

## The Freely Fated Oedipus: Interpretations in Determinism

Though he denies the play is “about free will vs. determinism,” in *Oedipus Tyrannus:*

*Tragic Heroism* Charles Segal concedes that the play raises the following questions:

How much control do we have over the shape of our lives? How much of what happens to us is due to heredity, to accidents, 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)

These questions bear a striking resemblance to the prominent debate taking place in modern neuroscience and philosophy. How much control do we have? How much blame or praise do we deserve if we are fated (or determined) to act certain ways? By reviewing how modern philosophers are answering these questions, I will attempt to bring a new understanding of Oedipus, in a way that is both illuminating and consistent with the questions Sophocles raised.

In this talk, I will refer to three different perspectives: Free Agent, Mr. Puppet, and Compatible Oedipus. Each is a different scholarly version of the character of Oedipus, possessing varying levels of control and agency, matched up with their corresponding philosophical theory. Each shows us a great deal about how important the idea of free will is to us and how intricately woven it is into our perception of the story.

Our first perspective is the Free Agent Oedipus, and it seems to be the predominant current theory having primarily arisen as a reaction to the accusation that the play is about “fate”. In the work of Bernard Knox, such as *Oedipus at Thebes*, Oedipus must possess free will or else no tragedy can occur at all. Fate, by its very nature, reduces the role and responsibility of man, and therefore reduces the tragedy. He states that in Sophocles’ play all Oedipus’ actions are born of his agency, and actions that take place outside the play are not relevant. (1957) Oedipus has a

contra-causal free will that can act independently of external and internal causes which puts him in line with a libertarian view of self-agency.

In the case of Mr. Puppet Oedipus, Oedipus has at least the illusion of free will, but it is not genuine. His fate is created by the gods or by some form of causal necessity. Sigmund Freud calls the play a tragedy of fate, “the all-powerful will of the gods and the vain efforts of human beings”. R.D. Dawe understands that though it does not feel as if we are watching “the mere spectacle of a great hero being sandbagged by Fate” it is only because “illusion of free will is preserved against a certain background of necessity” (2001). This idea of a lack of free will and its moral consequences is exemplary of the work of Sam Harris and also represented in the essay “For the law, neuroscience changes nothing and everything” by Joshua Greene and Jonathan Cohen. I will look briefly at this perspective as it presents a moral alternative to the Knox interpretation.

A third alternative is called the Compatible Oedipus. This protagonist is one who possesses free will while bound to fate. This Oedipus has few champions, but Charles Segal suggests that our hero is “both free and determined, both able to choose and helpless in the face of choices he has already made in the past or circumstances over which he has no power of choice” (2001). Though Segal does not elaborate on the philosophical implications of this, what he says bears a striking resemblance to the work of Daniel Dennett, exemplified in both *Elbow Room* and *Intuition Pumps*. Using these works, I will set out to show how Sophocles displays a perfect example of the “free will worth wanting” described by Dennett (2013).

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