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Fate vs Free Will in Sophocles' Oedipus & Antigone

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Abstract

Man is born free or so it is said, but is he free? Fate is the idea that whatever happens in this universe is predetermined by some higher natural powers over which man has no control whatsoever. These powers could be religious, psychological, ethical, or metaphysical in nature. There have been endless debates and discussions about the clash between man's free will and his fate. If destiny has its own ways of shaping a person's life, then how can man be said to have free will? And if he has free will, then how can everything be destined? Is fate fair or unfair, knowable, or unknowable? If everything in life is predestined, then why do some people suffer more than others? What is the point of learning or striving for anything? Why should people be judged or rewarded for their actions? Does pre-knowledge lead to despair or is it empowering? Should it lead a man to surrender to his destiny? Should he not give up on his life's purpose? In this paper, I propose to explore the ongoing tensions between human agency and divine providence with a special focus on Oedipus Rex, and Antigone, the plays written by Sophocles.

Keywords

Fate, Free will, Compatibilism.

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1. Introduction

Fate, by definition, is a concept that is suggestive of an idea that is somewhat mysterious and unexplainable and which has strange power to control and determine our lives without our knowledge. It is daunting to find oneself in the grip of a predicament wherein a person feels powerless. Free will, on the other hand, is when a person is able to exercise control over his actions and is morally responsible for its rightness or wrongness. The onus of it being good or evil, vicious or virtuous, praiseworthy or blameworthy then rests on the individual concerned.

The question of fate and free will has been differently tackled by different philosophical schools since ancient times. In their essay, "Free Will", *The Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, Timothy O'Connor, and Christopher Franklin, write, that for Plato, "freedom is a kind of self-mastery, attained by developing the virtues of wisdom, courage, and temperance, resulting in one's liberation from the tyranny of base desires and acquisition of a more accurate understanding and resolute pursuit of the Good." But for Aristotle, the emphasis is more on the individual's capability to choose his acts judiciously or otherwise and bear the consequences arising from them. "In Book III of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle says that, unlike non rational agents, we have the power to do or not to do, and much of what we do is voluntary, such that its origin is 'in us' and we are 'aware of the particular circumstances of the action.' Furthermore, mature humans make choices after deliberating about different available means to our ends, drawing on rational principles of action" (Timothy O'Connor, and Christopher Franklin).

Does there exist any 'compatibility' between fate and free will? Can they coexist without contradictions? This view, called 'compatibilism' is a philosophical school that attempts to reconcile the premise of determinism and free will, proposing that the idea of fate and free will can coexist and that human beings have free will to act and behave as morally responsible agents despite certain inherent constraints that they may have. Human fate may or may not be

compatible with human choices. Theists are of the opinion that gods have their own plans for all human beings, but simultaneously believe that human beings are also granted a free will to choose their actions judiciously within a given scope of his plan.

Stoics are of a belief that since all action is determined by a rational and benevolent cosmic order called 'logos', human beings should subscribe to their natural virtue and innate reasoning capability to live in harmony with this order. Since they have free will, they can choose to act or not to act as they deem fit, but the external events fated by logos would remain constant. As per causal determinism, all events are a consequence of a certain cause and effect relationship that exists between them. They are an integral part of an unbroken chain of events and causes that have been preordained by some higher power, but ultimately it is man himself who is responsible for his own actions. As per *The Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, "Causal determinism is, roughly speaking, the idea that every event is necessitated by antecedent events and conditions together with the laws of nature." The premise of determinism is that everything is predetermined and preordained by certain cosmic laws and man is merely a plaything who has no control over his actions.

There is a counter view of 'incompatibilism' too which is of the belief that fate and free will cannot coexist peacefully without contradicting each other. According to it, either the free will is non-existent or fate has no impact on human actions.

Existentialists, on the other hand, ascribe greater importance to man's freedom and believe that he is responsible for creating his own essence of life. They reject the idea of fate or divine power as a deterministic force that will contain or limit human autonomy. They believe that man has free will to choose whatever action that he may - good or otherwise, but whatever he chooses, he will have to face the consequences of his choices. Whereas, Libertarians believe that fate has no influence upon human actions since man enjoys absolute freedom to do as he pleases. Similarly, the agnostics assume that fate and free will are neither compatible nor incompatible to each other.

2. Fate & Free Will in Sophocles

Sophocles' plays, *Oedipus Rex*, and *Antigone* amply explore the tension between human agency and divine providence, and the

consequences that man faces while trying to defy or escape his destiny. Destiny, for the classical Greek audience was something which had a divine presence and which could never be doubted, "Destiny find me filled with reverence / pure in word and deed. Great laws tower above us, reared on high / born of the brilliant vault of heaven Olympian Sky their only father, / nothing mortal, no man gave them birth....." (Sophocles, 955-960, 209). In the play, Oedipus, unwittingly becomes a victim of a tragic oracle that had predicted that he will slay his father and marry his mother. "The Delphic oracle...was for Sophocles and his audience, a fact of life, an institution as present and solid, as uncompromising....." (Sophocles, 135), as such, it was firmly believed that the predictions would surely come to a pass. Despite all his efforts and running away to escape the unthinkable, he finds himself helplessly wallowing in the very catastrophe that he took all pains to avoid. He is rendered guilty of parricide and incest with his own mother, Jocasta. This leads to his self-blinding and exile from Thebes, making him a mere plaything tossed around by forces beyond his control. The very fact that he runs away from Corinth on account of some random repartee from a drunkard to find out the truth, is suggestive of the fact that he did believe in predestination and fate. He would not have run away in the first place, had he a good control over his actions i.e., his free will. And Jocasta too would not have abandoned baby Oedipus when she and her husband came to know that their child would bring scourge upon the family.

However, Oedipus is not without his share of free will. He is the tragic protagonist who dons the mantle of a free agent. He does not allow circumstances to trip him over, and relentlessly pursues truth, however heart-wrenching or destructive that might be. He is guilty of hubris too which leads him to be dismissive of Tiresias, the soothsayer and of the god-fearing chorus. In the ancient Greek tragedies, hubris was a precursor to doom, so Oedipus' downfall seemed to be imminent. His multifaceted persona has intrigued scholars and psychologists alike down the ages.

Human behaviour is constantly shaped and reshaped by both internal (like personal choices and free will) and external factors (pre existing circumstances, societal or family influences). Although human beings display free will in making their choices, but these choices may be a fall-out of some unconscious or subconscious motivation, very often beyond their immediate circle of awareness.

Oedipus's struggles with his destiny and free will can be viewed through Leon Festinger's *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance* published in 1957, wherein an individual is caught between his own two contradictory beliefs and actions. In their *An Introduction to Cognitive Dissonance Theory* and an *Overview of Current Perspectives on the Theory*, Eddie Harmon-Jones and Judson Mills discuss how it has led to researches "about the determinants of attitudes and beliefs, the internalization of values, the consequences of decisions, the effects of disagreement among persons, and other important psychological processes."

Oedipus's journey could be interpreted as a journey of a man who thinks it is he who is making his choices but is he? Or is he being led by the power of his own unconscious desires and motivations?

As the play opens, Oedipus comes across as an able and conscientious ruler who assures his country-men that he would do his utmost to free them of plague by bringing the murderer of King Laius to the gallows as per the predictions of Delphi. He leaves no stones unturned, he picks a fight with Creon, his judicious brother-in-law, and Tiresias, the very respected soothsayer. Oedipus wanted to provide respite to his people from the onslaught of plague and in this initiative, he was spurred by his inner sense of goodness and justice. Guided by reason, prudence, astuteness, and his feisty spirit, he avowed to undertake a mission that he thought as proper. He freed himself from the clutches of base passions and commenced a journey which he thought was morally appropriate for a king. But as the play progressed, his search for the murderer merged into another search, propelling him to look for his real self. His subconscious desire to circumvent the glaring truth about his and his family's past, resulted in cognitive dissonance in him. He had deliberately pushed the knowledge about the prophecy of killing his father and marrying his mother into deep unconsciousness when he left the city of Corinth for good to build a life anew for himself. As Emile Zola, the 19th century novelist and playwright, wrote, "If you shut up truth and bury it under the ground, it will but grow, and gather to itself such explosive power that the day it bursts through it will blow up everything in its way."

The prophecy did not take long to fulfil when he killed a man old enough to be his father over a minor altercation about the right of way. His destiny led him towards Thebes, to free its citizens from the Sphinx's curse and be hailed as their saviour and new King. And he

was offered the hand of the widowed queen as well. Unbeknownst to him, destiny drove him headlong towards a life which transformed him from a non-entity, country-less wanderer into the most powerful and affluent man in Thebes.

Oedipus' life could also find a resonance in Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory that analyses and studies the development of a child's personality in conjunction with his various environmental factors. Also known as the "bioecological systems theory" it posits that a child's own biology is a primary environment that fuels his development along with his immediate family and community. Conflict in one layer will have a rippling effect in others as well. As such, a child is a sum total of his immediate as well as his larger extended environment as well. The internal and the external factors intertwine and align themselves paving way for his future behaviour. Oedipus's entire life revolved around a series of interconnected environmental systems ranging from the circumstances of his birth, the prophecy about his future, his desertion by his biological family and later his adoption by a childless neighbouring King who kept him in the dark about his antecedents to the broad prevailing societal structures of the classical antiquity, his solving the Sphinx' riddle and saving the Theban citizens from its menace, and getting hailed as their new monarch. Although Oedipus is a self-made man who is an architect of his own destiny, he is also equally responsible for the choices that he made in his life guided by the external circumstances.

Oedipus' downfall could be a consequence of his own conscious choices and a product of the larger cosmic and societal forces that were beyond his control. He chose to play a good Samaritan who promises to help his countrymen rid of the devastating plague that had befallen them.

In his *Poetics*, Aristotle has showered lavish praises on Sophoclean plays for their tightly knit plot structures. Plots are the souls of a drama that keeps the spectators engaged in its action from the beginning to the end. The effect of the tragedy increases manifold when the spectators identify with the figures on the stage and are moved with the changes in their fortunes. This happens because they feel that the protagonists are independent-minded individuals who are free to act according to their free will and are not merely playthings in the hands of Providence alone. It is the meaningful relationship between the hero's actions and his sufferings that accentuates the depth and tragic

intensity of the plot. The external factors, obviously, no one can object or avoid or do away with, but the hero's will has to be independent, un-injected by the serum of his fate. Shakespeare's Macbeth was possessed by the vision of the three witches and the dagger dangling before his eyes, but he was the master of his own freewill. The actions were his and his alone. There was no compulsion for him. He chose to believe in the vision and derived his own interpretations from them. He was a free agent when he said,

"Or art thou but
A dagger of the mind, a false creation,
Proceeding from the heat-oppressed brain?
I see thee yet, in form as palpable
As this which now I draw.
Thou marshall'st me the way that I was going....."

(*Macbeth* 2.1.37-42)

Had he been bewitched by the witches, then Macbeth would not have been responsible for King Duncan's murder. Instead, he would have been a mere instrument who was used by certain external forces to wipe out the king and thereby be incapable of garnering sympathy from his spectators.

Having said that, also what is required is some causal connection between his actions and his sufferings to give meaning and relevance to the entire experience. The onus of the action and the consequent sufferings would then lead to catharsis.

Sophoclean Oedipus, though was fated to commit patricide and incest, can arguably be a free and independent being who was responsible for unleashing a train of sufferings on himself and his family. The plot of the play centres not on the predestined events that were predicted by the Delphic Oracle, but upon Oedipus's process of discovering the murderer of King Laius who still went unpunished, causing endless plague in Thebes. Little did he know that he had embarked on a monstrous journey to unravel the murderer's identity which turns out to be he himself. Unwittingly, he turned into a detective who was looking for none other than his own self.

The tragedy of Oedipus is thus the tragedy of Oedipus' own actions, it is he who is responsible for his own tragic fate. He is responsible for turning a deaf ear to his brother-in-law Creon's advice to discuss the prophecies of Delphi privately, for refusing to have

faith in the sane counsels of Tiresias, "I charge you, then, submit to that decree / you just laid down: from this day onward / speak to no one, not these citizens, not myself. / You are the curse, the corruption of the land!" (Sophocles, 398-400: 179).

Jocasta tries her best to dissuade Oedipus from probing the truth about his origins, "Stop-in the name of god, / if you love your own life, call off this search! / My suffering is enough" (1162-1164: 222). She calls him "man of agony" (1176: 223) for she had figured out the truth about Oedipus' birth much before he did himself. And having realized their guilt of incest, she runs inside the palace only to hang herself by a silken noose.

The discovery of his identity and parentage leaves him devastated and he rips the brooch off his mother/wife's gown and "digs them down the sockets of his eyes" (1402-1403: 237), crying, "agony! I am agony-- / Where does all this agony hurl me? / Where is my voice? -/ winging, swept away on a dark tide-/ My destiny, my dark power, what a leap you made!" (1443-1448: 239).

The messenger who runs out of the palace to convey the terrible occurrence uses words which reveal that Oedipus's actions were independent and not coerced, "terrible things, and none done blindly now, / all done with a will" (1359-60: 235). Upon being asked by the chorus as to what impelled him to commit such an atrocity upon himself, Oedipus pronounced, "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" (1467-71: 241).

The highly intelligent, excessively proud, and proactive Oedipus got so horribly entangled in the echoes of the predictions, that it was but natural for him to give in to some violent impulses. "What I did was best...I with my eyes, / how could I look my father in the eyes when I go down to death? Or mother, so abused...../ I have done such things to the two of them, / crimes too huge for hanging." (1499-1504: 243). He could not have faced his own children/siblings or countrymen.

He also cries, "I am misery...I have stripped myself / I gave the command myself....." (1510-1512: 243). Oedipus, who had prided himself for his intelligence and uprightness, stands exposed to his own blindness. The taunts to Tiresias and Creon reverberate in his mind, but only for a very brief while before he once again begins to reassert himself, reproaching the chorus for wishing him dead rather

than blind. "What I did was best-don't lecture me, no more advice" (1499-1500: 243). The miserable, pitiable man with his imperious persona bounces back once again to defend his act of self-blinding, "My troubles are mine and I am the only man alive who can sustain them" (1548-1549: 244). He begins to issue instructions only to be reminded that he is no longer the king of Thebes. The chorus who had summed up his fate saying that, "Man is equal to nothing" (p. 233) stands corrected and he re-emerges as his former formidable self. Having discovered his true lineage and the gross reality surrounding his blighted life, he feels empowered with the knowledge that "universe is not a field for the play of blind chance, and man is not its measure" (Sophocles, 152).

According to Emmanuel Kant human beings are the masters of their own fate and all their actions and behaviours are right provided they are in tune with everyone else's freedom as per the universal laws. They become architects of their own fate and behave as they inherently are. Oedipus too, behaved the way that he did because he possessed a powerful, passionate, quick-tempered personality and a very inquisitive mind. He owned the responsibility for his actions and transformed himself into a Sartrean hero who was 'condemned to be free' and must "begin his life on the other side of despair" in Colonus. His path of self-discovery humanized him, making him realize his own 'existential aloneness.'

Like her father Oedipus, Antigone also takes the onus upon herself of according burial rites to her brother Polynices against king Creon's royal dictum forbidding anyone to do it. Before she could be executed, she commits suicide, her suicide triggers the suicide of her fiancé Haemon and subsequently of his mother Euridice too, leaving the proud Creon heart-broken and miserable at the drastic turn of events that had taken place. Whether it was Antigone's independent action that sparked a series of foreboding events or whether she was ill-fated to have inherited the curse of her father and forefathers before him? She could have chosen to remain quiet and toed the line like the submissive and conventional-minded Ismene, "We are only women, we're not born to contend with men. / Then too, we're underlings, ruled by much stronger hands....." (74: 62) and a little later, "I'll beg the dead to forgive me, / I'm forced, I have no choice-I must obey / the ones who stand in power" (79-80: 62). Antigone, on the other hand, had the courage and conviction to follow what her conscience dictated her as a moral, religious, and divine right. Like her father, Oedipus,

she too is spurred on by a sense of inner righteousness and justice to defy the unreasonable dictum of Creon, she could not allow Polynices "be left unburied, his corpse carrion for the birds and dogs to tear, / an obscenity for citizens to behold!" (229-231: 68).

The interaction between the Sophoclean characters amply illustrates the clash between the human free will and providence. There is a higher order that is unwittingly pushing the people towards their fate but equally evident is their freedom to act as per their desires. Jocasta who was completely dismissive of the designs of gods, their prophecies, their dreams, believing that man has freedom to act and behave in whichever way he deemed fit gets proven horribly wrong. When Oedipus shares his apprehension of the Delphic prediction of him sharing his mother's bed, she dismisses it categorically, saying,

"What should a man fear?

It's all chance, chance rules our lives.

Not a man on earth can see a day ahead,
groping through the dark.

Better to live at random, best we can.

And as for the marriage with your mother-have no fear.

Many a man before you, in his dreams,
has shared his mother's bed.

Take such things as shadows, nothing at all-

Live Oedipus, as if there's no tomorrow" (1069-1078: 215).

But the grave realization that she had procreated with her own biological son drives her to commit suicide.

Oedipus had a choice right from the beginning whether to pursue the truth or not, whether to exercise his freedom to find out the truth behind the prophecies, the oracles, the gods or his own lineage. Despite being warned enough number of times by Creon, Tiresias, Jocasta, he uses his freedom as judiciously as he could and continues his pursuit relentlessly. And through his pursuit, what comes to the fore is not him being a mere plaything in the hands of destiny but a headstrong, passionate, and courageous man who emerges victorious despite what fate had ordained for him.

3. Conclusion

The master craftsmanship of Sophoclean plays is suggestive of the premise that neither human freedom nor meaningful acts hold

any respite for mankind. Since the clash between fate and free will is an ongoing and fascinating one and impacts lives all around, it also invites us to reflect on our own beliefs, values systems, our actions, and their outcomes. It challenges us to find a right balance between accepting what we cannot change and changing what we can. It inspires us to seek a deeper understanding of ourselves and the world around us. As Jean-Paul Sartre in his *Being and Nothingness* writes, "Man is condemned to be free. Condemned, because he did not create himself, in other respects is free; because, once thrown into the world, he is responsible for everything he does. The Existentialist does not believe in the power of passion. He will never agree that a sweeping passion is a ravaging torrent which fatally leads a man to certain acts and is therefore an excuse. He thinks that man is responsible for his passion."

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