent cause of that cause. The argument, in other words, is that if man has free will, man is the ultimate cause of his actions. On the other hand, if determinism is true, then all of man's choices are caused by events and factors outside his control. So, if everything man does is caused by events and factors outside his control, it then follows that he cannot be the ultimate cause of his actions. Therefore, he cannot have free will (Kane, 1966:252). In a clearer term, the argument is: if determinism is true, then man has no control over the past events of his life that determined his present state and does not have control over the law of nature. Since he has no control over these events, he also cannot have control over their consequences. And since his present choices and acts are necessary consequences of the past and the laws of nature; according to determinism, then he has no control over them, hence, there is no free will.

Compatibility, on the other hand, maintains that determinism is logically compatible with free will. To the compatibilists, determinism does not matter; what matters is that individuals' will is the result of their own desires; they are not overridden by some external forces. According to the compatibilists, responsibility does not demand that one be truly responsible for how one is. There are two sides to the compatibilists' idea. The first side believes that it is possible for one to be a free moral agent even if determinism is true. In this case, the compatibilists accept that one is responsible for what one does as long as one is not acting under certain sets of forces

or factors. The other side argues that one can still be held responsible for one's actions and that even if the way one is totally determined by factors that are beyond one's human control.

2.1. An Overview of *Oedipus Tyrannus*

Oedipus Tyrannus is a tragic play of a Theban king who has been predestined to suffer the tragic consequences of fate. The play begins in front of the palace of Oedipus at Thebes many years after the murder of former the king of Thebes, where a priest and a host of children have gathered. The priest informs Oedipus that the Thebes are dying and that there is blight on the fruitful plants of the earth, as well as on the cattle in the fields, and that the women are having stillbirth, with deadly pestilence striking and sparing none in the house of Cadmus (23-25). He then entreats Oedipus as the saviour of the land to cure the city of its woes. Oedipus responds by expressing his sincere condolence and explains that he has sent the queen's brother, Creon, to Delphi to consult the Oracle of Apollo so as to be directed on what to do. As he speaks, the emissary arrives and is forced against his wish to give his report in front of the crowd. Creon delivers the message from Apollo that the land is polluted because the land harbours the murderer of the former king of Thebes, Laius. The god Apollo demands that the murderer be found and either killed or banished. Creon explains to the king who is eager to know how the king met with his death, that king Laius went on a journey but never returned.

Determined to solve this problem, Oedipus sends for the blind prophet, Teiresias. Oedipus asks the prophet to use his skill to provide the name of the murderer of the former king. Teiresias tells the king that he would not have come if he had known the reason for his being summoned. After much pleading and accusation, Teiresias, in anger, declares Oedipus the culprit. Oedipus becomes enraged by this declaration, calls the blind prophet names and accuses him of conspiring with Creon to usurp the throne. As the old man is being led from the palace, he declares that Oedipus will be discovered as the murderer of his own father and brother to his own children, as well as a son and husband to the same woman. Oedipus becomes more determined than ever to unravel the mystery behind the killing of the former king as well as find out his own identity. Eventually, the mystery is unravelled. Put prosaically, the revelation goes thus: King Laius of Thebes learns from an oracle that he is to die by the hand of his own son. In order to prevent this prophecy from being fulfilled, he firmly binds the feet of the baby together with a pin and commands his wife, Jocastathe queen, to have the child killed. The mother, unable to commit the act of filicide as instructed, orders a servant to carry out the deed on her behalf. The servant, also unable to snuff life out of the infant, takes the baby to Cithaeron's forest valley, where he cares for the king's flock of sheep and gives the infant to a shepherd to raise as his own. The shepherd, in turn, takes the baby with him to Corinth, where he is adopted and raised by King Polybus and his wife Merope as their own son. As a young man, Oedipus is confronted by a man who drunkenly accuses him of not being his father's son. Oedipus, upset about the accusation, inquires about his parentage from the king and his wife, who vehemently deny it. Despite their denial, Oedipus, still suspicious and curious, goes a step further to find out who he is by consulting the Delphic Oracle. The Oracle, instead of giving him a direct answer to this inquiry, reveals to him that he has been destined to kill his father and marry with his own mother. Upon hearing this pronouncement, Oedipus, in desperation to avoid his fate resolves to leave Corinth, believing Polybus and Merope to be his real parents, thinking that, once away from them, his foretold fate will be averted.

While travelling, Oedipus gets to a crossroads where he bumps into a carriage that almost drives him off the road. Oedipus and the travellers quarrel over whose chariot has right-of-way. In the course of the quarrel, Oedipus kills the travellers except one, unaware that among the men killed is King Laius, his real father. Thus, he fulfils the first part of the prophecy of the oracle. He kills all but one of the king's men. Oedipus arrives at Thebes and is made the new king after answering the riddle of the Sphinx. With the riddle solved, the Sphinx killed herself. In gratitude to Oedipus for helping them get rid of the Sphinx, the Thebans reward him by making him their king and give him Queen Jocasta as his wife. From then on, the couple live as husband and wife, ignorant of their true relationship, that they are actually mother and son.

As the actions unfold, Oedipus soon discovers that he has unknowingly killed his own father and has married with his mother. In grief and despair at her incestuous life, Jocasta commits suicide, and when Oedipus realises that his mother and wife is dead and that their children are accursed, he puts out his own eyes and relinquishes the throne.

2.2. General Appraisal of *Oedipus Tyrannus*

Oedipus Tyrannus undoubtedly focuses on whether or not Oedipus is guilty of the crimes alleged by the blind prophet Tiresias (*Oedipus Tyrannus*, line 360). The major issue in *Oedipus Tyrannus* is the question of whether or not the major characters of the play can control their fate. This raises series of philosophical questions as observed by Segal:

- How much control do we have over the shape of our lives? How much of what happens to us is due to heredity, to accident, to sheer luck (good or bad), to personality, to the right (or wrong) decision at a particular crossroads in life, or to the myriad interactions among all the above (2001:28).

A critical philosophical analysis of the play will add other related questions: how much blameworthy or praiseworthy is a man if he has been predestined or preordained to act in certain ways? Can Oedipus, in any way, be held responsible for his actions? If Oedipus' story is reconstructed and arranged chronologically and scrutinized by the tenet of fatalism, it is as if all major steps in Oedipus' life are somewhat driven by prediction, though the determinist theory would not agree with this notion since every event has its determining conditions in its immediate antecedents, which may and may not include human will.

The events in *Oedipus Tyrannus* present an interwoven concept of fatalism and determinism. To start with, Laius, as later revealed by Jocasta (*Oedipus Tyrannus*, Lines 711-714), was fated to die a victim at the hands of his own son that is, a child to be born of Laius and Jocasta. With this prediction, the message of the oracle seems to be somehow conditional on the birth of a child and leaving open the possibility of Laius and Jocasta not having a child. Thus, the destiny of Oedipus would be contingent upon the actions of Laius

and, by extension, Jocasta. Both Laius and Jocasta could have decided not to have a child of their own but to adopt one as was commonly practised then. It is this prophecy that goaded Laius to rid himself of his fated son, Oedipus who, unknown to him, is taken to Corinth.

Another oracular prophecy incites ignorant Oedipus to leave his foster parents in order to avoid his predicted destiny. Oedipus is alerted by, according to Sophocles, "a drunken man, in his drink" who accuses him "of being a bastard" (*Oedipus Tyrannus*, lines 909-910, David Grene's translation). After taxing his assumed parents, King Polybus and Queen Merope, who comfort and assure him of his parentage, Oedipus, still filled with anger and resentment, goes to Pytho without the knowledge of his foster parents. He consults with the oracle, believing that his true parentage would be revealed to him. The god, instead of supplying him with the desired answer, sends him back home "unhonored" and rather informs him that he had been fated to lie with his mother and show to daylight an accursed breed which men would not endure, and is doomed to be murderer of the father that begot him (*Oedipus Tyrannus*, lines 780-793). To avert his destiny, Oedipus leaves Corinth.

Logically, the accusation of the drunkard spurs Oedipus into action without which the events leading to the fulfilment of his destiny would not have occurred. Curious about his identity, Oedipus takes his first leading step in consulting the oracle at Delphi, but seems not to have noticed that his question remains unanswered and assumes that the king and queen of Corinth are his real parents. Accordingly, he decides to avoid Corinth and, by so doing, he sets out on the road to Thebes, where he bumps into and kills his real father. Analysing Oedipus' response to the declaration of the oracle, Griffith (1996:52) argues that Oedipus should have asked the oracle for clarification and compares him with Croesus, who was criticised for failing to ask for clarification when he wanted to engage the Persians in warfare and misinterpreted the message from the Delphic oracle and suffered the penalty.

For the oracular declaration in Oedipus' circumstances to really come to pass, effective intervention on the part of the god or gods, as the case may be, is required. The fallible nature of man makes human reactions easily predictable. With man's fallible nature, the gap between merely predicting and fully determining narrows considerably, making it possible for the gods to wield great power over humans. Reacting to this line of reasoning, some critics have argued that, insofar as there was an oracular declaration of his destiny, Oedipus equally creates his own destiny through error of judgements, which is a product of his personal inadequacies rather than inevitable products of being human. Some of these criticisms seem to assume that it is logically possible for Oedipus to avoid his stated destiny. For instance, Erbse (1993:60) criticises Oedipus for not only following up the allegation that he is a bastard and so doubting his Corinthian parentage, but also for killing a man old enough to be his father and marrying a woman who could have been his mother. These attitudes are considered by Erbse as over confidence. Erbse feels that Oedipus should have deliberated more and acted more prudently. He argues that Oedipus should not have ignored the advice to abandon his search for the killer of Laius even though the gods are determined to pursue and punish the killer before Thebes could be saved.

The debate on the issue of moral responsibility in tragic plays started in antiquity and persists till now. Moral responsibility is often discussed in relation to actions being morally praiseworthy or morally blameworthy, especially if free will is involved. Garrath is of the view that, for someone to be held responsible for his conducts or actions, he must have total control of his actions. Explaining the concept of fatalism and moral responsibility, Garrath asserts that:

- If it is true that every event in the universe is determined by causal laws, this must be true of the events that constitute my actions. Therefore, my conduct cannot really be within my control: therefore, I am not really responsible for my conduct. Two conclusions immediately suggest themselves. One is that it is incoherent to praise or blame me – and anyone else – for our actions, because it is so difficult to doubt the causal will- orderliness of the universe. The alternative conclusion, scarcely more appealing, is that the human will somehow sits outside this causal framework (2004:2).

Fatalism, as can be deduced from Garrath's statement, expresses the belief that all events of life is preordained and predetermined by causal laws, indicating that man has no control over his actions. In line with this view point, Whelan describes fatalism as:

- A system of beliefs which holds that everything has an appointed outcome which cannot be altered by effort or foreknowledge, to a sense of resignation based on the realities of a difficult life-situation, to a more imprecise set of connotations covering cynicism towards established values of work and order (1996:35).

Thus, the action of fate can be described as blind, indiscriminate and relentless. To go by Heraclitean's idea, everything depends on destiny, which means necessity. Richard (1962:56) explains fatalism as reflecting the belief in a supernatural power that predetermines events without recourse to natural law or order. All discussions on fatalism suggest man as being powerless to control or influence the future or his own actions; whereas the concept of moral responsibility puts free will into consideration. In other words, for a man to be held responsible for his action, he must be able to exercise his free will without any restraint.

In Greek antiquity, contrary opinions were expressed, though not in too many words, on the idea of moral responsibility. Generally, the ancient Greeks were polytheistic and believed that the gods had and wielded immense power over the world and controlled nature in all its forms, leaving man with little or no free will at all. The Greek poets somewhat expressed the view that events of life are preordained and predestined by the gods. The early Greek philosophers, on the other hand, condemned the anthropomorphic nature of the gods by the poets. Xenophanes expressed the view that the gods should not be accused of conspiracy and deceit (Stephen & Platzner, 1995:30). Plato, in the concluding part of Book II and the beginning of Book III of his *Republic*, emphasises that the gods are virtuous, just and righteous and condemns the ascribed anthropomorphic nature of the gods. He argues that 'God is not the cause of all things, but only of the good' (*Republic*, 2. 380c). In his censure of the poets, he states that the poets should not portray the gods with cruelty but rather should declare that:

- What God did was righteous and good, and they were benefitted by their chastisement...but as to say that God, who is good, becomes the cause of evil to everyone, we must contend in every way that neither should anyone assert this in his own city if it is to be well governed (*Republic* 2, 380 a-b).

Plato argues reiteratively that the poets wrongly presented a repulsive image of the Greek gods attributing to them the failing human qualities and vices as well as blaming the gods for all human miseries and calamities. He contends that such portrayal of the Greek gods brings nothing but confusion. The gods do not impose tragic fate or destiny on mortal. He stresses this point in his myth of Er, where the soul of Er saw the souls of the dead choosing their lots in preparation for rebirth. From Plato's myth, two issues stand out: man is free to make his own choice of the lot; and his very existence has been determined by the lot he chooses. The inference here is that, even though the fates of lots have been predetermined, man has freedom to choose the lot he desires and, as such, he is responsible for his lot in life. He finally declares that 'God is blameless' in the choice of lot of an individual (*Republic* 10, 617e). However, the question at this point is whether man was actually conscious of the lots he 'chose' in life.

Aristotle, the famous disciple of Plato, while exploring the underpinnings of human virtues and vices in his *Nicomachean Ethics*, explains moral responsibility in line with actions that are praiseworthy or blameworthy. He relates virtue with voluntary and involuntary passions and actions and, on this, praise or blame is bestowed (*Nicomachean Ethics*, III. 1). To Aristotle, then, the source of the affliction and calamity of tragic heroes should not in, anyway, be regarded as injustice from the gods; it should rather be regarded as pure imperfection or flaw in the personality of the hero. Aristotle, as cited by Farahbakhsh (2006:27), defines a tragic hero as a 'man who is not eminently good and just, yet his misfortune is brought about by some error or frailty'. In other words, Aristotle attributes the affliction of a tragic hero, like Oedipus, to his own error of judgment because he has the freedom of choice to 'commit or not commit what he is warned against by gods' (Farahbakhsh, 2013:110). The affliction of Oedipus can then be attributed to his serious *ἀμαρτία* (hamartia) which sometimes applies to false moral judgment, or sometimes to purely intellectual error (Dodds, 1996:38). Thus, from Aristotle's point of view, the calamity or affliction of Oedipus is due to his moral fault.

Many scholars have challenged Aristotle's theory of hamartia as being contrary to the Greek widely spread concept of destiny. Drekvo, as cited by Bulfinch, (2003:182) argues that:

- ascribing Oedipus misfortune to his tragic flaw is not congruous with the notion of destiny in Greek mythology. If his destiny dictates that he must murder his father and marry his mother, does it really matter whether or not he has tragic flaw?

Frye (1973:32 & 172) also expresses the same sentiment:

- Aristotle's hamartia or flaw is not necessarily wrongdoing, much less moral weakness; it may be simply a matter of being a strong character in an exposed position... Aristotle's hamartia then is a condition of being, not a cause of becoming.

The notion that man is morally responsible for his actions, as conceived by Plato and Aristotle does not fit in with the Greeks' general idea of destiny. The ancient Greeks acknowledged the important role of fate in shaping and determining human life as a reality beyond the control of an individual. For them, unlike in modern times, the term 'fate' signified a petrifying and unstoppable force. The Greeks believed that fate was the will of the gods that cannot be thwarted. Despite this fact, countless characters are seen in Greek myths and texts going to a great length trying to alter fate to no avail, as is the case of Oedipus.

One model interpretation is adopting the theory in terms of moral or intellectual weakness or a mistake, or error of judgement. In connection with this interpretation, Gould (1988:50) argues that 'Aristotle requires only that there be an unavoidable mistake in the facts'. To Butcher, as cited by Carel (2006:114), Aristotle's hamartia could have one of the following meanings:

- (1) an error due to inadequate knowledge of particular circumstances; (2) an error due to unavoidable ignorance; (3) an act that is conscious but not deliberate, for example an act committed in anger or passion; (4) a defect of character, distinct on the one hand from an isolated error or fault and on the other, from the vice which has its seat in a depraved will.

Not to be overlooked is the theory that a tragic hero must have a grave moral flaw. A critical scrutiny of Oedipus personality and of the circumstances surrounding the events in his life in line with Butcher's interpretation of Aristotle's hamartia will help in determining the possibility and the impossibility of making a moral judgement on Oedipus. The evaluation begins with ascertaining the personal moral and epistemic status of Oedipus.

2.3. Moral and Epistemic Analysis of Oedipus Tyrannus

For one to be truly responsible for how one acts, one must be mentally aware of what one is. That is, one must have consciously and knowledgeably chosen to act the way one does. The moral question raised in *Oedipus Tyrannus* is not just a question of whether or not Oedipus is guilty of murder and adultery. The issue has to do with whether he is guilty of patricide and incest. In this instance, the question that comes to mind is: Would Oedipus have killed Laius if he had known that he was his father, in his fury, or even in self-defence? It has been argued that Oedipus is fully conscious of what he is doing and what his actions translate to when he kills the king and marries a queen whose husband was claimed to have been murdered.

To start with, he is fully aware, through oracular declaration, that he is in danger of committing patricide and having an incestuous relationship with his mother. If he had acted rationally and prudently he would have totally avoided being at odds with men older than he, especially those old enough to be his father. At the same time, he should not have engaged in any relationship with women older than he. Griffith is of the view that Oedipus should have given way to Laius on the ground that Laius' rank, which is evident in his mode of travel, and age, and also because he is a stranger. Griffith maintains that Oedipus should have stopped a while to think; his not doing this is a moral failing that results in a massacre (1992: 197-200). In view of the action and reaction between Oedipus and King Laius, Oedipus cannot be totally flawed here; he has merely reacted to the man who struck him. If Laius had not struck him, the struggle that resulted in murder would not have started.

From the perspective of the choices that cramm Oedipus' life, it can be surmised that Oedipus consciously and mentally makes all the decisions out of the choices he has. He makes the decision to consult the oracle when his parentage is questioned by a drunken man; it is his rational decision to believe the oracular declaration that he will kill his father and have children through his mother. Without consulting his 'assumed parents', he decides to escape from Corinth. It is also his decision to kill a stranger old enough to be his

father, while he doubts his own paternity, thereby killing his real father at the crossroads. He equally decides to risk his life facing the Sphinx at Thebes and becomes king over the Thebes as a reward for solving the Sphinx's riddle. He also decides to marry Jocasta who is old enough to be his mother as part of the reward given to him by the Thebes. Ironically, he makes the decision to punish the murderer of the former king, Laius if found. It is his decision to ignore all the warnings and advice given to him by his advisers. He makes the decision to discover his identity. Finally, it is left to him to choose whether or not to carry out his stated penalty for the slayer of king Laius, but he chooses to blind himself and go into exile.

The scenario described above fits in well with Aristotle's description of a tragic hero. At this point, then, it will be of interest to revisit Aristotle's theory of tragic hero. Going by Aristotle's portrayal, a tragic hero, either in a tragedy or a comedy, is a literary character whose error of judgment inevitably led to his downfall or destruction. The Aristotelian tragic hero must have certain attributes to qualify as one. Hamartia, error of judgment, that has been discussed earlier is the first of the attributes. Others are; a reversal of fortune (peripeteia), which is brought about due to the hero's error of judgment; the discovery or realisation that the hero's downfall was brought about by his own action (anagnorisis); excessive pride (hubris); and the character's fate (punishment), which must be greater than he deserves.

Sophocles portrays Oedipus as an honest leader trying to free his people from their affliction, and when he has found out the truth, does not attempt to absolve himself and escape the vowed punishment. Rather, he blinds and exiles himself. This portrayal of Oedipus fits well with the Aristotelian tragic hero. In *The Poetics*, Aristotle explains that:

- the change of fortune presented must not be the spectacle of a virtuous man brought from prosperity to adversity: for this move neither pity nor fear: it merely shocks us. Nor again, that of a bad man passing from adversity to prosperity: for nothing can be more alien to the spirit of tragedy.... Nor again, should the downfall of the utter villain be exhibited.... There remains then, the character between these two extremes- that of a man who is not eminently good and just, yet whose misfortune is brought about not by vice or depravity, but by some error or frailty (*The Poetics*, XIII.3).

Here, Aristotle implies that the tragic hero should be someone who is neither completely good nor completely bad. He should rather be someone highly famed and prosperous, a description that fits a royalty in Aristotle's day. Oedipus is not a bad man brought from grass to grace, he is of noble birth, first by his real parents and by his foster parents. He is also not a virtuous man brought from fortune to misfortune, but he is seen, in a way, as ignorantly contributing to his own downfall. His decision and persistence against all odds to find out who the killer of former king Laius was, leads to his downfall.

Analysing the character of Oedipus from Aristotelian theory of the tragic hero, critics have debated over what Aristotle meant by the tragic hero's error or flaw. Did he mean that a singular error of judgment of the hero led to his downfall or a combination of tragic flaws- a fundamental character weakness, such as hubris (destructive pride), ruthless ambition, or obsessive jealousy? After a critical examination of Oedipus character in connection with Aristotle's tragic hero's theory, Segal (1983:76) declares Oedipus as having no moral or tragic flaw:

- Oedipus does not have a tragic flaw. This view rests on a misread of Aristotle and is a moralising way out of the disturbing questions that the play means to ask. Sophocles refuses to give an easy answer to the problem of suffering.

Knox has earlier stated:

- There can be no question of hamartia in any sense of the word except mistake and that, apart from the fact that it certainly is not Aristotle's meaning, is irrelevant here, because from the point of view of avoiding the catastrophe every single action of Oedipus is equally a mistake... the actions of Oedipus that produce the catastrophe stem from all sides of his character; no one particular action is more essential than any other; they are all essential and they involve not any one trait of character which might be designated as hamartia but the character of Oedipus as a whole (Knox, 1957:30-31).

Carel shares the same view with Segal and Knox, stating that the character of Oedipus 'elicits nothing but respect in the viewer'. She describes Oedipus as having a 'complex and realistic' character, responding 'humanly and courageously to events and does not behave in a way that seems substantively flawed' (Carel, 2006:101).

Ordinarily, Oedipus could have been blamed for carelessness or irrationality or better still for lack of self-control in failing to adhere to certain moral injunctions in relation to his killing King Laius and marrying a woman old enough to be his mother. But Sophocles does not give any hint of possibility of Oedipus avoiding the impending doom. What Sophocles does is to provide a conclusive response to all 'mays' or 'may-not-bes' in the oracular declaration given to Oedipus, that he was 'fated to have children with his mother and was doomed to be murderer of the father that begot him (lines 790-795). The declaration of the oracle is unconditional. It does not provide 'ifs'. It does not say: 'if you do this, you will kill your father' or 'if you do so and so, you will marry your mother.' The oracle does not tell him what to do and what not to do. The simple statement is as direct as anything: 'you will kill your father, and have children through your mother'. And from Sophocles presentation of the gods in *Oedipus Tyrannus*, whatever is predicted by the oracle must surely come to pass.

Talking about oracular declarations, the role played by the Greek gods, especially by Apollo, has generated a lot of controversy. Dodds (1966:42), Kirkwood (1958:276), and Gellie (1972:105) are concerned about the declaration of Apollo. They ask whether Apollo merely declared the destiny of Oedipus or that he positively activated it through the various oracular declarations and also by interfering further in the course of his life. With the events following each decision made by Oedipus, it is as if he is simply acting out the role preordained for him by his inexplicable destiny. Lawrence (2008:6) is of the opinion that Apollo indeed worked towards the fulfilment of the destiny of Oedipus:

- We have seen that Apollo does indeed work towards the fulfilment of Oedipus destiny through the communication of oracles which require a human response for their fulfilment and immanently through such external events as the 'coincidence' of the

Corinthian's timely arrival. It seems reasonable then to infer that the god is responsible for the multitude of ironies and coincidences that inform the events surrounding the self-blinding (Lawrence, 2008:6).

In interpreting the Greek tragedies or any Greek play at all, it is important to take into account the Greek religious beliefs, especially their conception of the gods, as this will give a better understanding of ancient Greek culture and civilisation and most importantly the role the Greek gods played in their society. Prinsent (2008:87) in line with this view, explains that:

One of the most fundamental elements to be taken into account in approaching ancient Greek plays and in a wider scope in understanding ancient Greek culture and civilisation is gods' central role in all aspects of Greek people.

Dowden (1992:54) expresses the same opinion, asserting that the Greeks generally believed that the gods' dominance over natural and social phenomena was absolute and, therefore, the Greeks worshipped them to find favour in their eyes. The ancient Greeks believed that their gods had unchallengeable and undeniable authority in all their lives, including social life, family relations, and war. They sought protection and guidance from their gods by honouring them with their worship and by 'ingratiating themselves with them'. They believed that worshipping and paying homage to the gods was not just part of life but life itself. Story and Allen (2005:108) summarise the Greek gods' critical role as puppeteers who assumed and exercised absolute control over their subjects; therefore, free will was only a fiction.

In the Greek concept of fate and destiny, whatever has been predestined for an individual must come to pass, but destiny, according to Dodds (1966:42), does not necessarily imply determinism in a strict philosophical sense. Lawrence (2008:2) asserts that, even though certain events can be seen as preordained, there is no question of an unbroken causal chain. Using the example of Homeric Odysseus, he argues that Zeus predestining Odysseus does not necessarily mean that all his thoughts and actions on his way home are predetermined to the last detail. Lawrence infers that, though Oedipus is destined to kill his father and marry his mother, 'though not necessarily deliberate, and that it may also perhaps even be appointed that he meets him where he does,' but he was not destined to kill his father's attendants.

Agreed that the gods know what the future holds for an individual, but do they order it? Can it be said that every prediction is fate-bound, like the patricide and incest of Oedipus? Life events surely prove that, even though the gods know the future, they do not order it. Using an analogy, it is true that the gods know the country that will win the next World Cup football competition, but that does not, in any way, alter the fact that the victory will greatly depend on the skill of the players as well as their determination and fitness. Thus, the players must act to ensure victory. In the same manner, Dodds argues that the gods do not force Oedipus to do anything; he freely makes his choices which consist of series of actions which lead to his downfall. To Lawrence, Oedipus acts as an independent agent at the crossroads where he kills his father unknowingly, 'without intimation of divine participation through mental invasion.' He asserts:

- Similarly, Apollo's foreknowledge should not be equated with omniscience, but should be seen as confined to particular events in which he takes an interest... the actual events at the crossroads are explicable in fully human terms. There is no sense of divine involvement after the situation has been set up by the oracle and by coincidence. The focus now is Oedipus character and its contribution to the patricide

Lawrence's view is in line with the Aristotelian opinion that the tragic hero is somehow responsible for his downfall and not a mere puppet of the gods or the helpless victim of fate or villain. Thus, Oedipus is regarded as acting out of his own volition.

However, many researchers have expressed the opinion that it is unjustified to apply the notion of free will to *Oedipus Tyrannus*. The concept of free will, according to them, was absent from the language and culture of 5th century BC Athens. Segal (1983:75) avers that the concepts of fate and free will were not explicitly formulated in Greek culture until much later. Gould (1988:51) says that 'the Greek before the Stoics had not yet conceived of the will as we do and so did not see fate and free will as exclusive alternative.' Dodds (1983:182) and Knox (1984:144) view the concepts of fate and free will as synchronically applied to the play by a modern audience and interpretation.

3. Conclusion

Critics have debated and condemned Oedipus based on his personal account of the episode at the crossroads, thereby reflecting the concept of cause and effect. The concept of cause and effect is a general phenomenon in human life and Oedipus' life is not an exception. It has been posited that Oedipus has tragic flaws that manifest in every step of his decision-making, which eventually lead to his downfall. Some even hold the view that hubris (pride) is a major tragic flaw of Oedipus. However, putting the absolute power of the gods and the inevitability of their oracles' declarations into consideration, Oedipus' innocence, guilt or arrogance are quite irrelevant. With the plot of the play, it is glaring that, sooner or later, Oedipus will kill his father and marry his mother. This is because it has been decreed by the gods. Oedipus does everything he could to avert his destiny. He resolves never to see his supposed parents, but the more he runs away the nearer he moves to his destiny. If he has been able to avert this, to the audience, especially the Greek audience, this would have incapacitated the supremacy of the gods which, naturally, would have been interpreted as blasphemy.

In addition, it has also been argued that Oedipus does not consciously commit regicide cum patricide and incest; all is done in ignorance and compulsion. For anyone to be convicted of these crimes, as Oedipus is accused, it is important for such to be responsible for his own personality. He must be consciously and mentally aware of his actions in all areas. He must be mentally balanced. Little wonder that many people claim insanity in the face of judgment. Oedipus, though mentally balanced, seems to be acting out the script written by the gods, for each step he takes in order to avert his impending doom, draws him closer to his foretold destiny. Not to be taken for granted is the fact that Oedipus is surrounded by people who deceive him from infancy to adulthood in the name of protection, though not stated in too many words in the play.

However, Oedipus is a great man, a man of virtue, who by the virtue of his inner strength when faced with a mystery, could not resist following it to a logical conclusion even at a great personal cost. He proves himself a man of great strength, which enables him accept and endure the 'horror' he later finds out. He proves himself great for accepting responsibility for all his actions, even though all is done in ignorance.

Having considered different concepts on the issues of fatalism, determinism, free will, and moral responsibility, this paper is taking the position termed Self-determinism. This position provides a sense of moral responsibility as well as moral accountability. It also posits that man determines events of his life, depending on the choices he makes. Even though, there are inherent factors, man only needs to make choices, either right or wrong to set events rolling. The reaction of Oedipus when it dawns on him that he has committed patricide and incest is an evidence that he sees himself as being morally responsible and accountable for his actions.

At this junction, the question that can be asked is: How can ethical responsibility be attributed to Oedipus, and he gets punished for wrongdoing if his actions are predetermined? Ordinarily, animals are not considered as being morally responsible for their actions or for what they do because they are instinctively driven. Oedipus' life course has been predetermined by the gods, that he would kill his father and have children through his mother. Oedipus carries out what can be termed the will of the gods. Why then does Apollo hold the city of Thebes to ransom and declares that the man responsible for the death of King Laius be punished for plagues in the city to be cured? Why is Oedipus being held responsible for caring for the actions lined up for him by the gods, as his destiny which he fulfils? It is the idea of moral responsibility that makes man different from animals; if otherwise, there will not be any distinction between man and animals. This being the case, then, moral responsibility can be described in terms of reactive attitudes since appropriate reactions are shown to the agents considered to be morally responsible.

Self-determinism argues that a free moral agent must have the ability to make and execute plans within his limits. The fact that choice-making involves preference for one course of action over others shows that man has the ability to weigh the pros and cons of possibilities, and manifest conviction that he genuinely could opt for either of these alternatives and that it is up to him to decide which course to choose. In other words, choosing to act one way reveals a thorough conviction of one's choices. This suggests that everyone who deliberates believes in free will, and thus can do otherwise. Conversely, the concept of determinism implies that the agent cannot do otherwise. To argue against free will is to argue against man's self-conception because free will is central to man's self-conception as an agent capable of rational deliberation and decision-making.

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