

Lonergan and Oedipus

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Lonergan and Oedipus

By

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Lonergan and Oedipus

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Abstract

My first aim in this dissertation is to elucidate Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus* through the writings of Bernard Lonergan, SJ. My second aim is to elucidate Lonergan's thought by adducing it, in action, in *Oedipus Tyrannus*. Instead of analyzing what a classical text means to its own time and place, I undertake a philosophy of classics, exploring various philosophical problems by using Sophoclean texts. The paper incidentally discloses an interpretation of *Oedipus Tyrannus* that is at odds with some of the leading authors in the secondary literature while remaining consonant with others. I use Woodruff and Meineck's 2003 translation of *Theban Plays* throughout because I find the translation refreshing. It is my hope that this paper, like all good papers, raises more questions than answers.

In Chapter 1, I recruit Lonergan's three basic observations about human knowing to explain Oedipus' cognitive journey over the course of the play. First, Lonergan notes that underpinning all human knowing is the spirit of inquiry; the pure, unrestricted desire to know, which Lonergan calls "the supreme heuristic notion."¹ Second, he observes that the structure of human knowing is invariant. No matter who you are – mathematician, scientist, commonsense knower, etc. – all human knowing follows a dynamic but invariant structure Lonergan calls the "self-correcting cycle of learning." This cycle moves from inquiry to insight to judgment to decision. Third, this invariant, self-correcting cycle, underpinned by the pure unrestricted desire to know, operates within dynamically shifting patterns of consciousness, modes of human knowing, that are circumscribed by our concerns, expressed by the kinds of questions we ask. Human consciousness is "polymorphic."

Using these three points as touchstones, I elucidate the dynamism of Oedipus' cognitional structure by tracing the self-correcting sequence of his 132 questions until he arrives at his famous insight, which is simultaneously a virtually unconditioned judgment, expressed by his cry:

Oh! Oh! It all comes clear!
Light, let me look at you one last time.
I am exposed – born to forbidden parents, joined

¹ Bernard Lonergan, *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), 380. Hereafter referred to as *Insight*.

In forbidden marriage, I brought forbidden death (Lines 1181-1185).²

With the concrete situation known and understood with clarity (σαφής), Oedipus' consciousness should now become sublated into the structure of ethical intentionality. This sublation occurs the moment an agent says, "Okay. I understand and know the situation. Now, what should I do?" Typically, an agent begins to ask questions of value, questions which, in Patrick H. Byrne's words, intend "practical insights into possible courses of action."³ The goal of questions for intelligence and questions for judgment is to grasp, respectively, understanding and a virtually unconditioned judgment of fact. Likewise, the goal of questions of value is to "grasp of virtually unconditioned value" until, ultimately, a judgment can be made about that value in a decision which implements the value in action.

Instead of "ascending" into an "ethics of discernment," however, Oedipus' development remains arrested, in a static state of undistorted affectivity that makes moral conversion impossible. The play ends with Oedipus hovering in a liminal state, somewhere between Lonergan's rational consciousness and rational self-consciousness. This liminal position of distorted affectivity lends credence to Marina McCoy's claim that, "Sophocles does not reject the rational in favor of a tragic vision that is anti-rational or non-rational; rather, the rational itself includes an affective element."⁴

In Chapter 2, I point out the various "interferences" in the dynamic, self-correcting sequence which I argue imbues Oedipus' journey with its especially tragic and ironic dimension. I argue that the tragedy (and irony) of the play pivot on the "polymorphism" of Oedipus' consciousness. A corollary to this argument is that we may understand some of the muddled thinking and the bitter intersubjective quarrels in the play – including but not limited to Oedipus v. Tiresias, Oedipus v. Creon and Oedipus v. Jocasta – through the prism of Lonergan's discussion of "bias." My discussion of bias naturally leads to an interpretation of the play that finds Sophocles indicting, not wisdom *per se*, as Nietzsche argued, but those who fail to understand

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ὦ φῶς, τελευταῖόν σε προσβλέψαιμι νῦν,
ὅστις πέφασμαι φύς τ' ἀφ' ὧν οὐ χρῆν, ξὺν οἷς τ'
οὐ χρῆν ὁμιλῶν, οὗς τέ μ' οὐκ ἔδει κτανῶν.

³ P. H. Byrne, *The Ethics of Discernment*. (Toronto: The University of Toronto Press, 2016), 169. Hereafter referred to as *Ethics of Discernment*.

⁴ Marina McCoy. *Wounded Heroes: Vulnerability as a Virtue in Ancient Greek Literature and Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford Unveristy Press, 2013), 57. Hereafter referred to as *Wounded Heroes*.

what it means to correctly understand; those, in other words, who would deign to reduce understanding to a simple matter of “taking a look,” to use Lonergan’s phrase.⁵ I argue that the symbolism in the drama staunchly affirms Lonergan’s well-known claim that, “What is obvious in knowing is, indeed, looking. Compared to looking, insight is obscure, and the grasp of the unconditioned is doubly obscure. But empiricism amounts to the assumption that what is obvious in knowing is what knowing obviously is.”⁶

In Chapter 3, I enlarge the focus of my analysis from Oedipus’ single consciousness to the milieu in which that consciousness operates – Corinth, Thebes and, finally, Colonus. Viewed through a prism of Lonergan’s social theory, Thebes, and to a lesser extent Corinth, become exempla of “cities in decline,” symbolized generally by their hostility to questioning which, specifically, allows various biases to reign. I discuss the Greek concept of pollution, beginning with the familiar distinction between *agos* and *miasma*, and suggest that we may treat the idea of pollution in *Oedipus Tyrannus* as a metaphor for what Lonergan’s called the “long cycle of decline” and its root cause, “general bias,” the unprincipled privileging of the immediate and concrete over that which is non-present. The byproduct of this bias is “the social surd.”

In an essay entitled, “The Absence of God in Modern Culture,” Lonergan notes, in cultures exists the “disastrous possibility of a conflict between human living as it can be lived and human living as a cultural superstructure dictates it should be lived.”⁷ I argue that there many junctures in the play in which the failure of insight and the triumph of oversight is compounded by if not caused by the dictates of Theban and Corinthian cultures, starting with Laius and Jocasta’s decision to murder their child, a choice which is then echoed by Polybus and Merope’s choice to suppress the truth of their son’s origin. I then point out that the most obvious operative bias here is group bias, symbolized by various characters’ commitment to violent patriarchy which neglects female voices of reason. I show, following McCoy and Christopher Long, that *Colonus*, courtesy of Theseus’ leadership, represents a possible antidote to this group bias through healing love. As Oedipus says of the space of Colonus in 1125, “In all my wanderings, this is the only place/Where I have found truth, honor and

⁵ Nietzsche writes, “Wisdom, the myth seems to whisper to us, is an unnatural abomination: whoever plunges nature into the abyss of destruction by what he knows must in turn experience the dissolution of nature in his own person. The sharp point of wisdom turns against the wise man; wisdom is an offence against nature” (Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999, pg. 48.) Yet it seems absurd to label Oedipus as somehow an exemplar of “wisdom” once wisdom (*sophia*) is properly understood.

⁶ Lonergan, *Insight*, 44.

⁷ Bernard Lonergan. *A Second Collection*. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1974), 103. Hereafter referred to as *A Second Collection*.

justice./I am well aware of how much I stand in your debt,/Without your help I would have nothing at all.”⁸

For Lonergan, if the mischief of bias is to be conquered, the ultimate ground for that conquering will come from a liberation outside the agent’s own native resources. *Colonus* gives us a glimpse of this third mode of self-transcendence, religious conversion, which, for Lonergan, is an unrestricted being in love with a “mysterious, uncomprehended God.”⁹ On the one hand, this viewpoint would seem to represent a juncture at which Lonergan’s thought simply does not and cannot apply to a classical text, such as *Oedipus Tyrannus* or *Oedipus at Colonus*. Lonergan’s notion of unrestricted being in love (with God) and his further distinctions of operative and cooperative grace would seem to be anachronistic. And yet, Lonergan claims that unrestricted being in love is “interpreted differently in the context of different religious traditions.”¹⁰ I argue that there is a sense in which Theseus’ almost otherworldly commitment to reverence (*aidos*) for the sacred space of *Colonus*, and his compassionate commitment to care for the stranger (*xenia*), more closely approximates or, at the very least, anticipates the almost supernatural dynamism of the authentic moral conversion Lonergan seems to have in mind. There are moments, in other words, in which Theseus relies on the dynamism of his own native intelligence and others in which something beyond him seems to be at work, as if a precursor to the supernatural moral disposition of the father in Luke’s “Parable of the Prodigal Son.”

I conclude this chapter by noting that implicit in my argument is the premise that *Oedipus Tyrannus* cannot be read without adverting to *Oedipus Colonus*, without which the full sweep of the conquering of bias cannot be appreciated. From this premise I then deduce that the pessimistic Nietzschean reading of *Oedipus Tyrannus*, at the very least, requires more context. And while it is certainly possible to read *Tyrannus* separately from *Colonus*, insofar as they are not part of a traditional cycle, including *Colonus* in an analysis of *Tyrannus* discloses a further development in Sophocles’ thought that we may use to retroactively assess *Tyrannus* philosophically, especially vis-à-vis nihilism.

Chapter 4 is devoted to a discussion of Lonergan’s metaphysics of human freedom and its relation to willingness, moral impotence and liberation. Here I apply Lonergan’s rich and complicated discussion of human freedom in *Insight* to offer a viewpoint that is contrary to deterministic readings of the play. In *Oedipus Tyrannus: Tragic Heroism and the Limits of Knowledge*, Charles Segal advises us that to offer any fresh approach to *Oedipus Tyrannus* one must “remove a few layers of

⁸ Sophocles, *Oedipus at Colonus*. In *Theban Plays*, ed. Peter Meineck and Paul Woodruff. (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company Inc., 2003), line 1125. Hereafter referred to as “O.C.”

⁹ Bernard Lonergan. *Method in Theology*. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), pg. 102. Hereafter referred to as *Method in Theology*.

¹⁰ Ibid.

misconception.”¹¹ Segal’s first misconception is this: “This is *not* a play about free will versus determinism.” He adds that “the issues of destiny, predetermination, and foreknowledge are raised as problems, *not* as dogma.”¹² I will suggest here that if this assessment is accurate, the unintended irony of the play is that it nevertheless affirms a principle (dogma?) in spite of itself: that human freedom is enlarged by human intelligence, insofar as intelligence specifies, via practical insights and practical judgments of facts and values, a range of choices for the will to select. It follows that ignorance, bias and moral impotence, in blocking or shrinking this range of choices, limit our effective freedom to the point at which we are incapable of fully actualizing our essential freedom. Here I recruit Lonergan’s provocative image of the “surrounding penumbra” to describe “moral impotence,” in which he says, “Further, these areas are not fixed; as he develops, the penumbra penetrates into the shadow and the luminous area into the penumbra while, inversely, moral decline is a contraction of the luminous area and of the penumbra.”¹³ This image is particularly apt in describing the ways in which Oedipus enlarges the “luminous area” when he is authentically questioning, only to watch it contract into darkness when he is not – an equation symbolized by the Sophoclean trope of blindness.

Finally, in an “Epilogue,” I conclude with some observations about the way in which Sophocles is often presented in undergraduate philosophy classes. I concur with Yoram Hazony who writes, in *The Philosophy of Hebrew Scripture*, “I do not believe the dichotomy between faith and reason is very helpful in understanding the diversity of human intellectual orientations.”¹⁴ Likewise, it is unclear to me as to whether couching Athens as somehow opposed to Jerusalem is good pedagogical practice. In a similar mode, equally unclear to me is whether couching Sophocles as somehow opposed to Socrates, Plato and Aristotle is good practice. Yes, contradistinction has its pedagogical merits, but it can also wash away nuance.

I then suggest, by way of a conclusion, that if we must have a dichotomy, a better alternative, even pedagogically speaking, may be to use Lonergan’s dichotomy of the friendly or unfriendly universe. For ultimately, we are faced with one existential question: is our universe a friendly one? In *Method in Theology*, Lonergan asks, poignantly:

Is moral enterprise consonant with this world?...is the universe on our side, or are we just gamblers and, if we are gamblers, are we not perhaps fools, individually struggling for authenticity and collectively endeavoring to snatch progress from the ever mounting welter of

¹¹ Charles Segal. *Oedipus Tyrannus: Tragic Heroism and the Limits of Knowledge*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 53. Hereafter referred to as *Tragic Heroism*.

¹² Ibid., 54.

¹³ Lonergan, *Insight*, 650.

¹⁴ Ibid.

decline? The questions arise and, clearly, our attitudes and our resoluteness may be profoundly affected by the answers. Does there or does there not necessarily exist a transcendent, intelligent ground of the universe? Is that ground or are we the primary instance of moral consciousness? Are cosmogenesis, biological evolution, historical process basically cognate to us as moral beings or are they different and so alien to us?¹⁵

The phrase “friendly universe” comes a bit later in the text, when Lonergan adds, “Faith places human efforts in *a friendly universe*; it reveals an ultimate significance in human achievement; it strengthens new undertakings with confidence” (117, my italics). Notice the connection Lonergan adduces between religious conversion, or the unrestricted being in love with God, as the ground of the friendly universe. And yet, as I mentioned earlier, this unrestricted being in love is, as Lonergan points out, “interpreted differently in the context of different religious traditions.” After all, Socrates was no Christian; but he did believe the universe was friendly.

In this context, I argue that Sophocles ought to be aligned with Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, not to mention most Biblical texts, against the truly opposed counter-position, “nihilism.” While it is certainly true that, in *Oedipus*, Sophocles heard that “eternal note of sadness on the Aegean,” as Matthew Arnold once wrote, Sophocles also seems to have heard in *Colonus* a note of compassion and wisdom and love and the hope for a construction of a community in which human striving is not in vain.¹⁶ As Oedipus tells his daughters,

But there is one small word that can soothe –
And that is ‘love.’ I loved you more than
Anyone else could ever love, but now
Your lives must go on without me. (1610-1619)¹⁷

¹⁵ Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 102.

¹⁶ Mathew Arnold. “Dover Beach.” *Representative Poetry Online*.
<<https://tspace.library.utoronto.ca/html/1807/4350/poem89.html>>

¹⁷ The Greek is below:

τὰ πάντα λυεῖ ταῦτ' ἔπος μοχθήματα.
τὸ γὰρ φιλεῖν οὐκ ἔστιν ἐξ ὅτου πλέον
ἢ τοῦδε τάνδρὸς ἔσχεθ', οὗ τητώμεναι
τὸ λοιπὸν ἤδη τὸν βίον διάζετον.

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Preface

This paper arises from the ashes of a previous project. I had written at length on Lonergan and contemporary problems in philosophy of mind when I began to feel that my paper had soured. What was painfully esoteric had become, what seemed to me, useless, with little practical import.

Meanwhile, I was teaching *Oedipus* and *Antigone* to my Perspectives I course at Boston College using Lonergan terminology and recruiting in my lectures some of my research on Lonergan and mind. Why not transform the lectures into a formal paper, I reasoned? At least that paper might be relevant to Sophocles and Lonergan scholars alike, as either literary criticism or Lonergan commentary. It would be useful, simple and clear.

It is my hope that this book, like all good books, raises more questions than answers.

Introduction

My first aim in this book is to elucidate Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus* through the writings of Bernard Lonergan, SJ. My second aim is to elucidate Lonergan's thought by adducing it, in action, in *Oedipus Tyrannus*. Instead of analyzing what a classical text means to its own time and place, I undertake a philosophy of classics, exploring various philosophical problems by using Sophoclean texts. The paper incidentally discloses an interpretation of *Oedipus Tyrannus* that is at odds with some of the leading authors in the secondary literature while remaining consonant with others. I use Woodruff and Meineck's 2003 translation of *Theban Plays* throughout because I find the translation refreshing. It is my hope that this paper, like all good papers, raises more questions than answers.

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unrestricted desire to know, operates within dynamically shifting patterns of consciousness, modes of human knowing, that are circumscribed by our concerns, expressed by the kinds of questions we ask. Human consciousness is “polymorphic.”

Using these three points as touchstones, I elucidate the dynamism of Oedipus’ cognitional structure by tracing the self-correcting sequence of his 132 questions until he arrives at his famous insight, which is simultaneously a virtually unconditioned judgment, expressed by his cry:

Oh! Oh! It all comes clear!
Light, let me look at you one last time.
I am exposed – born to forbidden parents, joined
In forbidden marriage, I brought forbidden death (Lines 1181-1185).²

With the concrete situation known and understood with clarity (σαφής), Oedipus’ consciousness should now become sublated into the structure of ethical intentionality. This sublation occurs the moment an agent says, “Okay. I understand and know the situation. Now, what should I do?” Typically, an agent begins to ask questions of value, questions which, in Patrick H. Byrne’s words, intend “practical insights into possible courses of action.”³ The goal of questions for intelligence and questions for judgment is to grasp, respectively, understanding and a virtually

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Instead of “ascending” into an “ethics of discernment,” however, Oedipus’ development remains arrested, in a static state of undistorted affectivity that makes moral conversion impossible. The play ends with Oedipus hovering in a liminal state, somewhere between Lonergan’s rational consciousness and rational self-consciousness. This liminal position of distorted affectivity lends credence to Marina McCoy’s claim that, “Sophocles does not reject the rational in favor of a tragic vision that is anti-rational or non-rational; rather, the rational itself includes an affective element.”⁴

In Chapter 2, I point out the various “interferences” in the dynamic, self-correcting sequence which I argue imbues Oedipus’ journey with its especially tragic and ironic dimension. I argue that the tragedy (and irony) of the play pivot on the “polymorphism” of Oedipus’ consciousness. A corollary to this argument is that we may understand some of the muddled thinking and the bitter intersubjective quarrels in the play – including but not limited to Oedipus v. Tiresias, Oedipus v. Creon and Oedipus v. Jocasta – through the prism of Lonergan’s discussion of “bias.” My discussion of bias naturally leads to an interpretation of the play that finds Sophocles indicting, not wisdom *per se*, as Nietzsche argued, but those who fail to understand what it means to correctly understand; those, in other words, who would deign to

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“mysterious, uncomprehended God.”⁹ On the one hand, this viewpoint would seem to represent a juncture at which Lonergan’s thought simply does not and cannot apply to a classical text, such as *Oedipus Tyrannus* or *Oedipus at Colonus*. Lonergan’s notion of unrestricted being in love (with God) and his further distinctions of operative and cooperative grace would seem to be anachronistic. And yet, Lonergan claims that unrestricted being in love is “interpreted differently in the context of different religious traditions.”¹⁰ I argue that there is a sense in which Theseus’ almost otherworldly commitment to reverence (*aidos*) for the sacred space of Colonus, and his compassionate commitment to care for the stranger (*xenia*), more closely approximates or, at the very least, anticipates the almost supernatural dynamism of the authentic moral conversion Lonergan seems to have in mind. There are moments, in other words, in which Theseus relies on the dynamism of his own native intelligence and others in which something beyond him seems to be at work, as if a precursor to the supernatural moral disposition of the father in Luke’s “Parable of the Prodigal Son.”

I conclude this chapter by noting that implicit in my argument is the premise that *Oedipus Tyrannus* cannot be read without adverting to *Oedipus Colonus*, without which the full sweep of the conquering of bias cannot be appreciated. From this premise I then deduce that the pessimistic Nietzschean reading of *Oedipus Tyrannus*, at the very least, requires more context. And while it is certainly possible to read

⁹ Bernard Lonergan. *Method in Theology*. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), pg. 102. Hereafter referred to as *Method in Theology*

¹⁰ Ibid.

Tyrannus separately from *Colonus*, insofar as they are not part of a traditional cycle, including *Colonus* in an analysis of *Tyrannus* discloses a further development in Sophocles' thought that we may use to retroactively assess *Tyrannus* philosophically, especially vis-à-vis nihilism.

Chapter 4 is devoted to a discussion of Lonergan's metaphysics of human freedom and its relation to willingness, moral impotence and liberation. Here I apply Lonergan's rich and complicated discussion of human freedom in *Insight* to offer a viewpoint that is contrary to deterministic readings of the play. In *Oedipus Tyrannus: Tragic Heroism and the Limits of Knowledge*, Charles Segal advises us that to offer any fresh approach to *Oedipus Tyrannus* one must "remove a few layers of misconception."¹¹ Segal's first misconception is this: "This is *not* a play about free will versus determinism." He adds that "the issues of destiny, predetermination, and foreknowledge are raised as problems, *not* as dogma."¹² I will suggest here that if this assessment is accurate, the unintended irony of the play is that it nevertheless affirms a principle (dogma?) in spite of itself: that human freedom is enlarged by human intelligence, insofar as intelligence specifies, via practical insights and practical judgments of facts and values, a range of choices for the will to select. It follows that ignorance, bias and moral impotence, in blocking or shrinking this range of choices, limit our effective freedom to the point at which we are incapable of fully actualizing

¹¹ Charles Segal. *Oedipus Tyrannus: Tragic Heroism and the Limits of Knowledge*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 53. Hereafter referred to as *Tragic Heroism*.

¹² *Ibid.*, 54.

our essential freedom. Here I recruit Lonergan's provocative image of the "surrounding penumbra" to describe "moral impotence," in which he says, "Further, these areas are not fixed; as he develops, the penumbra penetrates into the shadow and the luminous area into the penumbra while, inversely, moral decline is a contraction of the luminous area and of the penumbra."¹³ This image is particularly apt in describing the ways in which Oedipus enlarges the "luminous area" when he is authentically questioning, only to watch it contract into darkness when he is not – an equation symbolized by the Sophoclean trope of blindness.

Finally, in an "Epilogue," I conclude with some observations about the way in which Sophocles is often presented in undergraduate philosophy classes. I concur with Yoram Hazony who writes, in *The Philosophy of Hebrew Scripture*, "I do not believe the dichotomy between faith and reason is very helpful in understanding the diversity of human intellectual orientations."¹⁴ Likewise, it is unclear to me as to whether couching Athens as somehow opposed to Jerusalem is good pedagogical practice. In a similar mode, equally unclear to me is whether couching Sophocles as somehow opposed to Socrates, Plato and Aristotle is good practice. Yes, contradistinction has its pedagogical merits, but it can also wash away nuance.

I then suggest, by way of a conclusion, that if we must have a dichotomy, a better alternative, even pedagogically speaking, may be to use Lonergan's dichotomy of the friendly or unfriendly universe. For ultimately, we are faced with one

¹³ Lonergan, *Insight*, 650.

¹⁴ Ibid.

existential question: is our universe a friendly one? In *Method in Theology*, Lonergan asks, poignantly:

Is moral enterprise consonant with this world?...is the universe on our side, or are we just gamblers and, if we are gamblers, are we not perhaps fools, individually struggling for authenticity and collectively endeavoring to snatch progress from the ever mounting welter of decline? The questions arise and, clearly, our attitudes and our resoluteness may be profoundly affected by the answers. Does there or does there not necessarily exist a transcendent, intelligent ground of the universe? Is that ground or are we the primary instance of moral consciousness? Are cosmogenesis, biological evolution, historical process basically cognate to us as moral beings or are they different and so alien to us?¹⁵

The phrase “friendly universe” comes a bit later in the text, when Lonergan adds, “Faith places human efforts in *a friendly universe*; it reveals an ultimate significance in human achievement; it strengthens new undertakings with confidence” (117, my italics). Notice the connection Lonergan adduces between religious conversion, or the unrestricted being in love with God, as the ground of the friendly universe. And yet, as I mentioned earlier, this unrestricted being in love is, as Lonergan points out, “interpreted differently in the context of different religious traditions.” After all, Socrates was no Christian; but he did believe the universe was friendly.

In this context, I argue that Sophocles ought to be aligned with Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, not to mention most Biblical texts, against the truly opposed counter-position, “nihilism.” While it is certainly true that, in *Oedipus*, Sophocles heard that “eternal note of sadness on the Aegean,” as Matthew Arnold once wrote, Sophocles also seems to have heard in *Colonus* a note of compassion and wisdom and love and

¹⁵ Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 102.

the hope for a construction of a community in which human striving is not in vain.¹⁶

As Oedipus tells his daughters,

But there is one small word that can soothe –
And that is 'love.' I loved you more than
Anyone else could ever love, but now
Your lives must go on without me. (1610-1619)¹⁷

¹⁶ Mathew Arnold. "Dover Beach." *Representative Poetry Online*.
<<https://tspace.library.utoronto.ca/html/1807/4350/poem89.html>>

¹⁷ The Greek is below:

τὰ πάντα λυεῖ ταῦτ' ἔπος μοχθήματα.
τὸ γὰρ φιλεῖν οὐκ ἔστιν ἐξ ὅτου πλεόν
ἢ τοῦδε τάνδρὸς ἔσχεθ', οὐ τητῶμεναι
τὸ λοιπὸν ἤδη τὸν βίον διάζετον.

Chapter One: Oedipus' Quest for Self-Knowledge

Introduction

Among his many insights, Bernard Lonergan makes three basic observations about human knowing that will be foundational to my elucidation of Oedipus' cognitive journey throughout Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus* and *Oedipus at Colonus*. First, Lonergan notes that underpinning all human knowing is the spirit of inquiry; the pure, unrestricted desire to know, which Lonergan calls "the supreme heuristic notion."³⁴ Second, he observes that the structure of human knowing is invariant. No matter who you are – mathematician, scientist, commonsense knower, etc. – all human knowing follows a dynamic but invariant structure Lonergan calls the "self-correcting cycle of learning." This cycle moves from inquiry to insight to judgment and then, ultimately, to decision and action. Third, this invariant, self-correcting cycle, underpinned by the pure unrestricted desire to know, operates within dynamically shifting patterns of consciousness, modes of human knowing, that are circumscribed by our concerns, expressed by the kinds questions we ask. Human consciousness is therefore "polymorphic," to use Lonergan's phrase.

In the following section, I explain these three points in a bit more detail before applying them to the play. I then elucidate the dynamism of Oedipus' cognitional structure by tracing the self-correcting sequence of his questions and answers until the pivotal moment at which cognitional structure is sublated into the "higher" structure of ethical intentionality. At this point Oedipus makes two decisions: 1.) he

³⁴ Lonergan, *Insight*, 380.

chooses to blinds himself and 2.) he chooses to remain in fidelity to his earlier fiat to “punish the killers by force.” Despite this “enlargement of conscious” to the realm of decision, I argue here that Oedipus fails to achieve self-transcendence and remains enslaved by his bias.

The Pure, Unrestricted Desire to Know

In the opening of *Metaphysics*, Aristotle famously says, “all men desire to know.”³⁵ This desire is by nature. It is not, for example, acquired, like learning to play the guitar. This desire differentiates the human species from others insofar as animals do not question sensible presentations which confront them. They do not reduce a potentially intelligible landscape of sense data into intelligible experience. Animals are, to use the Lonergan terminology I will introduce shortly, “empirically conscious” but not “intelligently conscious” or, even more robustly, “rationally self-conscious.” They lack the uniquely human desire from which all genuine learning flows.³⁶ It is a desire we must have in order to start any cognitive journey. “If a child

³⁵ Joe Sachs has translated this portion as, “All human beings by nature stretch themselves out toward knowing.” (Aristotle. *Metaphysics*. Trans. Joe Sachs. Santa Fe: Green Lion Press, 2002.) Whether the verb is rendered as “desire” or “stretching,” the important point is that it is a feeling “by nature.” It is a part of what we are, preceding what we can say about what we are. It is, to borrow from Heidegger, ontic, not ontological.

³⁶ Obviously, animal consciousness is clearly beyond the scope of this essay. One might object here that animals do mediate their sensible worlds into intelligible ones. The behaviors of birds and dolphins and monkeys, for example, indicate intraspecies communication about danger and the behaviors of predators, etc. They do not, however, ask questions, which is all that is being argued here.

never asks questions,” Lonergan reminds us, “you cannot teach him.”³⁷ Our questions point beyond us, into the unknown territory of Being, the “objective of the pure desire to know.”³⁸ Lonergan uses the phrase the “pure question” to denote the pre-linguistic, pre-conceptual, pre-judicial experience of inquiry. He writes that the pure question “is prior to any insights, any concepts, any words; for insights, concepts, words have to do with answers, and before we look for answers we want them; such wanting is the pure question.”³⁹

But why does Lonergan call this desire unrestricted? Why is it not a restricted desire? The reason is because unlike other desires which can be satiated by specific objects, the desire for knowledge will not rest until, at least theoretically, one knows all there is to know about everything there is to know. As Patrick H. Byrne notes, “the least inadequate way in which we can ‘know’ the unrestricted desire is by participating in its sweep, by giving ourselves over to its throe. We can experience the desire as drawing us ever beyond ourselves by letting ourselves be drawn.”⁴⁰ Our questions therefore set the conditions for our judgments which then set the conditions for an intentional self-transcendence because, ontologically, a human

³⁷ Bernard Lonergan, *Understanding and Being*. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1980), 6. Hereafter referred to as *Understanding and Being*.

³⁸ Lonergan, *Insight*, 372.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 34.

⁴⁰ P. H. Byrne, *The Ethics of Discernment*. (Toronto: The University of Toronto Press, 2016), 61. Hereafter referred to as *Ethics of Discernment*.

being is capable of “going beyond what he feels, what he imagines, what he thinks, what seems to him, to something utterly different, to what is so.”⁴¹

In contrast to many thinkers, Lonergan identifies human knowledge with this spirit of inquiry, our remarkable “criticizing activity,” as opposed to the objects criticized, i.e., the “criticized materials.” Yet, as Lonergan notes, the histories of both philosophy and science have been punctuated by different attempts to make the ideal of knowledge explicit by identifying knowledge not with the objective of the desire to know but with objects known – in statements resembling, “you have knowledge when you know X,” or, “you have knowledge when you know Y.”⁴² As Lonergan points out, however, this misdirected identification of knowledge with criticized materials (as opposed to criticizing activity) has been a source of misunderstanding, leading to what Lonergan calls “the dialectical of position and counterposition.” The field of physics, for example, has been recently elevated in some circles to the status of “real” knowledge as other types of knowing are devalued, wrongly. Opposed to this view, Lonergan writes,

There does not exist naturally, spontaneously, through the whole of history, a set of propositions, conceptions, and definitions that define the ideal of knowledge...While the conception of the ideal is not by nature, still there is something by nature. The ideal of knowledge is myself as intelligent, as asking questions, as requiring intelligible answers...The trick is to “move into the subject as intelligent” – as asking questions; as having insights – being able to form concepts, as weighing the evidence – being able to judge. We want to move in there where the ideal is functionally operative prior to its being made explicit

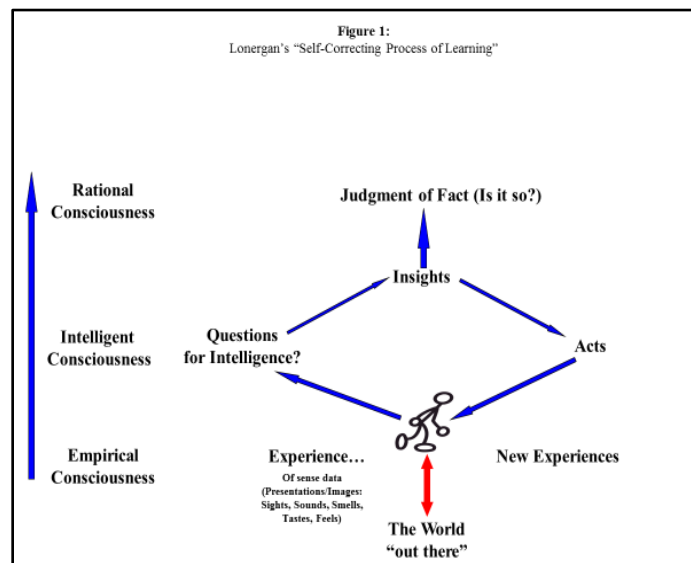
⁴¹ Lonergan, *A Second Collection*, 70.

⁴² For a more detailed account of Lonergan’s analysis of the history of philosophy, see his essay “The Subject,” in *A Second Collection*, pgs. 69-87.

in judgments, concepts, and words. Moving in there is reaching what is prepredicative, preconceptual, prejudicial.⁴³

The Self-Correcting Process of Learning

So, while the objects of human knowing may vary within determinate fields, the dynamic cognitional structure of human knowing itself is invariant. The human knower, as she questions given sense data, “ascends” through various levels of consciousness, in which each successive level subsumes and enlarges the previous. Human knowing always begins, says Lonergan, on the “level of presentations, by advancing through inquiry, insights, and formulation, by culminating in the critical inquiry of reflective understanding, the grasp of the unconditioned, and the rationally compelled pronouncement of judgment.”⁴⁴



⁴³ Lonergan, *Understanding and Being*, 14.

⁴⁴ Lonergan, *Insight*, 317.

The self-correcting process of learning, indicated in the diagram above, is not only immanent and operative in human consciousness; it can also be affirmed by the rationally self-conscious subject. If the skeptic asks, for example, “but is that *really* what I am doing when I am knowing?,” he is already engaged in the self-correcting process. Before he even attends to objects, therefore, the subject needs merely to affirm that, “Yes. It is the case that I have questions and that I require intelligible answers to those questions.” He is a knower, and knows he is a knower because, as Lonergan says, “we have defined the knower, not by saying that he knows something, but solely by saying that he performs certain acts.”⁴⁵

As the vertical arrow on the left side of the above diagram indicates, the self-correcting process of learning leads the human knower on an “ascent” through metaphorical “levels” of human consciousness: empirical consciousness (the level of presentations, sense data) is the sensible awareness immanent in cognitional acts, intelligent consciousness (the level of inquiry and insight) is manifested in the asking of what Lonergan calls questions for intelligence, “who, what, where, why, how?” and, finally, rational self-consciousness (the level of judgments) manifests in the asking of what Lonergan calls questions for judgment, “is it so?,” which culminate in the rationally compelled affirmation or denial of what Lonergan calls “a virtually unconditioned judgment.”⁴⁶ When a knower can say, “yes, it is so,” or “yes, it is the

⁴⁵ Ibid., 344.

⁴⁶ The word “levels” is obviously figurative and a good example of the way we often try to describe our consciousness (what it’s like to be conscious) via our descriptive knowing. Lonergan uses the word “levels” in many places but also discourages, in general, picture-thinking in reference to consciousness. He says, “consciousness is not to be thought of as some sort of inward look. People are apt to

case,” he knows a portion of Being, which is the correlative “objective of the pure desire to know.”⁴⁷ Most importantly, a human knower prizes what he knows because it is correct:

But as pure desire, as cool, disinterested, detached, it is not for cognitional acts and the satisfaction they give their subject, but for cognitional contents, for what is to be known. The satisfaction of mistaken understanding, provided one does not know it was mistaken, can equal the satisfaction of correct understanding. Yet the pure desire scorns the former and prizes the latter; it prizes it, then, as dissimilar to the former; it prizes it not because it yields satisfaction because its content is correct.⁴⁸

The taxonomy above will be particularly important in my forthcoming discussion of Oedipus’ famous, final insight that *he* is the incestuous parricide and source of Thebes’ miasma. His insight is, in Lonergan’s terms, simultaneously a virtually unconditioned judgment. He knows that the content of his insight (which now is cast in the form of a judgment) is correct.⁴⁹ It is the point at which there are, as the saying goes, “no

think of knowing by imagining a man taking a look at something, and further, they are apt to think of consciousness by imagining themselves looking into themselves. Not merely do they indulge in such imaginative opinions but also they are likely to justify them by argument...Hence, while some of our readers may possess the rather remarkable power of looking into themselves and intuiting things quite clearly and distinctly, we shall not base our case upon their success. For after all, there may well exist other readers like that, like the writer, find looking into themselves rather unrewarding” (*Insight* 344).

⁴⁷ Ibid., 372.

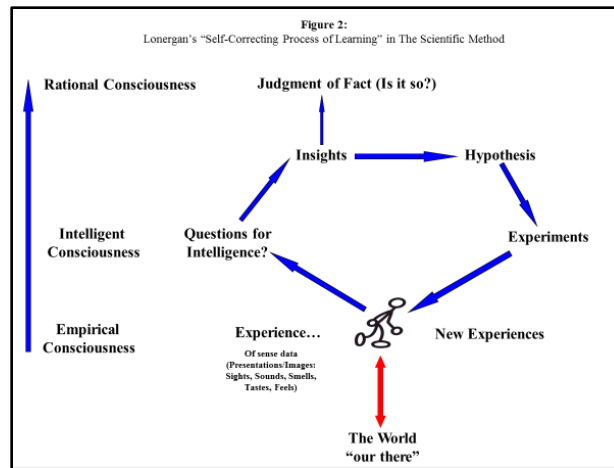
⁴⁸ Ibid., 373.

⁴⁹ I should point out here that throughout “Oedipus” Sophocles stresses the difficulty of making correct judgments without complete information. In fact, Oedipus’ judgments about his own fate at the end of *Oedipus Tyrannus* appear to need revision when considered in the light of *Oedipus at Colonus*. In that play, we wonder whether, in the end, Oedipus’ fate was a “good thing” for Athens in spite of the perception in Thebes that it is “dismal.”

further questions.” Instead, new questions emerge about what Oedipus ought to do on the heels of this correct understanding of the facts. It is no surprise, therefore, that after this point in the drama, the nature of Oedipus’ inquiry changes dramatically. His questions shift because his interests shift. Instead of attempting to solve a mystery for his “children,” the Theban citizenry, he grows concerned about his immediate sphere: his biological children. He questions his own future and what will become of his daughters in light of his affirmed judgment that he is the source of miasmas, suspecting, as Jocasta has said, his “fate is dismal.”⁵⁰

Lonergan’s claim that the structure of human knowing is invariant has important implications: just as it makes impossible any hierarchy among the mathematician, the physicist or the man of commonsense vis-à-vis stronger claims to the term “knowledge,” so too does it make any hierarchy between the scientist and the layperson impossible. In this respect, the layperson – that is to say, men and women of commonsense – varies from the scientist only in virtue of the varying determinate fields of the objects of knowing, as well as the scientist’s public or communal formulation of his insights into words in the form of a hypothesis. Figure 2 below indicates the way in which the scientific method adds the formulation of hypotheses and experiments to the self-correcting cycle.

⁵⁰ Sophocles, O.T., Line 1068.



If, then, the structure of human knowing, underpinned by the spirit of inquiry, is invariant and always follows this self-correcting process of learning, what then is the “accidental” difference between the mathematician, scientist and the layperson?

The Polymorphism of Human Consciousness

The answer to this question brings us to Lonergan’s third key observation about human knowing: human consciousness as *polymorphic*. “The pattern in which [consciousness] flows,” Lonergan reminds us, “may be biological, aesthetic, artistic, dramatic, practical, intellectual, or mystical. These patterns alternate; they blend or mix; they can interfere, conflict, lose their way, break down.”⁵¹ These patterns, or “heuristic contexts,” disclose the determinate fields for questioning and, as such, lead to differentiated discoveries via specific types of insights.⁵² The polymorphism of my

⁵¹ Lonergan, *Insight*, 411.

⁵² Lonergan points out the etymological relation between the word “heuristic” and the word “eureka,” literally “I’ve got it!” in Greek.

consciousness, like the self-correcting process of my learning, can be affirmed in the pronouncement that, “Yes, *it is so* that I alternate among in these patterns.”⁵³

Recall your high school experience, for example. You neither dissected frogs nor did you attempt to perform soliloquies in physics class, nor did you bother yourself with projectiles in biology or drama class, but the exclusion of these objects of understanding in one field from the field of the other in no way indicated that one field had more of a right to the mantle “knowledge” than the other. The physicist, the biologist and the aspiring thespian therefore engage their varying, determinate fields in and through the invariant structure of “the self-correcting process of learning” but they do so in different patterns. The physicist wonders about questions with which the thespian is unconcerned and vice versa. In light of this distinction, it is easy to grasp a corollary that flows from it: the pattern of our questions significantly determine the trajectory of our lives.

Further, just as the biologist and the physicist and the actor differ with regard to the objects into which they inquire, practical, commonsense knowing differs from scientific knowing. Practical knowing relies on what Lonergan calls “descriptive” knowing while scientific knowing relies on what Lonergan calls “explanatory knowing.” The former relates things to our senses, interests and concerns, the latter “relates things to other things.” The contexts differ only in virtue of the criterion of relevance; only insofar as further questions take the empirical investigator beyond

⁵³ The recognition of the alternating patterns and the ways in which they break down requires practice paying attention to “what you’re doing when you’re doing knowing.” This is the essence of what Lonergan calls “Self-Appropriation,” and the reason he calls it not an end but a beginning to philosophy.

the pragmatic interests and concerns of daily life. Further questions move the empirical investigator “beyond” the descriptive context wherein questions have ceased, since “further inquiry would lead to no immediate appreciable difference in the daily life of man.”⁵⁴ As Lonergan reminds us, both laypeople and scientists “reach their conclusions through the self-correcting process of learning ... they reach very different conclusions because, though they use essentially the same process, they operate with different standards and criteria.”⁵⁵ Just as the biologist, the physicist and the aspiring actor are not “made of different clay,” neither are scientist and layperson. Most importantly, as Byrne notes, “even though descriptive inquiry is more limited than explanatory inquiry, Lonergan does not believe explanation is somehow more important than description.”⁵⁶ In fact, Lonergan insists on the complementarity of both, saying “the rational choice is not between science and common sense; it is a choice of both.”⁵⁷

This last point will become increasingly important in reference to Oedipus. As I will point out, in spite of his best efforts to solve the mystery of Laius’ murder, a pursuit which would be more effective if conducted with the dispassionate air of a scientist, Oedipus cannot help but fall into a dramatic pattern of descriptive knowing – relating things to his senses and his affective self, a costly mistake in the end. And

⁵⁴ Ibid., 321.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 320.

⁵⁶ P.H. Byrne, *Ethics of Discernment*, 16.

⁵⁷ Lonergan, *Insight*, 203.

while it is true that the person operating in a dramatic pattern could be dispassionate (one needn't be in a scientific pattern to do that), Oedipus' affective self is distorted in a way that those questions relevant to himself are proportionally distorted. This distortion is the evidence of a failure of what Lonergan calls "self-appropriation," or the taking ownership of one's cognitive activities. In contrast, his encounter with the Sphinx, the very source of his fame, involves a purely intellectual puzzle and requires no such relations. Oedipus' error (and the error of his fellow Thebans) is a mistaken judgment: the assumption that his intellectual skills with the Sphinx would transfer to the practical, political, civic and therefore interpersonal domain.

And yet, instead of indicting himself for a failure of understanding, he opts to scapegoat his senses as faulty, ultimately gouging out his own eyes, crying out, "Now you may not see the evil,/Not the evil I have done – or suffered./From now on, you must gaze in darkness/On forbidden faces, while the ones you should have seen/You'll never know."⁵⁸ The choice to gouge out his eyes becomes ironic insofar as it only further discloses that Oedipus has learned little and does not yet know what understanding really is. Further, if we add that Oedipus' choice to gouge out his eyes, if we may even call it a choice, represents his attempt to unknow what can't be unknown and yet, the decision seems even more misdirected – given that his eyes are not the culprit. Oedipus' eyes have worked fine throughout the play; they have performed their function admirably. Oedipus scapegoats them because he still equates knowing with looking. Oedipus essentially makes the mistake Lonergan believes all empiricists make: "What is obvious in knowing is, indeed, looking.

⁵⁸ Sophocles, O.T., Lines 1271-1275.

Compared to looking, insight is obscure, and the grasp of the unconditioned is doubly obscure. But empiricism amounts to the assumption that what is obvious in knowing is what knowing obviously is.”⁵⁹ I should add here that Oedipus’ mistake is not that he fails to be “scientific” about his situation. This mistake is not unique to the scientific pattern either. Sensing, including but not limited to seeing, is relevant to commonsense patterns of experience as well and neither is immune to bias when knowledge is equated to seeing alone as opposed to recognizing seeing as one limited contributor to knowledge.

Over the next chapter I construct a comprehensive list of Oedipus’ questions, as the spirit of inquiry overtakes him and his unrestricted desire leads him to his famous insight and judgment. I point out Lonergan’s key cognitive plateaus, each of which represents a successive expansion of Oedipus’ conscious operations into higher and higher patterns. Broadly speaking, he moves from mere empirical consciousness to intelligent consciousness to rational consciousness and, finally, to rational self-consciousness which sets the conditions for self-transcendence, when Oedipus understands, in an act of judgment, who he “really” is. At this point in the play Oedipus finds himself the most free; and he faces questions of value in which he must choose how he wants to proceed. Prior to this moment, Oedipus seems far more like a leaf caught in the shifting winds of fate.

Further, I call attention to the shifting patterns of Oedipus’ consciousness which, to borrow again from Lonergan, “interfere, conflict, lose their way, break

⁵⁹ Lonergan, *Insight*, 44.

down.”⁶⁰ I contend that many scholars have failed to recognize that in his attempt to solve Laius’ mystery, Oedipus operates in a “descriptive pattern,” relating things to himself. As such, he fails to understand himself in an explanatory context, as part of an interconnected network, a whole, which, I will argue, is symbolized in Greek culture by the art of prophecy and the “Divine Order.”⁶¹ The mouthpiece for “understanding the whole” could only be someone who understands things in an explanatory context. On my reading, therefore, Tiresias’ blindness is symbolic of the need to “go beyond” the senses if a richer (explanatory) understanding is sought.

Oedipus the Intelligent Inquirer

Oedipus begins, as we all do, on the level of sensible presentations but, through his pure, unrestricted desire to know, begins to question these presentations, mediating them through intelligent inquiry. When we meet him in the dramatic opening scene, for example, he is already “intelligently conscious.” Lonergan tells us that the tell-tale sign of “intelligent consciousness” is asking “questions for intelligence”: who, what, where, why. In fact, the opening line of the play is the first of Oedipus’ many “why” questions, as he attempts to discern why his “children,” fellow Thebans, have come to him “wearing wreaths and clutching boughs.”⁶² Here, Oedipus immediately expands his empirical consciousness – merely visually

⁶⁰ Ibid., 411.

⁶¹ For more on the ancient Greek worldview as of nature as “organism,” see R.G. Collingwood, *The Idea of Nature*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1960).

⁶² Sophocles, O.T., Lines 2-3.

apprehending the suppliants at his palace gate – to an intelligent consciousness, as he attempts, through inquiry, to make a putatively unintelligible scene intelligible. This initial question will set the horizon of his dramatic journey toward “the truth,” an intentional self-transcendence, a grasp of the intelligibility of his own identity, i.e., self-knowledge.

1.) Why have you come here pleading,

Wearing wreaths and clutching boughs?” (Lines 2-3).

From this scene onward, Sophocles depicts Oedipus as an insatiable questioner before he is anything else. In fact, Sophocles will rely on the question as a powerful rhetorical tool. The primary mechanism of the dramatic irony is the way in which each question leads to further questions, pushing both Oedipus and the audience forward in the plot, closer and closer to a truth, which we know (and he does not) is a potential disaster waiting to be discovered. The play’s plot, as a function of Oedipus’ questions, also illustrates well one of Lonergan’s central points: the trajectory of our lives is very often a function of the questions we ask. Inversely, a lack of questions, or an inability to question, precludes us from actualizing potential trajectories and we are therefore effectively less free.⁶³ As Oedipus’ questions come more rapidly, we cannot help but wonder ourselves whether his “fate” might have been less “dismal” had he asked more questions (or the right questions) earlier.⁶⁴ In

⁶³ I will withhold the question of freedom and determinism – which might imply that we do not have any power in actualizing trajectories – for a later section on Lonergan’s metaphysics of freedom. ⁶³ See *Insight*, 642.

⁶⁴ In a later section, I will point specifically to the scene in which a drunken dinner guest points out that Oedipus is not his parents’ biological son. Oedipus questions the scene but, ultimately, somewhat inexplicably, fails to pursue them in a

fact, Oedipus even tells us that he came himself rather than sending a messenger, saying, “To have heard such news from others/Would not have been right” (6-7). This claim further illustrates Oedipus’ desire to know for himself, and not in some mediated (and possibly less accurate) way.

After questioning the suppliants, Oedipus next attempts to clarify the sensible presentations by asking three more specific questions for intelligence (why, what, what) of the elder suppliant, spokesman for the ailing Thebans:

- 2.) Why are you kneeling in supplication –
- 3.) What do you fear,
- 4.) what do you want?” (Lines 10-11).

Next, when considering whether to aid the suppliants, Oedipus asks a “how” question which is, on its surface, quasi-rhetorical but beneath which lurks an implied ethical obligation. This is important when compared to Oedipus’ solving of the riddle of the Sphinx. There, he does not need to ask questions – the given riddle is the question – and, further, seems to be under no such obligation to help Thebes. Now, he is their leader, and so he asks:

- 5.) “How could I not?” (Line 58).

The import of this “how” question is, linguistically, closer to: “Should I help? Yes. I am obligated to.” The import here is that good leaders are obliged to aid their struggling citizens and opting not to help is “out of the question.” Of course, Oedipus

way that would have led him to the correct answers earlier. Worse, his adoptive parents, Polybus and Merope, attempt to amputate Oedipus’ desire to know. To me, this desire foreshadows later attempts by characters attempting to shield Oedipus from the truth which may be Sophocles’ attempt to chastise communities which are inhospitable to questioning.

is, in fact, effectively free to refuse aiding his people but the nature of his question and its tone implies he does not even consider that a legitimate avenue to actualize.

We next learn, surprisingly, given Oedipus' apparent ignorance about the scene before him, that he has already taken action and sent Creon to consult the oracle. Yet Oedipus is already growing impatient, foreshadowing the future impatience so famously highlighted in much of the commentary on Oedipus. Of Creon's return, Oedipus asks a "where" question,

6.) "Where can he be?" (Line 75).

Next, to Creon, regarding the visit to Delphi he asks two more questions for intelligence in succession, the second of which is a clarification of the first:

7.) What word have you brought from the god? (86)

8.) But what of the oracle? (89)

Oedipus' next two questions move beyond mere intelligent inquiry and therefore mark, in Lonergan's terms, a transition from intelligent consciousness to rational consciousness. These questions are broader, more philosophical and oriented toward the future. They are easy to spot because, in Lonergan's terms, they are actually questions for judgment: they are "yes or no" questions that can only be affirmed or denied.

9.) Is there any hope? (90)

10.) Have we anything to fear? (90)⁶⁵

⁶⁵ Semantically, the question "Have we anything to fear?" is equivalent to "Is there anything to fear, yes or no?"

In the next three questions for intelligence (how, what, who), Oedipus returns to the practical exigencies of Thebes and the real-world implications the new Delphic pronouncement has for him and his “children.”

- 11.) How should we purge this curse? (99)
- 12.) What is the cause? (99)
- 13.) Who is this man whose fate has been revealed? (102)

It is here that we learn the back story surrounding Laius’ fate and the Theban response to that fate. It is obviously strange, one of Sophocles’ few plot contrivances perhaps,⁶⁶ that this exchange marks the first time Oedipus is hearing of the murder of his predecessor (as king and husband). But we suspend our disbelief, accepting that when Oedipus arrived in the city, Laius’ fate was kept from him out of national interest.⁶⁷ In spite of this reasoning, Oedipus is distressed by the lack of the spirit of inquiry in his Theban children, and what may be the greatest error in the play: willed ignorance. It is now our turn, as audience, to ask nagging questions: Did any of his children pursue the nagging questions about their dead king? How could they be so

⁶⁶ Bernard Knox notes that Aristotle admired *Oedipus Tyrannus* because “recognition and reversal ‘arise from the internal structure of the plot itself’ in such a way that what follows is ‘necessary or probable result of the preceding action.’ The subsequent events are due to the preceding ones, not merely after them – *dia tade* not *meta tade*. (There is only one exception to this, the arrival of the Corinthian messenger.)” (Bernard Knox, *Oedipus at Thebes: Sophocles’ Tragic Hero and His Time*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998, 13.)

⁶⁷ This may be yet another moment in which Sophocles implies that the Theban effort to shield Oedipus from the truth backfires. Sophocles seems to be asking us, his readers, to question for ourselves whether this rational response was the prudent course of action. Had Oedipus not been shielded from his predecessor’s fate, he might have discerned the truth far earlier, having just killed a man at the location where the old king has been reported to have died.

complacent? How could they suppress or repress their desire to know the truth? Does any national interest justify this sort of suppression? Creon tells Oedipus that the Thebans were preoccupied with more immediate concerns: the terrorizing Sphinx. We cannot help but delight in the irony that Theban inquiry, which we infer involved questions about how to defeat the Sphinx, comes as a tradeoff in a line of inquiry that would have involved questions regarding the murder of Laius.⁶⁸

And so, regarding the unsolved crime and the murderer, Oedipus begins to probe like a seasoned detective, asking “where” questions in rapid succession:

- 14.) And where on this earth are they? (108)
- 15.) Where can the faint
Track of this old blood crime be found? (109)
- 16.) But where was Laius murdered?
- 17.) In the palace? (112)
- 18.) Out in the country? (113)
- 19.) Or did it happen abroad? (113)
- 20.) Did anyone see it happen? (114)
- 21.) Someone on the same journey? (114)
- 22.) A messenger? (115)
- 23.) A clue to solve this crime? (115)

Next, we receive the key “clue”: Creon’s claims that the survivor of the ambush upon Laius saw only one thing. Oedipus intelligently latches on to this data, suspecting its

⁶⁸ This irony reminds us of the opportunity cost of questioning. The “concern” of one line of inquiry may come at the expense of another. In this case, it is an immediate concern juxtaposed against an event that occurred in the recent past.

monumental importance, furthering his anger over the complacency of his fellow Thebans in pursuing it:

24.) What was that? (120)

25.) How would a thief dare to do such a thing

Unless he had been paid off by someone here? (124-125)

We should note here that the question above is laced with a negative moral judgment that, as I will point out later, seems to lack the sufficient evidence that would be required to utter it. In a point to which I will return, Oedipus often “rushes to judgment” without first “marshaling the evidence” (to use Lonergan’s phrase) and this may be yet another sign of an intellectual deficiency which, as I argue in chapter 3 against Dodds, is a moral deficiency. The next question, which completes the scene is this:

26.) What crisis

Could have kept you from a complete investigation? (128-129).

At this juncture in the play, Oedipus has asked enough questions to make the situation intelligible enough to offer a bold, existential vow about what course of action he will choose: “Then I will start again. I will see it exposed” (132-133). This speech essentially completes the first scene of the play, as the Elder replies, “Up, children; he has given his word/That he will do all that we asked” (152-153).

After 153 total lines before the first choral *parados*, Oedipus alone has asked approximately 26 questions, the bulk of which are questions for intelligence. He has made the scene before him (the sensible presentations) intelligible; he has exposed the problem to be solved; and he has taken swift steps to solve it. He is proceeding

intelligently, marching onward toward the next level of consciousness, “rational” consciousness, in which he will be forced to make judgments of yes or no.

The next scene in the play focuses primarily on Oedipus’ heated exchange with Tiresias. Prior to the exchange, however, Oedipus offers one of his boldest speeches, loaded with irony, in which he prophesizes that the killer of Laius will suffer. Of note here is that in his boldest and ostensibly least authentic moments, Oedipus asks zero questions (Lines 216-275). To use a more colloquial phrase, he begins to “run his mouth,” positioning himself on the right side of justice and, as he says, “fighting for the rights” of the victim.

And yet, for a man who has peppered us with good questions to this point, he seems to be utterly questionless in these cocksure proclamations, to the point where he almost resembles the unyielding truculence of Creon in *Antigone*. Oedipus boldly says:

So I stand, side by side with the god,
Fighting for the rights of the murdered man.
I damn the killer, whoever he may be,
An unknown man, or one of many.
May he suffer and die, pain beyond pain.
I damn myself, if I should come to know
That he shares my hearth and home –
Then I call this curse to fall on me (244-251).

Oedipus then adds to this invective the following harsh (and, not coincidentally, questionless) speech to those who may refuse to heed his proclamations:

Those who disobey me be damned by the gods:
Your barren land will know no harvest,
Nurture no children. This curse or something
Far, far worse will doom you to destruction.
Those faithful Thebans who accept my words
Can claim that Justice stands at their side.

May the good grace of the gods be with you forever (269-275).

We must note that these proclamations extend far beyond where his 26 questions for intelligence have led him. His heretofore critical, intelligent way of proceeding now smashes against his uncritical and dogmatic fiats. Why, in the spirit of prudence and consistency, would his questioning spirit not extend to these decisions about justice and punishment? Why, for example, don't we read more questions within the sphere of ethical intentionality: What shall we do to the man if we discover him? Will it behoove us to make him suffer? What if he has erred in ignorance? What then will we do? What if justice is more complex than we may think? These, of course, are questions Oedipus does not ask in spite of ample evidence that he is a creature (a human being) capable of asking them.

An obvious objection to this line of argument is that, up to this point, Oedipus has no good evidence to suspect anything but brutal regicide. He is therefore not justified by the evidence in inferring that the issue could be more complex than it seems. And yet, in a purely philosophical sense, the implicit (dogmatic) assumption that he could never be the very source of the city's miasma is equally unjustified. As McCoy notes, Oedipus' "mistake is to believe in absolute oppositions between the just and unjust when a more nuanced answer is possible...[]...Oedipus thinks of justice and injustice as morally absolute categories in a world in which such categories do not always neatly apply."⁶⁹

⁶⁹ McCoy, *Wounded Heroes*, 41.

McCoy's point is well-taken. Clearly, Oedipus could have been more empathetic here, achieving a better symbiosis between reason and his affective self. For example, if he had asked more questions for intelligence in an effort to understand the concrete situation, the greatest of which might have been the basic counterfactual, "But what if I were the killer and I did it unknowingly?," he might have been in a less vulnerable (and embarrassing) position at the play's dramatic close. To use McCoy's terms, had Oedipus been more vulnerable here, he might have found himself less vulnerable later.

Instead, Oedipus moves on, and only returns from this questioning hiatus with the arrival of the blind prophet Tiresias. Ironically, it is his affective self (his impatience) that spurs on the desire to know. This scene parallels the impatience in inquiry Oedipus displays when waiting for Creon's arrival. Waiting for Tiresias, Oedipus says:

27.) Where is he? (287).

28.) Rumors? (291).

29.) We questioned Apollo – did the heralds tell you? (305-306).

When Tiresias finally arrives, the prophet becomes a foil to Oedipus, immediately expressing a reluctance to answer Oedipus' questions, crying, "Oh, oh. It is a hateful thing to know, when nothing/Can be gained from knowledge. I saw it clearly/But forced it from my thoughts!" (316-318). Here, Sophocles exposes the tension between ignorance and wisdom, between the sighted questioner and the blinded one who has "seen" (understands) the answer already – and, given its apparent horror, therefore believes the prudent course of action is to halt the

questioning process of the ignorant one. Here, Tiresias' blindness seems to immunizes him from the bias that knowing is taking a look. One would think that Oedipus' blindness in *Oedipus at Colonus* would perhaps absolve Oedipus too of this bias and yet, as I point out in Chapter 3, it does not, further emphasizing my claim that Oedipus understands little by the end.

This moment raises a fascinating question: despite the desire to know and our insatiable questioning, are there moments in which we have insights that lead to judgments to stop questioning particular domains, i.e. the Frankenstein problem? Or, in other words, is there an implicit tension between the unrestricted desire to know and the judgment to quell that desire?⁷⁰

Consider, for example, recent debates on human cloning: there, our unrestricted desire to know all there is to know confronts an ethical judgment that some things are better left unknown in a community too irresponsible to respect that kind of power. In a later section of the paper I will discuss why it is the case that such a growing contingent of characters (Tiresias, Jocasta, the Messenger, etc.) advocate

⁷⁰ There is an important distinction to be drawn here between, on the one hand, the unrestricted desire to know and, on the other, the actions that might spring from the insights and judgments that the unrestricted desire to know discloses. If a father, for example, knew that his truthful response to his son's question might be psychologically damaging to the son, insofar as his son was, say, too fragile to hear the response, the father might make the judgment to defer the answer to a more appropriate time. But this would not be "quelling the unrestricted desire to know." In fact, the father would be immersed in the unrestricted desire, having asked further pertinent questions about the value of giving a response. But, since the desire to know cannot be quelled permanently, the willful attempt to suppress it (willed ignorance) is always an unwise approach, especially when considering the unrestricted desire, if unleashed, could lead to further questions and insights that could ameliorate the suspected negative consequence.

for “willed ignorance,” just as Polybus and Merope desired for their son back in Corinth. This issue may be the fulcrum upon which the play pivots. It may be the case that contrary to Nietzsche’s view, Sophocles is not anti-rational but critical of communities that would attempt to silence questions. From this viewpoint, the play is an indictment of those who would attempt to silence questions in the name of various ulterior motives. In *Colonus*, Athens emerges as the new home for the wandering questioner and the location of Oedipus’ death becomes hallowed ground. One wonders why Nietzsche neglected to discuss *Colonus* when citing Oedipus as an indictment of wisdom.

Unwilling to respect what is either Tiresias’ wisdom or Tiresias’ exhortation to willed ignorance, Oedipus presses on, refusing to accept the prophet’s wishes:

- 30.) What is it? (319)
- 31.) Why this despair? (319)
- 32.) What? So you do know but refuse to speak? (330)
- 33.) Is there anything that moves you? (335)
- 34.) Will you never speak? (336)
- 35.) Could anyone not be angry after hearing
 How you hold our city in such contempt? (339-340).

On Tiresias’ saying “what will be will be,” Oedipus replies with a clarifying question:

- 36.) What will be? (342)

Oedipus then offers another bold claim indicting Tiresias as a conspirator, a claim which also goes “beyond” the territory mapped out by his previous questions

for intelligence. Angered, Tiresias bluntly replies with a statement of the truth: “You are this land’s defiler!” In a crucial moment, instead of pausing to “marshal the evidence” that would be required to affirm such a claim, Oedipus shoots the proverbial messenger:

- 37.) How dare you stir up such a story? (354)
- 38.) Do you think you’ll escape the consequences? (355)
- 39.) Who put you up to this? 357)
- 40.) Tell me what? (358)
- 41.) Do you believe you can say these things with impunity? (368)
- 42.) Did you plot all this, or could it be Creon? (378)

Tiresias then indicts Oedipus for “plaguing himself.” Here, Oedipus launches into a barrage of claims about Thebes and his special and privileged role as *tyrannos*, which, in this context, merely means that he is a king who has come to the throne by an avenue other than genealogy.⁷¹ Most importantly, he arrogantly and unjustifiably invokes his past success with the Sphinx as a mark of present credibility while simultaneously infusing his language with new “me/them” rhetoric, an example of what I will later call “individual bias.” Oedipus’ fellow Thebans (in this case, the prophet community) morph before our eyes from being “his children,” a phrase of inclusion, to “you people,” an indictment of their “otherness.”

- 43.) What jealous craving eats away at you people? (382)
- 44.) Is it because of my tyranny? (383)

⁷¹ This is one of the more brutal ironies of the play: Oedipus *is* the genealogical heir.

45.) Tell me, when have your prophecies been proved? (390)

46.) When the Sphinx sounded her deadly song
Did you speak to save our people then? (391-392)

47.) Where were you? (394)

48.) Did you really think you could just cast me out
And align yourself with the throne of Creon? (399-400)

Upon hearing this self-congratulatory and elitist rhetoric, Tiresias then launches into a counter-speech, reminiscent of Antigone's speech to Creon, in which he claims allegiance to Apollo only, implying that the civic law and its purveyors hold no sway over him and that, lest Oedipus forget amidst his new divisive rhetoric, we are all equals: "I am still your equal/In at least having the right to reply./I am not one of your minions; I answer to Apollo" (411-412). He then offers clues and linguistic hints, which indict Oedipus as the source of miasma, unnecessary given his previous definitive statement. Instead of questioning the content of the speech and again, marshaling the evidence required to affirm or deny it, Oedipus' next question is one for judgment but in the wrong domain, essentially, "should I tolerate this insubordination from such an underling, yes or no?"

49.) Must I tolerate this, from him? (429)

Tiresias, perhaps equally as compelled by anger as Oedipus now, then provides the crucial statement which becomes the key clue for the next litany of questions: "I am what I am; a fool, if that is what you think,/But those that bore you thought me wise enough?" (435-436). Oedipus replies to this cryptic proclamation with a burst of three questions, two for intelligence and one for judgment (What, who,

is) that suddenly reorient his trajectory back on the path of valuable inquiry, the effect of which are to retroactively mark the previous two exchanges (with Creon and Tiresias) as superfluous detours full of egotistical grandstanding and ad hominem attacks. In this exchange we see the problem of self-knowledge emerging, and the Sophoclean trope that claims to know oneself with certainty are themselves evidence of a form of ignorance.

50.) What did you say? (437)

51.) Who gave birth to me? (437)

52.) Is everything you say shrouded in dark riddles? (439)

Appropriately, this final question brings us to the Second Chorus. Charles Segal notes that this exchange brings out the dramatic contrast between the divine seer and human rationality: “the horror of the prophet’s uncanny knowledge stands in an even more powerful contrast to Oedipus’ rationality, as Tiresias’ closing two lines suggest: ‘Go inside and reckon these things up; and if you catch me as one who’s false, then say that my intelligence in prophecy is nil’ ...the scene is a powerful visual enactment of the clash between human and divine knowledge.”⁷²

But is this really what this heated exchange accomplishes? Or does it instead imbue us with the impression that in spite of his auspicious start, full of excellent questions, nearly 53 of them in fact, Oedipus has been waylaid on the journey by what appears to be a disharmonious relation between Oedipus’ rational and affective aspects? Or, further, that Tiresias “uncanny” knowledge is not “uncanny” at all. The prophet merely boasts an explanatory understanding of the interconnected network

⁷² Segal, *Tragic Heroism*, 82.

of human beings, and the cosmos at large, of which human agents are a small but important part.

After returning back to the correct path of interrogation, Sophocles depicts Oedipus becoming sidetracked again, as he interrogates Creon in similar fashion to his interrogation of Tiresias. But note, the nature of the questioning in this exchange has changed. It no longer seems as dispassionate and authentic as it was once. Oedipus' questions are tinged with even more anger and feeling, not the sangfroid of a scientist or, even, a seasoned detective:

- 53.) You? (532)
- 54.) You dare to come here, to my house? (532)
- 55.) What was it that you saw in me –
 Weakness, stupidity? (536-537)
- 56.) Did you really think that
 That I'd never see through your scheme
 And take steps against your creeping conspiracy? (537-539)
- 57.) Do you really think
 you can harm you're your own family with impunity? (551-552)
- 58.) Did you, or did you not, persuade me
 To send for that self-righteous soothsayer? (555-556)
- 59.) And this old prophet, was he in business back then? (562)
- 60.) And at that time did he ever mention me? (564)
- 61.) Was there no murder investigation? (566)
- 62.) And what of your expert? (568)

63.) Why did he not speak then? (568)

64.) How can I believe a man like you? (626a)

65.) Like yours? (630)

This string of questions is particularly telling in light of the first batch of questions. Here, instead of probing the issue, Oedipus' questions intimate a suspected conspiracy that lacks evidence, another indication of Oedipus' failure to understand understanding. Thankfully, the exchange with Creon is brought to an end by Jocasta's entrance. Her peacemaking attempts seem to win the chorus' allegiance and the chorus exhorts Oedipus to be a bit more malleable. Yet, instead of authentically considering their point of view, he remains truculent:

66.) And why should I yield? (649)

67.) Do you know what you're asking of me? (652)

Here Creon departs and Jocasta and the Chorus begin a dialogue. When Jocasta asks the chorus for a recap, they resist and Oedipus indicts them (wrongly) for presenting an obstacle to his pointed inquiry.

68.) Can you see what you have done, trying
to blunt my edge with your good intentions? (687-688)

The scene that follows is pivotal; it is Sophocles at the height of his dramatic powers. It depicts Jocasta's reaction to Oedipus after she finally gets a sense of why Oedipus suspected Creon. The clue comes on line 715, when Jocasta, casually states, "But Laius was killed by strangers/At a place where three roads meet." It is in the following string of questions that Oedipus begins to piece together the first of the three judgments that, together, will comprise the content of his final insight. First, that

he killed Laius and is therefore the source of miasma. Second, that Laius was his father. Third, by extension of the second, that Jocasta is his mother.

- 69.) Where exactly did this happen? (732)
- 70.) When was this? (735)
- 71.) Zeus! What are you conspiring against me? (738)
- 72.) How old was he? (741)
- 73.) What if the blind prophet can see? (747)

Note that at this juncture of the play, on the 73rd question, which is quasi-rhetorical, the seed of truth has been conceived in Oedipus' consciousness and will now begin to gestate. Only now, as the improbable possibility that he could be the killer glimmers, albeit faintly, does prudence return to him. His rash temperament gives way to a demand to ask still more questions in an effort to "marshal the evidence," to eventually make what Lonergan will call a "virtually unconditioned judgment."

- 74.) Was he traveling with a small entourage
Or in force at the head of a large column? (750-751)

When Jocasta replies that Laius "had five men, including his herald; There was one carriage, and Laius rode in that" (752-753). Oedipus replies "Oh, now I start to see!" (754). Obviously, this cry is not meant to describe the act of visually seeing but an act insight, in the linguistic sense of "I see [understand] what you mean." This line is also an ironic juxtaposition between Oedipus and Tiresias and establishes the fitness between inquiry and insight, as opposed to the commonly held viewpoint which defines knowing as "taking a look." Yet Oedipus still wonders if growing suspicious could possibly be correct. Oedipus' desire to know returns to him and he

again becomes an exemplar of a man who, as Lonergan says, prizes the truth “not because it yields satisfaction but because its content is correct.”⁷³ And so Oedipus pushes on:

- 75.) Jocasta, who told you about this? (755)
- 76.) Is he still here, among our household? (757)
- 77.) Could he brought back as soon as possible? (765)

Here, between lines 771-833, Oedipus digresses into a key speech about his past as he attempts to reconstruct it in the hope it will be newly intelligible in light of recent events. Not coincidentally, Oedipus’ consciousness recruits the memory of drunken dinner guest who claims that Oedipus is not his parents’ son. I will devote more attention to this scene in the next chapter on “bias.” Needless to say, this long speech proceeds without questions until, after Oedipus admits to killing the royal party at the place where the three roads converge, he deploys a barrage of rhetorical questions from which we infer the deep dissatisfaction and contempt he is beginning to feel for himself.

- 78.) Who could be as contemptible as I? (815)
- 79.) What man could be more heaven-hated? (816)
- 80.) Am I so foul? (823)
- 81.) So hopelessly unholy? (824)
- 82.) What man in his right mind could say otherwise? (829)

Attempting to marshal more evidence, Oedipus now places his fleeting hopes in the “herdsman”; the member of Laius’ house who survived and retreated to the

⁷³ Lonergan, *Insight*, 373.

countryside. This juncture marks the most profound “ascension” from intelligent consciousness to rational consciousness, as Oedipus tries not merely to question but to arrange his accumulating insights into a narrative of data from which to make judgments. In fact, this moment marks the first time in the play Oedipus actually “reasons,” at least as Lonergan understands the term. The key question that serves as the springboard for reasoning is rooted, not surprisingly, in the concept of contradiction, as Oedipus asks,

83.) How can one be the same as many? (845)⁷⁴

The 3rd chorus now appears upon the stage as Oedipus marshals the evidence. He is hopeful that the “several thieves” narrative will be the corroborated story. In the interim, Jocasta launches into an attack on soothsayers to which Oedipus blithely replies, “You are right, of course, but I still want the herdsman here” (860-861). The desire to summon the herdsman, the desire to speak with him in person, despite Jocasta’s attempt to demean the source of the information, only further showcases Oedipus’ unrestricted desire to know and its ultimate unquenchability. Here, Oedipus seems to desire a virtually unconditioned judgment about his innocence. Hearsay, therefore, is not enough. What *seems* to be the case is not enough.

In the next brief section before Oedipus returns, Jocasta dialogues with an elderly Corinthian – the shepherd to whom Oedipus was handed, as a baby, by the Theban herdsman. The appearance of the Corinthian on the stage is not, logically

⁷⁴ In a point to which I will devote some attention later, the parallel here to the content of the riddle of the sphinx is undeniable. Note that, linguistically, the question, “How can one be the same as many?” is equivalent to the question, “How can a being be four-footed, three-footed and two-footed at the same time?”

speaking, necessary. In fact, it may be the only plot point in the play that is a function of chance.⁷⁵ Polybus has died and the Corinthian just happens to arrive to announce the news of his death at what is ostensibly the most crucial time, for both Oedipus and for the sake of the drama. This arrival creates the delightful irony that what all perceive to be bad news – Polybus’ death – turns quickly into its opposite, good news, when Oedipus assumes he could not have killed his father, but then back to bad news, as the Corinthian happily attempts to allay Oedipus’ fears by informing him Polybus was not, in fact, his father.

Nevertheless, prior to this moment, Jocasta is hopeful and summons Oedipus from his house, to which Oedipus inquires:

84.) Why call me from our house? (951)

85.) Well, who is he? What is he saying? (954)

86.) What’s your message? (957)

The Corinthian informs Oedipus that Old Polybus is dead, a claim which, not surprisingly, Oedipus immediately questions. He even offers a question from which we infer a tremendous, if not hasty, skepticism regarding prophecy and the “Divine Order.” Meanwhile, we are aware that if Oedipus only had the understanding of the whole, the ability to grasp himself in an explanatory context, he would recognize the brutal irony which now confronts him.

⁷⁵ See footnote 42. (Bernard Knox. 1998. *Oedipus at Thebes: Sophocles’ Tragic Hero and His Time*. New Haven: Yale University Press. 13). Hereafter referred to as *Oedipus at Thebes*.

87.) Was there foul play, or did he die of natural causes? (960)

88.) Why? Why, dear wife, should we observe the oracle
At Delphi, or strain to see signs from birds screeching
In the sky? (964-966)

At this, Jocasta replies, “Exactly what I said in the beginning” (973). Oedipus replies, “You did, but fear misguided me” (974). In a moment of tremendous irony, given the way in Oedipus’ affective self has indeed led him astray when interrogating Tiresias and Creon, we grasp that here, the opposite is true: Oedipus’ fears are indeed accurate. In this instance, Oedipus’ unrestricted desire to know guided him toward the truth despite the distortion of his affective fears. Oedipus does not yet understand his affective responses.

Hopeful that he may not, in fact, be Laius’ killer now, Oedipus still harbors fears the second aspect of the prophecy may still be true, that he “should still shun” his “mother...her bed” (976). After expressing this fear, Jocasta launches into one of the more provocative speeches about “chance governing human life,” an expression of a worldview to which we will return in a later section on what Lonergan calls “position and counterposition.” The Corinthian messenger then innocently inquires about why they still worry about these things and is informed of the oracle. He retorts, in line 1008, “My boy, it’s quite clear you don’t know what you’re doing” and then, on 1014, “Really, you had no cause for fear,” to which Oedipus naturally replies with what Lonergan calls a “question for intelligence”:

89.) Why? (1015)

The Corinthian then drops a bombshell which, for most, would be the tipping point to render judgment, “Because Polybus is no relation of yours” (1016). This statement, to Oedipus, is unintelligible insofar as it is (but shouldn’t be) unfathomable. As such, the questions for intelligence (what, how, why, why, when, etc) regarding this claim come fast and furious, as Oedipus (and Jocasta) finally begin to suspect the worst is yet to come.

- 90.) What are you talking about? (1017)
- 91.) How could you equal my father? (1019)
- 92.) Then why did he call me his son? (1021)
- 93.) From another’s hands? (1023)
- 94.) Was I bought? (1025)
- 95.) Did you find me somewhere? (1026)
- 96.) Why were you traveling in that region? (1028)
- 97.) So you were a wandering shepherd, a hired hand? (1029)
- 98.) And when you first held me, was I hurt? (1031)

In one of the most provocative moments of the play, the Corinthian replies to these questions by suddenly recruiting Oedipus’ physical body as *prima facie* evidence. Oedipus’ physical body is an aspect of his person that has been forgotten in this extended retreat into the mind. Now his body returns to him in a newly intelligible way as the messenger encourages Oedipus to examine himself, “Your own feet can testify to that!” (1032). The scene reminds us of the psychosomatic integration we often forget as we engage in intellectual pursuits and serves as a precursor to the psychosomatic relation between eyes and understanding in Oedipus’

infamous choice of self-blinding. Yet Oedipus attempts to dismiss the invitation to reclaim his ankle wounds as newly intelligible in the light of insight:

99.) An old affliction; why speak of it now? (1033)

The scars upon Oedipus' ankles require a special attention in terms of Lonergan's thought.⁷⁶ Oedipus, though, dismisses them, returning to his questions for intelligence:

100.) Gods! Who did this – my mother? (1037)

101.) My father? (1037)

102.) You took me from someone else? (1039)

103.) You didn't find me? (1039)

104.) Who was it? (1041)

105.) Do you know? (1041)

106.) Can you tell me? (1041)

107.) The Tyrannus who used to rule this country?

At this point, the Corinthian informs Oedipus of Laius' herdsman, which prompts another litany of pointed questions for judgment.

108.) Does he still live? (1045)

109.) Can I see him? (1045)

110.) Do any of you gathered here know

Who this herdsman could be? (1047-1048)

111.) Is he somewhere out in the country? (1049)

⁷⁶ See Patrick H. Byrne's essay, "Edith Stein & Bernard Lonergan: Empathy, Phenomenology and Self-Appropriation" (forthcoming). Used with permission.

112.) Is he here? (1049)

In what ought to be, perhaps, the final dagger, the Corinthian tells Oedipus that his wife Jocasta would know the answers to these questions.

113.) My wife? (1054)

114.) Could the man he means be the one we summoned? (1055)

115.) Do you know? (1055)

Here, with this data, Jocasta experiences the insight that will take her husband a few more questions to achieve. It is worth noting here the significance of the fact that the insight and the virtually unconditioned grasp of the “truth” occur in two different characters at two different times, one requiring less data than the other to “get it.” This phenomenon seems to support Lonergan’s basic premise that truth resides within the consciousness of the pursuer. And so, in a speech that parallels Tiresias’ earlier injunction that “nothing/Can be gained from knowledge,” Jocasta instinctively attempts to restrict the unrestricted desire to know shouting: “No! By all the gods, if you have care for your life/Stop these questions. Have I not suffered enough?” (1060-1061).⁷⁷ When Oedipus refuses, she attempts again, to which Oedipus replies, “You’ll never persuade me to give up the truth” (1065), to which Jocasta responds, “I pray you never know the man you are” (1068). Like the earlier exchange with Tiresias, this moment invites us to evaluate the famous Aristotelian

⁷⁷ It is interesting to consider whether this instinct to restrict the unrestricted desire to know is a function of Jocasta’s protective instinct as Oedipus’ mother, shielding him from harm or as a wife. Essentially, it seems to be both: her son and husband are in peril.

aphorism that “piety requires us to honor truth above our friends.”⁷⁸ Likewise, for Lonergan, there are no questions the answers to which we should not, at least, desire.

Next, the Chorus intervenes on behalf Jocasta, saying, “Her silence frightens me; evil will break from it” (1075). Oedipus replies to them with a beautiful encomium to truth and yet the encomium may be pathetically misguided. We begin to suspect that Oedipus’ refusal to shy away from the truth is merely because he assumes the truth is tolerable. In other moments of bias, which will be developed further in Chapter 2, he further attributes Jocasta’s fear to her “feminine conceit,” believing that she fears a low birth, shouting,

Then it will break! I have to know
 Who I am, however low my birth
 That woman, with her feminine conceit,
 Is ashamed of my humble origins,
 But I see myself as a child of good-giving
 Fortune, and I will not be demeaned.
 She is my mother, the seasons my kin,
 And I rise and fall like the phases of the moon.
 That is my nature, and I will never play the part
 Of someone else, nor fail to learn what I was born to be (1076-1085).⁷⁹

Aside from the obvious punning (“she is my mother”), we cannot help but notice the emergence of what may be the most beautiful aspect of Oedipus’ character: his commitment to avoiding a kind of Sartrean bad faith. Oedipus refuses to “play the part/of someone else.” Perhaps his dignity lies in his authenticity; his unwillingness

⁷⁸ Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics*. (trans. Joe Sachs, Newburyport, MA: Focus Philosophical Library, 2002). 1096a 17-18.

⁷⁹ In an existential sense, this passage is a testament to Oedipus refusal to practice what Jean-Paul Sartre called “bad faith.” Oedipus will not wear the mask of another, fascinating given that masked persona on stage. In this sense, the play is decidedly post-modern: the masked man tells us he will refuse to wear the mask.

to play false. Nevertheless, with the arrival of the Theban herdsman, and in spite of Jocasta's entreaties and retreat, Oedipus' questions again come fast and furious. First, he asks the chorus:

116.) Have you ever seen this shepherd? (1115)

117.) First of all, tell me, Corinthian, is this the man? (1119)

Oedipus turns to the Theban herdsman and asks basic grounding questions for intelligence:

118.) Did you once belong to Laius? (1122)

119.) What was your job, your livelihood? (1124)

120.) Where did you usually work? (1126)

121.) Was this man ever there – did you know him? (1128)

122.) Have you met him before? (1130)

The next few lines depict a fascinating exchange between two older men, roughly the same age, as one questions while the other simultaneously demurs, fearful of exposing the truth they both suspect will be deleterious to their hearers. The scene culminates with the herdsman refusing, prompting Oedipus to resort to the aggression that characterized his detours with Tiresias and Creon.

123.) Did you give him a child as he said? (1156)

124.) Where did you get it – your home, or from someone else? (1162)

125.) Which citizen was it? (1164)

126.) Whose house? (1164)

Here the herdsman too joins the growing contingent of characters (Tiresias and Jocasta) who attempt to restrict the unrestricted desire to know. In a line that

succinctly sums up this worldview, the Herdsman shouts, “No more questions!” (1165). Sophocles will now deftly and ironically balance the phrase, “No more questions,”⁸⁰ against Oedipus’ forthcoming virtually unconditioned judgment in which there are “no more questions” because there are, literally, “no further questions.”

127.) A slave child, or one of his own? (1168)

128.) She gave it to you? (1172)

129.) For what reason? (1174)

130.) Her own baby? (1175)

The herdsman tells Oedipus that Jocasta feared an oracle:

131.) That said what? (1176)

132.) Then why did you give him to this old man? (1177)

In response to this question, the herdsman delivers the final piece of data that serves as a sort of cognitive tipping point. It is, as I will point out in the next section, the final condition in a network of conditions and their fulfillments. The appearance of this data satiates Oedipus’ questioning to the point that he has also made a virtually unconditioned judgment about his terrifying insight, which is unsurprisingly expressed verbally with an allusion to eyesight, “It all comes clear.”

Oedipus’ Reflective Understanding: Insight and the Virtually Unconditioned Judgment

⁸⁰ The Greek is: μὴ πρὸς θεῶν, μὴ δέσποθ’, ἱστόρει πλέον.

In *The Merchant of Venice*, Launcelot says to Gobbo, “Truth will come to light. Murder cannot be hid long – a man’s son may, but in the end *truth will out*” (my italics).⁸¹ Colloquially, the expression “truth will out” suggests that “the truth” – or, to use Lonergan’s phrases, what *is* so, what *is* real, what *is* actually the case (as opposed to what *seems* to be the case), and what we may “only gainsay by falsity” – has an inertial tendency to rise to the surface of things, given an adequate timeframe.

In *Oedipus Tyrannus*, that timeframe is 1181 lines. Oedipus’ litany of questions for intelligence, outlined in the previous section, set the conditions for his insight. This insight, it turns out, is simultaneously a “rationally compelled pronouncement of judgment,” the verbal expression of which is Oedipus’ pained cry, “Oi, Oi.”⁸² Oedipus then relies on the common visual metaphors to describe his insight, using words like clarity (σφαῖρη), light (φῶς), exposure (πέφασμαι) and the act of looking (προσβλέψαιμι).

And yet, for both Sophocles and Lonergan, the metaphorical connection between insight and ocular vision belies the real cognitional structure (and journey) by which truth is, in fact, grasped. As Byrne notes, “Colloquially we do say, ‘Oh, now I

⁸¹ Shakespeare, William. *The Merchant of Venice*. *The Norton Shakespeare*. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1997). II.2.68-70, p. 1103.

⁸² Scholars have long noted that the name “Oedipus” is a deft play on the expression, “oi,” one of pain, in addition to being a play on “oida,” Greek verb to “know” – “to painfully know.” As Charles Segal points out, “Indeed, [Oedipus’] name, in one possible etymology, suggests the meaning “Know Foot” (oida, Gr. “I know,” and pous, Gr. “foot.”) That is, “He who knows the riddle of the feet” (Segal, *Tragic Heroism*, 36).

see the answer.’ But to speak more exactly, seeing is precisely what we are not doing. Seeing is not the way we become conscious of the answer to a question.”⁸³

Consider Oedipus’ cry:

Oh! Oh! It all comes clear!
 Light, let me look at you one last time.
 I am exposed – born to forbidden parents, joined
 In forbidden marriage, I brought forbidden death (Lines 1181-1185).⁸⁴

It is no coincidence that Sophocles has Oedipus use the third-person singular neuter pronoun “it” (τὸ) to describe, essentially, “that which has become clear.” But just what is this act of grasping “it” and what is the “it” that is grasped? To fully answer this question we may turn to Archimedes, another classical figure who, not unlike Oedipus, is shrouded in apocryphal myth. In the opening pages of *Insight*, Lonergan alludes to the story of Archimedes whose famous cry “eureka,” literally means “I’ve got it.”⁸⁵ In Lonergan’s terms, this “it,” no matter how we describe it linguistically (intelligibility, the reason, the cause, the explanation, etc.), is the object grasped by a very special cognitive act he calls “insight.”

An insight, according to Lonergan, has five attributes. First, insight comes as a release to the tension of inquiry. As we have seen, Oedipus has been inquiring up

⁸³ P.H. Byrne, *Ethics of Discernment*, 28.

⁸⁴ Sophocles, O.T., 1181-1185. The Greek is below:

ἰοὺ ἰοῦ: τὰ πάντα ἄν ἐξήκοι σαφῆ.
 ὦ φῶς, τελευταῖόν σε προσβλέψαιμι νῦν,
 ὅστις πέφασμαι φύς τ’ ἀφ’ ὧν οὐ χρῆν, ξὺν οἷς τ’
 οὐ χρῆν ὁμιλῶν, οὗς τέ μ’ οὐκ ἔδει κτανῶν.

⁸⁵ Lonergan, *Insight*, 29.

until this moment. And while Archimedes is remembered for his “peculiarly uninhibited exultation,” just as Oedipus is remembered for his pained cry, “Oi! Oi!,” the significance, as Lonergan notes, “does not lie in this outburst of delight but in the antecedent desire and effort that it betrays.”⁸⁶ This “desire and effort” is, respectively, the unrestricted desire to know and the self-correcting process of learning. Lonergan adds,

Deep within us all, emergent when the noise of other appetites is stilled, there is a drive to know, to understand, to see why, to discover the reason, to find the cause, to explain. Just what is wanted has many names. In what precisely it consists is a matter of dispute. But the fact of inquiry is beyond all doubt. It can absorb a man. It can keep him for hours, day after day, year after year, in the narrow prison of his study or his laboratory. It can send him on dangerous voyages of exploration. It can withdraw him from other interests, other pursuits, other pleasures, other achievements. It can fill his waking thoughts, hide from the world of ordinary affairs, invade the very fabric of his dreams. It can demand endless sacrifices that are made without regret though there is only hope, never a certain promise, of success. What better symbol could one find for this obscure, exigent, imperious drive, than a man, naked, running, excitedly crying, ‘I’ve got it’?⁸⁷

Second, insight comes suddenly and unexpectedly. While we might argue that Oedipus’ insight is far more discursive than, say, Archimedes’, his understanding that he, of all people, is the cause of the miasma is certainly unexpected.⁸⁸

⁸⁶ Lonergan, *Insight*, 28.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁸⁸ Meanwhile I am sympathetic to viewpoints which suggest there is a sense in which Oedipus “knows” (subconsciously) the truth of his identity the whole time. I will treat this reading in a later section on dramatic bias. There may be a distinction to draw out between what Oedipus “knows” and what he “feels.”

Third, insight is a function not of outer circumstances but of inner conditions. Note, that while new data is brought to light as the play progresses, other characters in the play, like Jocasta, grasp the truth earlier than Oedipus. That it takes different people different timescales to grasp a puzzle is the *prima facie* evidence that insight is a function of the inner conditions of the knower and could never be merely a matter of “ocular vision.” If that were the case, it would follow that all people with functioning eyes would solve the same puzzle instantly.

Fourth, insight pivots between the concrete and the abstract. We recall that Oedipus has a very concrete problem on his hands, far more dire, in fact, than Archimedes’. Oedipus’ city has been “plunged headlong into the depths of disaster” ...and...“desolation wastes away the harvest/Destroys our herds and grazing fields/Blights the women and makes them barren.”⁸⁹ Oedipus faces a national disaster, not a conman duping a King. Any hope Thebes may have for the future will be contingent upon insight – maybe not Oedipus’, but someone’s – into the problem. It is for this reason that Lonergan notes, “by its very nature insight is the mediator, the hinge, the pivot.”⁹⁰

Fifth, and finally, insight passes into the habitual texture of one’s mind. In fact, Lonergan could very well be describing Oedipus when he says, “Once one has understood, one has crossed a divide. What a moment ago was an insoluble problem

⁸⁹ Sophocles, *O.T.*, Lines 22-27.

⁹⁰ Lonergan, *Insight*, 30.

now becomes incredibly simple and obvious.”⁹¹ This attribute is the hallmark of a good mystery. What was once so dark and unintelligible all seems so lucid and simple.

Typically, an insight is separated from the act of judgment in a temporal sequence, as the questioner, post-insight, begins to question whether his insight is actually correct, with his consciousness enlarging from intelligent to rational self-consciousness. Archimedes, for instance, needed time to test his insight in an actual concrete experiment, asking an “is it so?” question about his insight. There are, however, occasions in which insight is simultaneous or, at the very least, nearly instantaneous with judgment, especially when the questioning process that yields the insight affirms along the way the requisite conditions to judge the content of the insight correct.

Oedipus’ insight is, therefore, simultaneously the ground for a virtually unconditioned judgment, which effectively fuses the climax of the play’s plot with the climax of the questioning process. In fact, after this critical point, the remainder of the play is essentially a protracted denouement. The situation is now intelligible. Oedipus has, as the saying goes, “no further questions,” at least as they pertain to his identity as incestuous parricide and defiler of Thebes. Yes, he will ask a few lingering questions about his fate and the fate of his children, as the sphere of his concern contracts to more immediate matters, but not at the furious pace he questions prior to his insight. The insight has now passed into the habitual texture of his (and our) mind. It seems Launcelot is vindicated: the truth is out.

⁹¹ Ibid.

And yet the Shakespeare line needs revision in light of Lonergan's analysis. If *Oedipus Tyrannus* teaches us anything, it is a point foundational to Lonergan's cognitional theory, epistemology and, ultimately, metaphysics: the "truth will out," yes, but only insofar as authentic questioners are willing to do the legwork of asking the right questions to "out it." Truth, therefore, is contingent upon questioners ontologically capable of what Lonergan calls a "virtually unconditioned judgment." In other words, while a mind does not make something true, there is, nevertheless, no truth without minds. If judgments answer "yes or no" questions, then the road to any judgment will be paved by prior questions for intelligence the condition for which is an empirical consciousness capable of this kind of cognitive ascent. Lonergan relies on a powerful metaphor taken from embryonic development. Human consciousness is the womb in which truth is conceived, gestates and from which, ultimately, it is born (parturition). Consider Lonergan's definitive comment, included in its entirety to stress its importance (and elegance):

The criterion, I believe, by which we arrive at the truth is a virtually unconditioned.⁹² But an unconditioned has no conditions. A subject may be needed to arrive at truth, but, once truth is attained, one is beyond the subject and one has reached a realm that is non-spatial, atemporal, impersonal. Whatever is true at any time or place, can be contradicted only by falsity. No one can gainsay it, unless he is mistaken and errs.

Such is the objectivity of truth. But do not be fascinated by it. Intentionally it is independent of the subject, but ontologically it resides only in the subject: *veritas formaliter in solo iudicio*.

⁹² Lonergan adds this footnote: "The formally unconditioned has no conditions whatever; it is God. The virtually unconditioned has conditions but they have been fulfilled. Such, I should say, is the cognitional counterpart of contingent being and, as well, a technical formulation of the ordinary criterion of true judgment, namely, sufficient evidence" (*Insight*, 70). For a more complex elucidation of the virtually unconditioned see *Insight*, Chapter 10.

Intentionally it goes completely beyond the subject, yet it does so *only because ontologically the subject is capable of an intentional self-transcendence, of going beyond what he feels, what he imagines, what he thinks, what seems to him, to something utterly different, to what is so.* Moreover, before the subject can attain the self-transcendence of truth, there is the slow and laborious process of conception, gestation, parturition. But teaching and learning, investigating, coming to understand, marshalling and weighing the evidence, these are not independent of the subject, of times and places, of psychological, social, historical conditions. The fruit of truth must grow and mature on the tree of the subject, before it can be plucked and placed in its absolute realm.⁹³

The real is not, therefore, as the empiricist claims, the spatially extended or, to use Lonergan's phrase, "the already-out-there-now-real." Instead, for Lonergan, "the real" is that which is affirmed in a virtually unconditioned judgment.

But just what is a virtually unconditioned judgment? What does it mean to say that Oedipus makes the virtually unconditioned judgment that he is the defiler of his city, along with all of the corollary propositions that attend it, including judgments on the veracity of the prophecies?

Lonergan tells us "a virtually unconditioned involves three elements, namely, (1) a conditioned, (2) a link between the conditioned and its conditions, and (3) the fulfillment of the conditions. Hence a prospective judgment will be virtually unconditioned if (1) it is the conditioned, (2) its conditions are known, and (3) the conditions are fulfilled."⁹⁴ As it turns out, the latter two criteria (knowing the conditions and judging they are fulfilled) constitute quite a high bar, the height of which is often underappreciated by those, like empiricists, who equate human

⁹³ Lonergan, *A Second Collection*, 70-71; italics are mine.

⁹⁴ Lonergan, *Insight*, 305.

knowing with a rather simplistic standard of “taking a look.” In a point to which I will return later, we may argue (against Nietzsche and others, as it were) that it is not wisdom but a casual empiricism, a stance which does equate knowing with “taking a look,” which receives the brunt of Sophocles’ critique of knowledge (if one may even speak of a “critique”).

Returning to judgment, consider, for example, a comedy bit that used to appear on *Late Night with David Letterman*. The bit was called “Will it float?” In it, various objects are presented to the audience with the question for judgment: “Will it float?” In other words, in any given scenario, the game can be reduced to the proposition, “X will float in Y.” Affirm or deny?⁹⁵ A question for judgment. One of the comedic imports of the game is the readiness with which laypeople are willing to make the judgment without (presumably) attempting to do the “cognitive legwork” (i.e. questioning) to ascertain whether the requisite conditions of floating (the conditioned) are indeed fulfilled. This legwork often requires far more questions than typical people, typically operating in pragmatic descriptive patterns, are willing to do and yet Lonergan’s standard is, as he reminds us, merely a “technical formulation of the ordinary criterion of true judgment, namely, sufficient evidence.”⁹⁶

On Lonergan’s view, to offer judgment, we must first defer to our inquiry. We must first inquire about the conditions that would need to be fulfilled to affirm or

⁹⁵ Lonergan offers a third possibility that is neither affirm or deny – one might simply “consider” the proposition as a hypothesis.

⁹⁶ Lonergan, *A Second Collection*, 70. (See footnote 3). The full sentence is as follows: “Such, I should say, is the cognitional counterpart of contingent being and, as well, a technical formulation of the ordinary criterion of true judgment, namely, sufficient evidence.”

deny the proposition. For example, in the “Will it Float?” game, the most obvious condition we learn in high school chemistry class: the density of the object in relation to the density of the solution. But relative density is only one condition which, on its own, is not a sufficient condition to actualize or “cause” the physical event called floating.⁹⁷ It is for this reason that Lonergan would describe density as an “explanatory conjugate.” An object may be more or less dense than another. In this sense, having a particular density does not necessitate an object to float but it is an important relational condition among others. In fact, further questions would in fact reveal that greater density is not the only condition – the student of hydrostatics knows gravitational fields or non-inertial reference frames set new conditions. Would the object, for example, float in the solution if both were moving closer and closer to the speed of light? The denial of extreme conditions such as these is implicit in the Latin qualifier, *ceteris paribus*, invoked in hypothetical scenarios.⁹⁸ When making our judgments we do not expect these bizarre conditions to obtain and yet we understand – through yet another act of judgment – that certain changes are not impossible.⁹⁹

⁹⁷ In this sense, in terms of modern theories of causation, Lonergan’s view seems most closely aligned with JL Mackie, whose understanding of causation is couched in language about fulfilling conditions.

⁹⁸ In my classroom I often challenge my students to do the “cognitive legwork” of ascertaining the conditions needed to be fulfilled in order to make even basic, uncomplicated judgments. I write on the board: “Frost played lacrosse at UNC Chapel Hill.” Then I ask: yes, or no? Affirm or deny? It is often shocking to hear the dubious procedures – loaded with uncritical assumptions – whereby some students immediately deny the proposition.

⁹⁹ Likewise, I often show my students a YouTube clip of the famous MLB pitcher Randy Johnson throwing a fastball to an opposing batter. I pause the clip just

Lonergan next invokes the concept of deductive inference (specifically, *modus ponens*) while simultaneously acknowledging the obvious drawbacks of pure deduction by using the phrase “virtually” as a hedge against, say, a Humean objection that any judgment “presupposes other judgments to be true.” He writes,

Now the conclusion is a conditioned, for an argument is needed to support it. The major premise links this conditioned to its conditions, for it affirms ‘If A, then B.’ The minor premise presents the fulfillment of the conditions, for it affirms the antecedent A. The function, then, of the form of deductive inference is to exhibit a conclusion as virtually unconditioned. Reflective insight grasps the pattern, and by rational compulsion there follows the judgment. However, deductive inference cannot be the basic case of judgment for it presupposes other judgments to be true. For that reason we have said that the form of deductive inference is merely a clear illustration of what is meant by grasping a prospective judgment as virtually unconditioned.¹⁰⁰

A further elucidation of this principle may be found in the old logic mystery, “Who Killed Torrelli,”¹⁰¹ which appears below. The reader is encouraged to attempt to solve the puzzle before moving on:

One and only one of the men mentioned below killed Torrelli. Each one of the five men made three statements, two true and one false. Their statements were:

Lefty: “I did not kill Torrelli. I never owned a revolver. Spike did it.”

Red: “I did not kill Torrelli. I never owned a revolver. The other guys are passing the buck.”

Dopey: “I am innocent. I never saw Butch before. Spike is guilty.”

as the ball has left his hand and ask, “how many think the ball will hit the mitt?” Some assume yes, others suspect a trick and say no but very few predict the appearance of an unlucky bird that flies right across the path of the ball and explodes in a ball of feathers and guts.

¹⁰⁰ Lonergan, *Insight*, 306.

¹⁰¹ I am indebted to Professor Patrick H. Byrne of Boston College for first introducing this mystery to me in the context of Lonergan and the virtually unconditioned.

Spike: "I am innocent. Butch is the guilty man. Lefty lied when he said I did it."

Butch: "I did not kill Torrelli. Red is the guilty man. Dopey and I are old pals."

Like in *Oedipus*, the question which underpins the mystery, "Who killed Torrelli?" (e.g. "Who killed Laius?") at first blush sounds like a question for intelligence. With five options presented, however, the puzzle really becomes five questions for judgment: Lefty killed Torrelli, yes or no? Red killed Torrelli, yes or no? Dopey killed Torrelli, yes or no? Spike killed Torrelli, yes or no? Butch killed Torrelli, yes or no?

Notice that while there are multiple (more complex) ways of solving this puzzle (using truth tables, etc.), a quick glance at the statements and the rules reveals, that in order for "X to be the killer" (the conditioned) statements professing innocence paired with statements indicting others would both need to be false, violating the rules of "two true, one false." A quick inspection of the statements reveals that 4 of the 5 suspects (Lefty, Dopey, Spike and Butch) all claim innocence while simultaneously indicting others. But **if** they were the killers (K), **then** both of these statements would be false (F). But they can't both be false (the rules fulfill the condition). Lefty, Dopey, Spike and Butch, therefore, by *modus tollens*, are not the killers. Red is the only solution which avoids contradiction.

Likewise, Oedipus' "eureka" moment, which stands upon a mountain of questions and insights, is the product of nearly identical reasoning, which itself is the byproduct of Oedipus' ontological capability of ascending to rational self-consciousness, the condition of which is intelligent consciousness, the condition of

which is empirical consciousness. Although by no means fully explicit to him (for he never really attempts true self-appropriation) his reasoning runs like this:

If...“I have killed a man (M)” and “that man is my father (F)” and “I have slept with a woman (W)” and “that woman is my mother (J)” and “I have scars on my ankles (A)” ...*then* “the Delphic prophesy is correct (P)” and “I am the source of miasma (S)”

$$\frac{(M \cdot F \cdot W \cdot J \cdot A) \supset P \cdot S}{(M \cdot F \cdot W \cdot J \cdot A)} \\ P \cdot S$$

There are, of course, potential contradictions which Sophocles must deftly surmount in order to make the judgment “virtually unconditioned,” a necessity in order for Oedipus’ final insight to pack such a dramatic and definitive punch. In the service of this punch, Oedipus’ ankle wounds, the drunken guest’s speech, the Corinthian shepherd’s pronouncement that Polybus and Merope are not, in fact, Oedipus’ biological parents all add additional conditions that reinforce the virtually unconditioned truth of the conclusion. For example, Oedipus might be willing to affirm that he killed Laius (at the three roads) but refuse to believe Laius was his father, given the contradiction between the statements, “Laius is my father” and “Polybus is my father.” To be told, therefore, “but Polybus and Merope are not your biological parents,” provided he believes it,¹⁰² makes it possible to fulfill what was thought to be an impossible condition. Note that within this reasoning process the original question of the play, the mystery itself, “who is the land’s defiler?,” is only one condition in the full and complete judgment of “Oi! Oi! It all becomes clear.” Oedipus

¹⁰² Note that “belief” plays an important role in the play as well. Why does Oedipus believe the Corinthian shepherd? His belief is contingent upon the memory of a first-hand empirical experience of the drunken dinner guest.

might, for example, affirm sexual relations with Jocasta but then deny that Jocasta is his mother.

It is his ankle wounds (A) that become the key data required to link the present Oedipus with the past Oedipus and, by extension, the previous king, Laius, across time. Note that this “linking” is clearly not a matter of mere ocular vision. Oedipus’ ankle wounds, which he has seen his whole life as a matter of ocular vision and which, previously, he has uncritically dismissed – He tells us, “An old affliction; why speak of it now?” (1033) – become newly intelligible as they unite the two prophecies. Were it not for the sense data of the wounds and the leap of insight, Oedipus would presumably be unable to link the image of the baby described in the testimony of the shepherd – “I found you in a tangled ravine on Mount Cithaeron” (1026) – with his present self as one identity over time. As Lonergan would put it, Oedipus is an “intelligible unity, identity, whole” which intelligibly unifies different data at different times in insights. Only now, through insight, do the ankle wounds become the “mediator, the hinge, the pivot.” In fact, Oedipus’ insight in this moment is not unlike an insight we all have that is so common it often goes unnoticed: namely, the moment we reflect on a baby picture and connect the baby in the image with ourselves. How do we do that, when the image in the photo, for all intents and purposes, looks nothing like us?

The slow conception, gestation and parturition of “whole truth” in Oedipus’ consciousness illustrates Lonergan’s most famous claim that “genuine objectivity is the fruit of authentic subjectivity”¹⁰³ which, for Oedipus, seems like a pyrrhic victory.

¹⁰³ Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 292.

What better way to affirm this claim than by adverting to the way in which different aspects of the “whole truth” are, first, scattered about the consciousnesses of others in the play. For example, the Theban shepherd knows that Oedipus has killed Laius but does not yet know that Oedipus is the same boy he handed away. Conversely, The Corinthian messenger knows that Oedipus was the boy he was handed years ago but does not know he is also the man who killed Laius. Jocasta soon understands that Oedipus is the infant she gave away years ago and is therefore guilty of incest but could not know that this man also killed her previous husband, Laius. Now, through an interpersonal journey, in which these different fragments have been mined from the islands of individual consciousness where they were hidden, Oedipus is able to assemble them into a monument called “the whole truth.”

And so, like Archimedes, while Oedipus might not be able to articulate at this juncture just what has occurred in his reflective insight without, as Lonergan says, “prolonged efforts at introspective analysis,” he nevertheless understands that this judgment is special – it meets a far higher standard than a “mere guess.” We do not, after all, shout “Oi! Oi!,” on the heels of “mere guesses.” Further, Oedipus’ need to be surer than a “mere guess” becomes ironic, especially when considered against other moments in the play in which he is so famously rash – in his suspicions of Tiresias and Creon, for example. Here, in this climactic moment, Oedipus is neither rash nor swift (*tachys*), nor is he indecisive in judgment. Perhaps this prudence is a function of his growing suspicion that now, it is his own fate on the line. Grasping, for the first time, that he may be vulnerable, he takes care to ensure that his insight is invulnerable.

In fact, the entire enterprise of attempting to judge correctly whether you committed a crime in the past immediately points beyond a mere empirical verification criterion of meaning. The past cannot be sensed but it can be judged. Oedipus ankle wounds are evidence that he might be the “same” infant Jocasta abandoned years ago but they are no confirmation. If Oedipus had no wounds on his ankles, would this confirm he wasn’t the baby? Do wounds on the ankles confirm it? Not necessarily. Instead the judgment comes in a network – instead it is the intelligible unification of a number of pieces of sense (and non-sensible) data. As Byrne notes, “Yet even when sensible data are found that meet the reflective criteria of fulfilling conditions, these are seldom the complete or sole set of conditions that must be fulfilled.”¹⁰⁴

We note that it is in this moment in the drama, because it is so well-executed, and, not coincidentally, loaded with questions, that we recognize, like Oedipus does, that there is no room for even hyperbolic doubt or paranoia. Even David Hume would agree that Oedipus is the killer, despite the spatiotemporal distance between Oedipus the killer and Oedipus the Tyrannos. Byrne writes, “When we know someone to be the same person, what is the same is the intelligible unification of those different sense data. And the conditions that must be fulfilled to judge sameness of intelligibility are different from sameness of sensible data.”¹⁰⁵

There are obvious interpretive implications of this analysis. For example, when the climax of the play is couched in terms of insight and virtually unconditioned

¹⁰⁴ P.H. Byrne, *Ethics of Discernment*, 54.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 53.

judgment, Oedipus' decision to gouge out his eyes becomes yet another ironic moment of misdirected anger, not unlike the misdirected anger at Tiresias and Creon. Oedipus' eyes are not the problem. They work just fine. In fact, they have performed their function admirably – ocular vision. Nevertheless they become the scapegoat for Oedipus' intellectual failure – the failure to grasp the now obvious point that ocular vision is not the whole of knowledge. In fact, in the next section I will discuss the irony that Oedipus' first decision (post insight) is the choice to harm his eyes, a fitting testament to his lack of discernment on the level of rational self-consciousness.

We should note as well that Oedipus' virtually unconditioned judgment that he is the land's defiler is not the first time we have seen Oedipus' intelligent consciousness enlarge into what we have described as rational self-consciousness. There are a few moments prior to this one, interpolated amidst what is primarily intelligent consciousness, which foreshadow the reasoning process Oedipus uses in his final judgment.

Recall, for example, Oedipus' initial hope in summoning the Theban herdsman earlier in the action of the play. Oedipus hopes that the data the herdsman will provide will exonerate him: "I will await the herdsman;/He is now my only hope" (836-837). When Jocasta inquires as to why the herdsman could possibly be a herald of hope, especially given the trajectory and import of the questioning, Oedipus reminds her of her own earlier statement, saying, "Let me tell you; if what he says agrees/With your story, then I will escape this crisis" (839-840). Jocasta fails to understand the link between the premise (the conditions) and the conclusion (the conditioned) and asks a clarifying question for intelligence, "What did you hear me

say?" Oedipus then offers the first instance of reasoning, the hallmark of rational consciousness. His reasoning is rooted in a putative contradiction in number.

He says,

You said he explained how Laius was killed
By several thieves. If he still says thieves,
Then I could not have killed him.
How can one be the same as many? (Lines 842-845, my italics)

Notice this final, italicized question. While the question seems to be a question for intelligence (how), it is actually a question for judgment: one is the same as many, yes or no? Or, is it possible for one to be "the same" as many? In Lonergan's terms, this question is illustrative of Oedipus' transition from questioner to reasoner, from intelligent consciousness to rational consciousness. His ascent parallels the soul's ascent as it moves from *pistis* to *dianoia* in Plato's divided line. In Book VII of *The Republic*, for example, Socrates discusses what he calls "summoners," using the relations of fingers on the hand.

The ones that don't summon the intellect are all those that don't at the same time go over to the opposite sensation. But the ones that do go over I class among those that summon the intellect, when the sensation doesn't reveal one thing any more than its opposite, regardless of whether the object strikes the senses from near or far off.¹⁰⁶

A "summoner" (παρακαλοῦντα), in Socrates' use of the word, is a perception that "summons" the intellect. As Miriam Byrd has noted, "One is summoned when the soul, content with its acceptance of sense perception as representative of reality, is confronted by a perception which appears to have contradictory qualities."¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁶ Plato, *The Republic*. (trans. Alan Bloom). (New York: Basic Books, 1991), Book VII. 523c.

Socrates then launches into an extended discussion of “calculation” (λογισμὸν) and the calculative powers of the soul, as opposed to the sensitive or affective.

Likewise, for Oedipus, immanent in his cognitional structure is the desire to reconcile the contradiction between two mutually exclusive perceptions – in this case, one thief or many thieves but not (simultaneously) both. The insights Oedipus has accumulated thus far, through the self-correcting process of learning, have disclosed a potential contradiction which cannot stand and so he must question the very groundwork of the two imagined scenes and their apparent mutual exclusivity. Laius was either murdered by multiple men or one but not both: Either M or O. Oedipus, in other words, ascends to logical relations to reconcile the problem, beyond the world of sense. In Platonic terms, as Miriam Byrd notes, “The soul realizes that sense perception is no longer deemed adequate to understanding the world, and it is provoked to use thought, appealing to intelligible entities in order to solve the puzzle (524d–e). This leads the soul from *pistis* to *dianoia*.”¹⁰⁸

We should note also the heavy irony that Oedipus’ attempt at reasoning here is not even the first time in the play he has questioned a putative contradiction in number. Earlier, when Oedipus inquired of Creon about the fate of the herdsman, Creon tells Oedipus that “he said he saw only one thing for certain” (119). Oedipus immediately believes this may be the source of hope, asking, intelligently, “What was that? One thing could reveal much more/Hope can spring from such a small

¹⁰⁷ Miriam Byrd. “The return of the exile: the benefits of mimetic art in the Republic.” (*Conversations Platonic and Neoplatonic*, 2010), 23-38.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 24.

beginning" (120-121). Creon then explicitly states the key premise from which Oedipus deduces his hope. Creon says, quite authoritatively, "A pack of *thieves* killed him in ambush;/Not one man alone, but many" (122-123, my italics). Yet Oedipus, in what is often cited in the secondary literature as a subconscious slip, changes the plural to a singular: "How could a *thief* dare to do such a thing/Unless *he* had been paid off by someone here?" (124-125, my italics). Similarly, when Creon earlier explains that the cause of miasma is "murder," Oedipus replies by rushing, without evidence, to a singular murderer, asking, "who is this man?" Yet Creon proceeds to inject the first misdirected image, saying, "[Laius] is dead, and the command is clear: Punish the *killers* by force" (my italics).¹⁰⁹

Still later in the play, Oedipus uses a similar reasoning process when he is informed of his adoptive father Polybus' death. In this later scene, the accepted premise is: *Polybus is Oedipus' father*. Oedipus, of course, is worried he has killed his father. But Polybus has just died. The key, from Oedipus' perspective, is to demonstrate that if Polybus died by some other manner than by Oedipus' own hand, it cannot be literally true that he killed his father. This would be an obvious contradiction. The tragedy is amplified as we watch Oedipus infer a correct conclusion from an untrue premise. And so Oedipus says,

Why? Why, dear wife, should we observe the oracle
At Delphi, or strain to see signs from birds screeching

¹⁰⁹ We cannot help but wonder, here, why Creon says "killers" in the plural? Is he reporting Delphi? If so, Delphi is incorrect. If we take as a more likely inference that this inaccuracy is a mistake in Creon's reportage, then why doesn't Oedipus clarify the issue? "Wait," Oedipus might have said. "Are we looking for one man or many here? What's the deal? Let's get the basic facts clear." His ultimate failure to demand clarification mirrors, as I will argue in a later section, his failure to demand clarification at the oracle and is, ultimately, a testament to what Lonergan calls "bias."

In the sky? They led me to believe that I would kill
 My father, yet he's dead and buried deep in the earth.
 And here am I, who never raised a hand against him,
 Unless my absence made him die brokenhearted.
 Then, I suppose, I could be called his killer,
 But not the kind contained within these worthless oracles.
 Polybus has taken those with him to Hades. (Lines 964-972)

Oedipus' reasoning is again tied to what seems to be a contradiction in two mutually exclusive perceptions. The formal logic, underneath its more rhetorical formulation, might be expressed in two syllogisms in modus ponens in which the conclusion of the first becomes the minor premise of the second: "If my father died of natural causes, then I did not kill my father. My father died of natural causes. Therefore, I did not kill my father. If I did not kill my father, then the oracle is wrong. I did not kill my father. Therefore, the oracle is wrong." Obviously this impressive chain of deductive inference is valid but not sound, since it is contingent on the truth of the (false) proposition, "Polybus is my father."

The marital exchange that follows on the heels of Oedipus' extended use of reasoning is provocative. Jocasta uses the speech above to confirm her initial belief, totally devoid of reasoning, that Oedipus had nothing to fear in the first place. She says: "Exactly what I said in the beginning" (Line 973) to which Oedipus replies, "You did, but fear misguided me" (Line 974). We take from this statement that Oedipus believes his affective self has been running interference with his reasoning. Yet, in an ironic reversal, Oedipus' affective response here (his latent fears) seems, unbeknownst to him, to have a better purchase on the truth than does his reasoning. And yet, because Oedipus questions are related to a distorted affective self, his

“reasoning” is not really reasoning after all. This is a topic to which I return in Chapter Two.

Nevertheless, in spite of an obvious unease in his affective self, Oedipus now cites fresh data (Polybus’ death) as confirmation of a latent suspicion that Delphi is a sham, in spite of the earlier recollection of the rumor of his adoption. Here we must unearth a few layers of irony. Oedipus is a man revered for his “judgment” – recall, the old suppliant says, “you understand what to do at such times/that is clear; all of us trust your judgment.” Yet one of his first “insights” in the opening of the play – after apparently many “sleepless nights” – is to defer to the very Oracle he now suspects as quackery. Like Socrates’ quest in *The Apology*, Oedipus’ deference to the wisdom of Delphi, “the will of the gods,” only initiates an ironic quest to deny them.

Further, Oedipus’ reasoning here, if correct, would have Delphi exposed once and for all as a sham, a major coup for his Theban community. As Bernard Knox notes, the veracity of prophecy and even prophecy as a legitimate art was an intellectual battleground in 5th century Athens. Knox points out that “Athens during the Peloponnesian War was plagued with degenerate exponents of the prophetic art, men who were in the business for money and who carefully shaped their prophecies to fit the desires of their customers.”¹¹⁰ He then cautions, however, that “to deduce from the demonstrable bad faith of charlatans the falsity of prophecy as a whole was a further step which few were willing to take, for the truth of divine prophecy was a

¹¹⁰ Knox, *Oedipus at Thebes*, 45.

fundamental assumption of that combination of ritual cult and heroic literature which served the Greeks as religion.”¹¹¹

Now, it would be one thing if Oedipus’ speech above were directed specifically at Tiresias, like his earlier speech, in which Oedipus might very well be indicting “degenerate...charlatans.” But it seems clear here that his indictment is precisely the stronger claim to which Knox alludes: “the falsity of prophecy as a whole.” Oedipus asks, “Why, dear wife, should we observe the oracle/At Delphi, or strain to see signs from birds screeching/In the sky.” This is, instead, a judgment about the fundamental pragmatic value of religion, the “validity of the whole traditional religious worldview.”¹¹²

For a brief time, reasoning, rooted in the calculative power of the soul (Plato) or the rational consciousness (Lonergan) has won the day against the mysterious, archaic forces of a worldview (fatalism) that was still strong but in danger of growing stale. And yet this moment is fleeting. Oedipus discovers that his reasoning was not reasoning at all. Almost paradoxically, reason, if correctly used, would only have validated and grounded prophecy.

Ultimately, this paradox is precisely what obtains. Oedipus’ reasoning does grasp “the whole truth” in this moment of insight and judgment and Oedipus experiences what Lonergan calls “intentional self-transcendence.” Oedipus’ virtually unconditioned judgment takes him “beyond” what “seems” to be the case to “what is.” In other words, he has reached objectivity (“what is”) through what Lonergan calls

¹¹¹ Ibid.

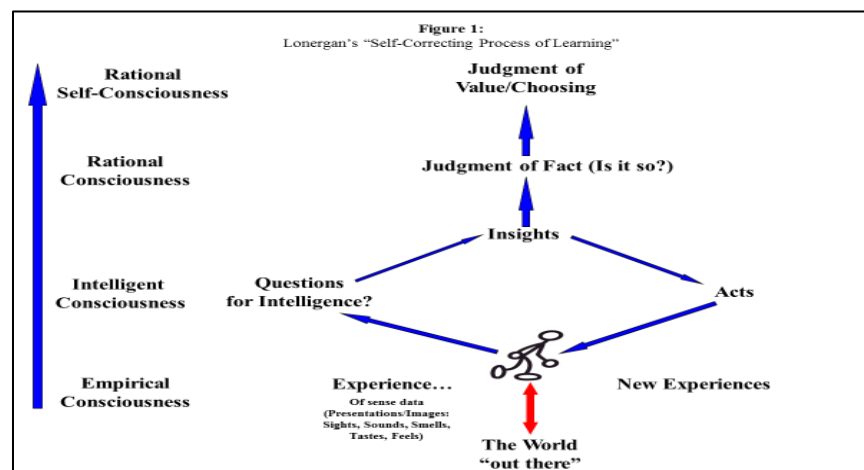
¹¹² Ibid., 46.

“authentic subjectivity,” the tireless questioning process even at the risk of his own peril and discomfort. And “what is” is precisely what prophecy said it would be.

The Aftermath: Trading Self-Transcendence for Self-Harm

We have finally arrived at the point in *Oedipus Tyrannus* wherein we find Oedipus’ consciousness in full possession of the horrifying truth of his identity. Oedipus has completed “the slow and laborious process of conception, gestation, parturition.”¹¹³ To continue with Lonergan’s taxonomy, Oedipus is on the verge of yet another “enlargement of consciousness,” from rational consciousness to rational self-consciousness, the “highest” level in the self-correcting cycle of learning (see diagram below).

Recall that Oedipus has made virtually unconditioned judgments of fact; but he must now make virtually unconditioned judgments of *value*. He must make decisions. Yes, the detective has his man. But what should he do with him? That the detective’s “man” happens to be himself makes him no more immune to decision.



¹¹³ Lonergan, *A Second Collection*, 70-71.

When Oedipus retreats inside his palace at line 1185, after his infamous insight on line 1182, he “sees” the whole situation so clearly (“Oh! Oh! It all comes clear!”), that he will now choose to blind himself in a vain (and undiscerning) attempt to un-see it. We must recall what it really means to say that he “sees” the whole situation clearly. Thus far we have used the strategy of replacing the verb “to see” with the verb “to understand.” Now, however, in addition to his insight, Oedipus has made a virtually unconditioned judgment. He not only “understands,” he “knows.” He has transcended ocular vision – the world of sense appearances – to understand and to know the truth of his identity and, as a corollary, the falsity of his previous identity. We may now replace the verb “to see” with “to understand and to know.” Oedipus’ self-blinding, therefore, is not only an attempt to un-see the horror; it is an attempt to un-understand and to unknow what cannot be un-understood or unknown.

The decision to self-blind is a fruitless and ineffective one of course for, as Lonergan points out, once achieved, insight passes into “the habitual texture of the mind.” Oedipus seems to immediately recognize this attribute of insight, crying, “Inescapable, unspeakable!/Ohhh!/Again and again, so much agony!/Memories stabbing, piercing me with pain!” (1315-1318)

Given this inescapable understanding and, now, this inescapable knowledge, Oedipus finds himself poised to actualize potential self-transcendence. This transcendence is a potential because, as Lonergan says, “ontologically the subject [in this case, Oedipus] is capable of an intentional self-transcendence, of going beyond what he feels, what he imagines, what he thinks, what seems to him, to something

utterly different, to what is so.”¹¹⁴ And yet, while I have demonstrated in previous sections the various “enlargements” of Oedipus’ consciousness which he effectively actualizes, at this point in the self-correcting cycle, Oedipus fails, and the enlargement remains *in potentia*.

Instead, as I will now endeavor to show, Oedipus’ development remains arrested, in a static state of undistorted affectivity that will make moral conversion impossible. The play ends with Oedipus hovering in a liminal state, somewhere between rational consciousness and rational self-consciousness. He makes decisions, yes, but they spring from a distorted affective self and, as such, are arguably not decisions at all. I would add that the liminal position in which Oedipus finds himself at the end of the play becomes further confirmation of McCoy’s claim that, “Sophocles does not reject the rational in favor of a tragic vision that is anti-rational or non-rational; rather, the rational itself includes an affective element.”¹¹⁵

These final scenes consist, for the most part, of the Messenger’s secondhand report of Oedipus’ eye-gouging followed by a dramatic exchange between Oedipus and Creon which begins on line 1419 and runs to the last line of the play. Both moments give us good reason to think that despite his questioning and famous insight (1182), Oedipus’ questions cease, and he fails to achieve self-transcendence. In fact, despite superficial or outward changes post-insight (his loss of the throne, Jocasta’s suicide, his eye-gouging, his reunion with his daughters, his eventual exile), Oedipus’ final moments upon the stage betoken an obstinacy in character that endures into and

¹¹⁴ Lonergan, *A Second Collection*, 70-71.

¹¹⁵ McCoy, *Wounded Heroes*, 57.

throughout *Oedipus Colonus*, as he fails throughout the course of that play to ask those additional questions which might lead to new insights and, ultimately, moral conversion. The final few scenes of *Oedipus Tyrannus* merely foreshadow the way in which, for Oedipus, old biases die hard, and will continue to die hard in “*Colonus*.” My reading concurs with the viewpoint Paul Davies proposes in “The End of Sophocles’ O.T.”:

At the end of the play Oedipus is no wiser than Ajax is in his play as to his true position as a mortal within a universe made and controlled by the gods. He has learned nothing, I repeat, except some purely factual information as to the identity of his mother and father. To an intelligent member of the chorus or the audience, as to a Creon or an Odysseus, this factual information would be the starting point for a series of profound insights and illuminations regarding the limits of man’s place in the world. It has to be said that the play itself gives us no grounds whatsoever for attributing any such illumination to Oedipus.¹¹⁶

It is important to recognize here that analyzing Oedipus’ character in terms of how closely he approximates authenticity does not amount to some paternalistic demand that Sophocles ought to have crafted Oedipus as some sort of moral exemplar. As Dodds notes, “for neither here nor anywhere else did Sophocles portray that insipid and unlikely character, the man of perfect virtue.”¹¹⁷ This “insipid character” is unrealistic and Lonergan seems to concur with his unlikeliness, saying, “human authenticity never is some pure and serene and secure possession.”¹¹⁸ As

¹¹⁶ Paul Davies, “The End of Sophocles O.T.,” (*Hermes*, 110. Bd., H. 3 (1982)), p. 277.

¹¹⁷ Dodds, “On Misunderstanding the ‘Oedipus Rex’.” (*Greece and Rome*, 1966), p. 38.

¹¹⁸ Lonergan, *Philosophical and Theological Papers* 1965-1980, 44.

cliché as it may sound, authenticity is a journey, not a destination. But it does not follow from this that Sophocles is somehow averse to encouraging us to entertain alternative visions of human behavior in comparison with that which he has presented. In other words, if a tragedian depicts a character with failings and vulnerabilities, which Oedipus clearly has, it seems quite legitimate enterprise (beyond my primary goal of merely elucidating Lonergan's thought) to offer an implicit standard from which those failings and vulnerabilities depart.

Therefore, to measure the failure of Oedipus' self-transcendence in Lonergan's terms, we must assess the level to which Oedipus becomes willing to withdraw from unauthenticity and eliminate oversights and misunderstandings. If transcendence involves a change, a "going beyond" some previous state, it follows that if we can show that a character has not changed from where he began, no transcendence will have occurred. In an essay called "Faith and Beliefs," Lonergan writes:

Self-transcendence involves a tension between the self as transcending and the self as transcended. It follows that human authenticity never is some pure and serene and secure possession. It is ever a withdrawal from unauthenticity, and every successful withdrawal only brings to light the need for still further withdrawals. Our advance in understanding is also the elimination of oversights and misunderstandings. Our advance in truth is also the correction of mistakes and errors.¹¹⁹

While it is true that Oedipus strives over the course of the play to eliminate oversights and misunderstandings, the striving stalls, as Oedipus enters the arena of action and decision with its attendant feelings and judgments of value (rational self-consciousness). Over the next few pages I devote some time treating these decisions

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 44.

post-insight, paying close attention to Oedipus' feelings as intermediary between judgments of fact and judgments of value. My analysis will follow closely Patrick H. Byrne's *The Ethics of Discernment*, an important text on Lonergan's thought which offers, in Byrne's words, a "plausible synthesis, that pulls together various sources into an integrated account of what I will call 'the structure of ethical intentionality'."¹²⁰ I should add as a minor caveat that my analysis will capture neither the full breadth and scope of Lonergan's thoughts on feelings and values, nor the breadth and scope of Byrne's text. Interested readers on this specific topic are encouraged to consult those excellent texts.

"Oh! Oh! It all comes clear!": Now What Should I Do?

We may begin by pointing out that, for Lonergan, just as there are virtually unconditioned judgments in matters of fact (rational consciousness), there are also virtually unconditioned judgments of value (rational self-consciousness). And yet between these two levels of consciousness is, to use Byrne's phrase, "a fertile field" of feelings. In what Byrne describes as a "cryptic remark,"¹²¹ Lonergan once wrote, "Intermediate between judgments of fact and judgments of value lie apprehensions of value. Such apprehensions are given in feelings."¹²²

A brief discussion of Oedipus' horizon of feelings makes sense at this juncture. In fact, a reader may fairly object that, until now, I have neglected the way in which

¹²⁰ Byrne, *The Ethics of Discernment*, 96.

¹²¹ Ibid., 108.

¹²² Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 37.

Oedipus' feelings are integrated in the dynamism of cognitional structure. Although I will discuss fears and anxieties in my discussion of dramatic bias in Chapter Two, the previous pages have run the risk of over-intellectualizing a drama that orbits around our affective hopes and fears, oscillating between jubilation and anxiety and then, finally, horror. I have risked reducing Oedipus to a sort of human calculator when he is, after all, embodied and, in virtue of being embodied, comes equipped with an entire "affective" dimension. The phenomenon of embodiment, especially given the body's infirmities (blindness, ankle wounds, etc.), as one questions, judges and chooses, is clearly a significant theme throughout the play. Further, in a simpler sense, feelings are just a basic and pervasive phenomenon in our lives and to neglect them would leave any analysis incomplete. As Byrne notes, Lonergan used to say that "feelings are the mass and momentum of human living."¹²³

Typically, as the diagram above indicates, after insight and judgment in matters of fact, an agent's consciousness becomes sublated into the structure of ethical intentionality. This sublation occurs the moment an agent says, "Okay. I understand and know the situation. Now, what should I do?" The agent, in other words, begins to ask questions of value, questions which, in Byrne's words, intend "practical insights into possible courses of action."¹²⁴ In other words, just as the goal of questions for intelligence and judgment was to grasp understanding and a virtually unconditioned judgment of fact, the goal of questions of value is to "grasp of virtually unconditioned value" until, ultimately, a judgment can be made about that value in a

¹²³ Byrne, *The Ethics of Discernment*, 98.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 169.

decision. The action that is the result of the decision will implement the value. Byrne distills the equation in the following form: “‘Intelligible, possible course of action I has a value V,’ where I is supplied by a practical insight and V is supplied by a person’s horizon of feelings.”¹²⁵ Linguistically, the link between feeling and value is obvious enough. We hear people say, for example, “I feel education is key to a healthy community.” This feeling is an anticipation of the forthcoming judgment of value that education *is actually* valuable and that we should implement that value in various real-world policy decisions.

Byrne uses the illuminating example of Elizabeth Bennet from Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* to effectively illustrate the tension between competing values vis-à-vis feelings. As Byrne writes, Elizabeth’s “feelings for pleasure and security were felt as of considerably less value than her feelings about her personal integrity and her feelings about the character of other people.”¹²⁶

We might, by way of comparison, use Daisy Buchanan from Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* to illustrate a character whose feelings anticipate opposite values. Daisy Buchanan’s fears make the feeling of security of considerably more value than her feelings of love for Jay Gatsby. In the end of the novel, to the chagrin of many readers, Daisy chooses to stay with Tom Buchanan, despite his boorishness and manifest flaws, causing many readers to question Daisy’s judgment and, as such, her character. In fact, it is Gatsby’s belief that Daisy will choose him simply because he has wealth that belies Gatsby’s own misjudgment of Daisy’s values. The famous scene at the

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 174.

Plaza hotel showcases this misjudgment, as Fitzgerald describes Daisy stuck in the middle of Tom and Gatsby but, as the truth of Gatsby's identity becomes, like with Oedipus, clearer and clearer to her in the form of a virtually unconditioned judgment (rational consciousness), she begins to pull away in fear. Daisy's growing fears, now that the material facts are clear, anticipate her forthcoming judgment of value that, as Fitzgerald will write, the "dream is dead," and that life with Gatsby will be untenable, despite their love. Thus, she *decides* to implement her value by staying with Tom.

"That drug store business was just small change," continued Tom slowly, "but you've got something on now that Walter's afraid to tell me about."

I glanced at Daisy who was staring terrified between Gatsby and her husband and at Jordan who had begun to balance an invisible but absorbing object on the tip of her chin. Then I turned back to Gatsby – and was startled at his expression. He looked – and this is said in all contempt for the babbled slander of his garden – as if he had 'killed a man.' For a moment the set of his face could be described in just that fantastic way.

It passed, and he began to talk excitedly to Daisy, denying everything, defending his name against accusations that had not been made. But with every word she was drawing further and further into herself, so he gave up and only the dead dream fought on as the afternoon slipped away, trying to touch what was no longer tangible, struggling unhappily, undespairingly, toward that lost voice across the room.¹²⁷

Returning to Oedipus, of significance is the way in which a man who has established himself as a vociferous questioner despite his fears (in the first 4/5's of the play), and a man who, for right or wrong, has a reputation for wisdom, asks no questions of value after the material facts have been clarified, understood and known. In other words, conspicuously absent in Oedipus' cognitional structure is an "ethics

¹²⁷ F. Scott Fitzgerald. *The Great Gatsby*. (New York: Scribner Paperback Fiction, 1995). p. 142.

of discernment.” There are no, “so what should I do?” questions. We might, for example, see him consider, at least verbally in a speech, whether his feelings toward the relative disvalue of his eyes is worth destroying them.

Recall the scene of Oedipus’ eye-gouging. Sophocles recruits the character of a messenger to deliver the news of the bloody aftermath of Oedipus’ insight, a common technique in Greek theater. After the truth is out in the light of clarity (σαφής), both Oedipus and Jocasta retreat from it, taking refuge in the dark palace, out of the public spotlight. From one perspective, the interior of the palace might be a place where cooler heads prevail, a place where discernment might win the day. From another perspective, Jocasta and Oedipus have retreated to a den of affective dimensions, the place where their marriage was consummated and which is now befouled, desecrated. Both resort to self-harm in fits of emotion. The messenger describes the scene to the chorus and the audience:

She was hanging there, his wife. We saw her
 Hanging in a noose of braided rope.
 Then he saw her. He howled in misery,
 Loosened the hanging rope, and laid her down
 On the ground, poor woman.
 Then a horrible sight: he tore out the long pins
 Of beaten gold that adorned her clothes,
 Lifted them up, and plunged them into his eyes,
 Crying out, “Now you may not see the evil,
 Not the evil I have done – or suffered.
 From now on, you must gaze in darkness
 On forbidden faces, while the ones you should have seen
 You’ll never know.” That was his litany.
 Again and again he chanted it and struck his eyes.
 Blood was running down from the sockets,
 Staining his cheeks red, an unstoppable flood
 Dashing down, a dense hail of gore. (1268-1285)

On the heels of the messenger's morbid news, Oedipus appears through the great palace doors, back on stage and in the public eye, so that his hideous and gruesome visage is visible to both chorus and audience. As Woodruff points out, "the actor playing Oedipus may have changed his mask while off-stage, or the blinding may have been depicted on his existing mask with the addition of red paint or of ribbons representing blood."¹²⁸ The choice to self-blind with Jocasta's dress pins is an obvious reference to the other wounds on Oedipus' body: the scars on his ankles, also the result of pins (pinions) thrust into him in what was no doubt a fit of his parents' emotion. Might we relate the two acts as the capricious actions of unintelligent procedure? Like parents, like son? Might this action be construed as another tragic breakdown, an opportunity for authentic growth and self-transcendence gone sour?

In one sense, Sophocles has saved us from a good amount of analysis here. We could be assessing the anticipatory feelings and fine ethical distinctions and nuanced questions of value Oedipus considers within the palace, not unlike a Hamlet or a Macbeth, but we cannot: because Oedipus does not make them. Instead, he says very little and, when all is boiled down, makes only two decisions post insight: one is a decision to gouge out his eyes. He explicitly cites this decision as a free choice, saying, "But I did this...By my own hand" (1333-1335). And the second decision is more of a choice to inaction or passivity, opting not to challenge or question his own fidelity to the oracle's fiat to "punish the killers by force," (107) which Oedipus earlier took as his own "obligation to the dead" (134) for "driving out this infection" (138). Yet now, with the situation clarified, he never once asks questions of value regarding whether

¹²⁸ Sophocles, O.T., p. 116. This line appears in the footnote to line 1297.

these statements should be reconsidered or amended given the potentially mitigating data of his acting in ignorance or the equally mitigating data that his present predicament is the result of his own parents attempting to kill him.

Of utmost importance here is that this final section of the play, from the 5th Chorus (Fourth Stasimon) to the final line, is contingent upon the clarification (σαφής) of the concrete situation that Oedipus describes in his moment of insight. Now that the material facts are understood by all actors on the stage in insight (intelligent consciousness) and known in judgment (rational consciousness), the entire landscape, Thebes, the world, has darkened. Even the chorus' feelings toward the universe have changed. It is no longer friendly, but unfriendly. They lament, famously,

Oh, what a wretched breed we mortals are:
 our lives add up to nothing.
 Does anyone, anyone at all
 harvest more of happiness than a vacant image,
 And from that image fall away?
 You are my pattern, your fortune is mine,
 You, Oedipus, your misery teaches me to call no mortal blessed (1186 – 1196).

That Oedipus' overreactions and rash decisions ironically come upon the heels of clarification is nothing new. Recall that in the first scene of the play, when Creon returns with counsel from Delphi, Oedipus asks a question for intelligence (how) regarding how to deal with the situation. Creon's response is emphatic: "The purge is banishment, or else death for death" (100). Six lines later, Creon reiterates the point, saying, "He's dead, and the command is clear:/Punish the killers by force" (108-

109).¹²⁹ Note again a reference to “clarity” (σαφῶς); the implication is that anyone who misinterprets this fiat would miss something that was clearly stated – in other words, an unclear thinker.

Yet a few scenes later, in a questionless speech, Oedipus seems to go well beyond the scope of the Delphic proclamation, making decisions that lack discernment about scales of value. He says, “I forbid any inhabitant of the land/Where I hold the seat of power/To share the sacred or hold sacrifice,/Or to sprinkle the water of holy rites/Banish him, shun him from your homes./This is the man who has plagued us” (236-243). Then, later, he adds, unequivocally, “I damn the killer, whoever he may be,/An unknown man, or one of many./May he suffer and die, pain beyond pain./I damn myself, if I should come to know/That he shares my hearth and home” (246-250). These claims seem illustrative of man who has taken a “clear command” and interpreted it in a disproportional way, not unlike a man failing to recognize his measurements are the byproduct of a parallax view.

McCoy concurs. After pointing out Oedipus’ first mistake, that of conceiving of “justice and injustice as morally absolute categories in a world in which such categories do not always neatly apply,” she adds that,

A second failing might be found in Oedipus’ harshness with the one that has killed the king, for his vows to exclude the man entirely from society are extreme. He declares that the polluted one may not reside in his land; is not to be welcomed by any in the land, not even greeted by its citizens; excluded from worship and even excluded from the hospitality of water to wash his hands (236–42). Exile alone was an appropriate ritual response to pollution, but Oedipus lays these

¹²⁹ The Greek is as follows: τούτου θανόντος νῦν ἐπιστέλλει σαφῶς / τοὺς αὐτοέντας χειρὶ τιμωρεῖν τινας. Meineck and Woodruff use the phrase “by force” as opposed to the traditional “take vengeance” (τιμωρεῖν).

additional conditions of refusing water or even a simple greeting to the polluted man. If Oedipus had imagined himself as the criminal, would he not have considered the possibility that such additional demands are beyond the requirements of purification?¹³⁰

Now, at the close of the play, we find something similar going on. The clarification of the material facts has changed Oedipus' horizon of feelings; but his feelings change in an extreme, disproportional, confused and, at times, contradictory way. Most obviously, Oedipus now has feelings of hostility and anger toward his eyes and, failing to discern whether those feelings spring from a distorted affective self, makes a negative judgment about their value, shouting at them, "Now you may never see the evil/Not the evil I have done – or suffered./From now on, you must gaze in darkness/On forbidden faces, while the ones you should have seen/You'll never know" (1271-1275). He then implements the disvalue of his eyes by destroying them.

Obviously, to a person engaged in the questioning structure of ethical objectivity, there would emerge better, more appropriate ways to deal with such a horror. The chorus recognizes Oedipus' affective distortion, saying,

Amazing horror!
Nothing worse can come upon a man.
Was it madness that struck your mind? (1297-1299)

The chorus then challenges the wisdom of the decision: "I can't agree with what you did: Better to die than to be blind" (1367-68). Oedipus then replies with a telling statement that seems inconsistent with self-transcendence or a newfound self-appropriation, saying, "Don't tell me that what I did was not for the best. I do not want opinions, I do not need advice" (1369-70). This statement is yet again indicative of a

¹³⁰ McCoy, *Wounded Heroes*, 42.

man who has not learned much over a drama which has consisted of others teaching him things he did not know. One would think that at this point, Oedipus would be more amenable to advice.

Instead of recognizing here, in an intersubjective way, that the insights of others (the Chorus) can communicate valuable data about our own missteps, Oedipus doubles down on his capricious choice, telling them that if he could gouge out his ears, he'd do that too: "If I only I could stem the stream of sound,/Then I'd shut away my broken body/Hearing silence, seeing nothing:/Sweet oblivion, where the mind/Exists beyond the bounds of grief" (1386 – 1390).¹³¹ Oedipus seems to be fantasizing here of a consciousness with no sense modalities to pollute it. And yet, he also recognizes that this type of consciousness would still not escape the memories, saying, "Inescapable, unspeakable!/Ohhh!/Again and again, so much agony!/Memories stabbing, piercing me with pain!" (1315-1318).

The Chorus calls attention to this contradiction, replying, "Do not be amazed: Your agony's so great,/You feel it twice, first in body, then in soul" (1319-1320). The chorus, in contrast to Oedipus, seems hyper-aware of the futility of attempting to deny understanding and knowledge by destroying the sense modalities, seemingly recognizing the greater philosophic point we have made throughout this chapter that insight is not a matter of ocular vision and that, as Lonergan has said, "What is obvious in knowing is, indeed, looking. Compared to looking, insight is obscure, and the grasp of the unconditioned is doubly obscure. But empiricism amounts to the assumption

¹³¹ Interestingly, Sophocles offers no real reason why Oedipus could not have achieved his goal of denying all sense modalities – certainly, dress pins would be an effective instrument in rupturing ear drums as well as eyes.

that what is obvious in knowing is what knowing obviously is.”¹³² Oedipus continues to make this error.

Meanwhile, in a surprising twist perhaps, Oedipus’ feelings of love for his daughters only seem to strengthen in the light of clarification of material facts. Oedipus’ feelings of love anticipate the judgment that his daughters are valuable to him, a theme which will be developed in *Colonus*. And yet we might have predicted, for example, after seeing what he does to his eyes, that his daughters would face a similar fate, at the hands of his sword, perhaps. Recall that when Oedipus enters the palace after his insight, his feelings toward Jocasta change in the light of clarification. He shouts, “Bring my sword./And where’s my wife – no, not my wife,/Mother of two crops, myself and my children” (1255-1257). In one sense it would be more consistent for Oedipus to harbor new feelings of hostility toward his daughters now that he knows and understands that they are the byproduct of ugliness, an incestuous union. Instead, he demonstrates heightened feelings of love for them.

Ironically, despite his feelings of hostility toward the senses of sight and hearing, he quickly touts the power of the sense of touch with his daughters, saying, “If only I could hold them one last time” (1466). Then, in another moment of contradiction, he touts the very sense of hearing he previously asked to be destroyed, saying, “What’s this?/I can hear them, yes, by all the gods, my darlings!/They’re crying, crying...Creon, you took pity, You sent me what I love more than anything...anything” (1471-1474).

¹³² Lonergan, *Insight*, 44.

The second choice Oedipus makes (again, without an ethics of discernment) is to remain in fidelity to his and the oracle's command to "punish the killers by force." Oedipus finds himself in the ironic situation of being subject to his own harsh decree which, in keeping with the play's thematic concerns, was levied with incomplete information. He immediately asks his fellow Thebans to "cast me out this place, my friends,/Quickly, cast me out:/I am the destroyer, the curse,/The man the gods loathe most of all" (1340 - 1346). On the one hand, we feel a certain admiration for Oedipus, for choosing to remain faithful to the fiat despite the intervening data. On the other hand, remaining in fidelity to that decree, despite the data, seems obstinate, imperious and narrowminded, betokening a failure of self-transcendence.

So, what are we to make of the fact that Oedipus asks no questions of value about the punishment? At no point, for example, does he ask the questions, "should we proceed? Should we stick to the command?" Further, what are we to make of the fact that Oedipus makes no attempt to exculpate himself from the crime, or, at the very least, contextualize the crime to mitigate the punishment? Clearly, when Oedipus accepts Delphi's initial suggestion to "punish by force," the assumption is that Thebes will be dealing with a premeditated murder or, at least, a brutal regicide. The entire Theban community now understands and knows that this is not the case. In other words, the situation is far more complex than initially thought. Recall McCoy's earlier claim that Oedipus thinks in "morally absolute categories in a world in which such categories do not always neatly apply."

Freud famously argued that the conspicuous absence of any prolonged attempt to defend himself, or even to discern whether he is guilty at all, is the *prima*

facie evidence of Oedipus' inner conviction of his own guilt over acting out his two primal subconscious desires – the desires to kill the father and sleep with the mother. Freud writes, "The hero makes no attempt to exculpate himself by appealing to the artificial expedient of the compulsion of destiny. His crime is acknowledged and punished as though it were fully conscious – which is bound to appear unjust to our reason, but which psychologically is perfectly correct."¹³³

An alternative viewpoint, and a simpler one (insofar as it does not recruit empirically unverifiable subconscious drives), is merely that Oedipus has a distortion somewhere in the cognitional cycle that precluded (until 1182) certain images from consciousness that would have elicited insights. This preclusion (or bias) continues now, as he fails to ask questions about his present predicament that would lead to insights and judgments of value and reorient his older position which is now antiquated. After all, we must not overlook the fact that Oedipus not only has the insight and judgment that he is the killer, he has also had a more general insight (a meta-insight) into what understanding actually is. In other words, in addition to his insight about his own identity, Oedipus also grasps for the first time that, as Byrne noted previously, "seeing is not the way we become conscious of the answer to a question." In one sense, this meta-insight is more powerful than the specific insight that he is the defiler. It is a bad enough to be an incestuous parricide but worse may

¹³³ Freud, Sigmund. "Dostoevsky and Parricide." (In *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, London: The Hogarth Press, 1961), p.188.

be Oedipus' newfound understanding that he never even knew what it was to know, never understood what it was to understand, never judged what a judgment actually is. Not only is his personal identity crumbling, his identity as a knower – and therefore as a reasoner and judger – is crumbling. This meta-insight should have disclosed the irony to Oedipus that his decisions to gouge out his eyes and remain in fidelity to his earlier fiat are just more instances of unquestioning obstinacy.

Oedipus' imperiousness continues when, on 1381, he demands again, and as if he were still the king, that the people of Thebes implement his proclamation, shouting, "I gave the order: Cast out the curse!" (1381). The chorus is hesitant. Oedipus asks no questions about their hesitancy and, a few lines later, he demands it again, "By all the gods, you must let me hide away, Cast me into the sea, kill me, shun me from sight" (1411). And then later, "Cast me out, quick as you can, to a place/Where I will never speak to another human" (1436).

At this point Creon replies, from a far more circumspect and discerning stance, that he needs to see what the gods want him to do, to which Oedipus, bound to the earlier proclamation: "But that is clear, it was ordained: The father-killer is defiled and so must die" (1441). Creon says "we need to be sure" and then, "Yes, and this time you should believe the god." Oedipus then expresses his profound worry over the familial disgrace he has bestowed upon his daughters ironically exhorting them, "Pray that you always lead measured lives./Better lives than lived by your own father." Then, Oedipus' imperious returns again, as he dictates to Creon, again as if he were still the king, "Then I'll go, but know my terms"(1520-1525).

Oedipus, in other words, misses an opportunity for genuine growth. He stands on the cusp of self-transcendence insofar as he has learned two key things: 1.) he understands who he really is in terms of the truth of his birth and 2.) he understands what understanding really is. This dual-insight places him in an excellent position to make far more discerning choices. Instead, Oedipus christens this newfound identity with a rash, imperious and violent choice to mutilate himself (a fitting tribute to his wife's rash, imperious and violent choice to hang herself) and then, after the self-harm is inflicted, he opts to sacrifice the welfare of his children on the altar of an uncritical fidelity to his earlier hope for the killer, "May he suffer and die, pain beyond pain." In other words, Oedipus' moment of potential self-transcendence recedes away from him the moment he reaches it and he abandons the pursuit. He does not ascend to rational self-consciousness to ask those pertinent questions about what should be done.

Concluding Thoughts: Oedipus' Imperiousness (Anticipating Bias)

Oedipus' abandonment of these further pertinent questions leaves us to infer that aside from learning the identity of the killer, Oedipus has learned nothing else of substance. To further validate the claim that Oedipus' consciousness fails to reach Lonergan's fourth level of rational self-consciousness, I conclude this section by turning to Davies' basic points in "The End of Sophocles' O.T."

As a preliminary clarification, Davies cites Livingstone's brief 1939 essay which points out a common misconception about the ending of *Oedipus Tyrannus* – specifically, the viewpoint, held by many, that many readers incorrectly understand the *stimmung* of the end of the play. This misunderstanding is rooted no doubt in the

misperception that the play ends with Oedipus exiled or, at least, leaving Thebes. This viewpoint is probably informed by many of the famous paintings of Oedipus (Jalabert, Giroust) which, indeed, depict Oedipus leaving Thebes or at *Colonus*. Davies reminds us, via Livingstone, that the play ends instead with Oedipus entering the palace at Creon's behest. Davies writes, "This, then, is the close of the 'O. T.' It is easier to say how the play does not end - not with Oedipus wandering out a blind beggar etc."

With the ending of the play clarified, Davies then pivots to his central concern. He finds the lengthy exchange between Oedipus and Creon (partially cited above) startling for it is "curious inconsequentiality." Davies writes,

Surely the most striking feature of them is their curious inconsequentiality. As early as 1429 Creon is insisting that Oedipus enter the palace. He repeats the request almost a hundred lines later (1515) and even then it is not until ln. 1521 that Oedipus reluctantly consents to go and then not without demur. Likewise, as soon as Creon enters, Oedipus begs (1436) to be cast out of the land. At 1518 he is still making the same request and Creon is still giving the same cautious response. This seems an oddly indecisive way in which to end a great drama. (271).

What then is the point of the conversation? To venture an explanation about the function of the exchange, Davies cites Taplin who cites as persuasive the position held by classicist Colin MacLeod. Macleod asserts, in a letter to Taplin, that the function of the scene is to powerfully illustrate Oedipus' newfound impotence – he is totally in Creon's hands.

"The point is," MACLEOD is reported as writing to TAPLIN, "that Oedipus, formerly the king, now cannot even control his own destiny: he has to be in Creon's hands (Creon whom he treated so sharply)." MACLEOD continues: "The entry to the house is deeply significant. Oedipus cannot escape from the place where he blinded himself and Jocasta killed herself, to death or desolation: he has to go on being humiliated and guilt-ridden where he belongs. I think this is very fine: how Sophocles eschews the grand suicidal gesture (or even exile),

quietly 'refuses' it to Oedipus, to bring out something far more realistic, down-to-earth, and painful."¹³⁴

Davies, however, questions the legitimacy of this thesis as well, wondering whether the theory constitutes an underestimation of Sophocles' prodigious gifts as a dramatist. In other words, if MacLeod is correct, that Sophocles wants to show Oedipus in Creon's hands, a semi-competent dramatist could have and would have done so far more effectively than that which is depicted from lines 1419 to the last line of the play. Davies writes, "Sophocles could quite easily have composed a more emphatic scene wherein Oedipus' dependence on Creon was fully stressed; as the play stands it is brought out clearly enough (see above p. 269 f.)." Instead, Davies continues to stress the scene's "curious inconsequentiality."

Davies then arrives at his basic thesis. If we stipulate that the scene is not inconsequential (because Sophocles *was*, after all, an accomplished tragedian) and that the scene does not really depict Oedipus as putty in Creon's hands, an alternative view emerges. Specifically, Sophocles wants to demonstrate that Oedipus (and Creon too, for that matter) has not changed at all. Davies writes,

And finally the imperious ἐπισκίπτω at 1446. Clearly the old desire for mastery is with him still: he knows best how he must be punished, and with the same rash eagerness and haste that characterised his actions at the cross-roads, his proclamation of the punishment for Laius' killer, and his putting out of his own eyes inside the palace, he has given no thought to the gods' wishes on the matter. The speech he makes about his children shows some change of tone: ἴθ' ὦναξ, / ἴθ' ὦ γονῆ γενναῖε: are words of pleading, softer and more yielding, as their aim demands. But towards the end the familiar imperiousness returns: πειστέον, κεῖ μὴδὲν ἤδύ at 1516 is the old Oedipus 18, and despite this apparent concession to the change in circumstances, the next lines show him laying down (and Creon accepting) the terms

¹³⁴ Davies, "The End of Sophocles O.T.," 273.

under which he will enter the palace. Not every monarch would endure so cataclysmic a reversal of fortune to retain such a longing for mastery.¹³⁵

Davies is quick to point out that Creon too is “the same as before,” adding that “this explains why the final scene of the play comes so dangerously close to impasse: neither character must, neither character can, change” (276). Davies then compares Oedipus to Richard II. He quotes Peter Ure, who says of Richard’s character, he is tragic because his “loss of power has not freed him, for himself at least, from the burden on majesty” (277, see footnote). Davies asks, “Is not this Oedipus’ tragedy too? The last scene of the play shows him still acting spontaneously like a king, in the old imperious manner, although the once equivalent temporal power has now fallen away” (277). Davies’ comparison of Oedipus to Richard II, via Peter Ure, is to be juxtaposed against comparisons between Oedipus and Lear. For example, R.G.A. Buxton, says, “Like Gloucester in ‘King Lear,’ Oedipus will gain insight but lose his eyes” (footnote 24). Davies asks, to the contrary, “Why not say Oedipus loses his eyes to symbolize his lack of insight?” (277, footnote 24). He adds,

So that it is for Oedipus that this interpretation of the end of the ‘O. T.’ has most relevance. For him the outer change has been total, the inner change nil. To put it positively, his character is so strong that it has remained intact amid the rubble of his outer state. To put it negatively he has learnt nothing. The purpose of the play may well be to illustrate to the audience the fragility of mankind, even the strongest and cleverest of whom may in a moment be struck down. It is a lesson totally lost on the man who proves its truth.

It is easy to see how Davies’ analysis maps well onto my basic contention that Oedipus has failed to achieve self-transcendence in Lonergan’s taxonomy. As I have

¹³⁵ Ibid., 275.

attempted to show, Oedipus asks no additional questions post-insight. In Lonergan's terms, Oedipus is biased.

It is fitting, therefore, to now turn now to an extended discussion of "bias" as we attempt to probe deeper into Lonergan's thought and its broad applications to the play. In the next chapter I will argue that not only does Sophocles go to great lengths to showcase Oedipus' interfering biases, those biases endure into *Oedipus at Colonus*, painting a portrait of an obstinate man who refuses to yield to questioning. Oedipus, in other words, begins to garner a reputation that is the opposite of the reputation of wisdom for which he is (erroneously, I will argue) revered. Ultimately, this point will have important implications for the roiling debate about whether it is appropriate to describe Oedipus as having a "tragic flaw" (*hamartia*).

Chapter 2: Patterns of Experience, Bias and “Taking a Look”

Introduction

In Chapter One I elucidated the dynamism of *Oedipus Tyrannus* by tracing how Sophocles portrays Oedipus’ self-correcting sequence of his questions and answers until he arrived at his famous insight and virtually unconditioned judgment. His insight and judgment were then followed by his consequent self-transcendence, a critical juncture at which Oedipus has an opportunity to choose among questions of value. He then undermines any potential for real growth by making inauthentic, extreme, brash, and obstinate choices; choices more consistent with some of his earlier ones. We are now in position to expose the various “interferences” in the dynamic, self-correcting sequence which, as I will argue, gives Oedipus’ journey its especially tragic and ironic dimension.

I will argue in this chapter that the tragedy (and irony) of the play pivot on the “polymorphism” of Oedipus’ consciousness. A corollary to this argument is that we may understand some of the muddled thinking and the bitter intersubjective quarrels in the play – including but not limited to Oedipus v. Tiresias, Oedipus v. Creon and Oedipus vs. Jocasta – through the prism of Lonergan’s discussion of “bias.” My discussion of bias naturally leads to an interpretation of the play that finds Sophocles indicting, not wisdom *per se*, as Nietzsche argued,¹³⁶ but those who fail to understand

¹³⁶ In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche writes, “Wisdom, the myth seems to whisper to us, is an unnatural abomination: whoever plunges nature into the abyss of destruction by what he knows must in turn experience the dissolution of nature in his own person. The sharp point of wisdom turns against the wise man; wisdom is an offence against nature” (Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 48). Yet, in a point to which I will return later, it seems absurd to label Oedipus as somehow an exemplar of “wisdom” if wisdom (*sophia*) is properly understood. Oedipus may be clever

what it means to correctly understand; those, in other words, who would deign to reduce understanding to a simple matter of “taking a look,” to use Lonergan’s phrase.

By the end of this chapter, my position will approximate McCoy’s, that “Sophocles does not reject the rational in favor of a tragic vision that is anti-rational or non-rational; rather, the rational itself includes an affective element.”¹³⁷ I add to this that in addition to including an affective element in the rational, Sophocles forces us to enlarge our concept of rationality even more, avoiding the mistake of concluding that, to paraphrase Lonergan, what is obvious in rationality (sense knowledge) is what rationality obviously is. This position incidentally avers Champlin, who connects Sophocles with Parmenides: Oedipus is an Everyman who, like the throngs of Parmenides’ “know-nothing” mortals, lives by his senses, in spite of their deception, and is therefore deceived into what Parmenides famously called “the way of opinion,” the antithesis of “the way of truth.”

As a preliminary step, this chapter requires a brief (and slightly technical) discussion of one of Lonergan’s most important overarching distinctions in *Insight*: descriptive vs. explanatory knowing. “Descriptive” knowing, according to Lonergan, relates “things to our senses,” while “explanatory” knowing relates “things to other things.” This distinction offers a profitable approach to the age old appearance-reality dichotomy in general and, specifically, the appearance-reality dichotomy within the play, on which the tragedy and irony is constructed.

(*deinotes*) and may have achieved a reputation for cleverness, but wise? Wise? Would Socrates gouge his eyes out with Xanthippe’s dress pins?

¹³⁷ McCoy, *Wounded Heroes*, 57.

To that end, I will recruit Lonergan's descriptive-explanatory distinction to contrast Oedipus' encounter with the riddle of the Sphinx, the solution to which requires understanding "man" in an explanatory context, with Oedipus' attempt to discern Laius' murderer, which should also require an explanatory understanding but which, as I argue, Oedipus fails to recruit, opting instead to rely solely on his senses, i.e., descriptive knowing. Knox argues Oedipus is a man of swift action (*tachys*), but it is precisely his swiftness of action that leads him to privilege sense knowledge in lieu of cautious discernment. I will argue that this privileging of sense knowledge is ultimately a function of what Lonergan calls "general bias," which treats commonsense descriptive knowing as omniscient.

We may take as a point of departure for this section Segal's claim that, "the entire action of the play may be viewed as one huge, collective test, a reenactment of Oedipus' contest with the Sphinx...Oedipus increasingly directs the intellectual power that made possible his external victory over the monster to the harder riddles of his own origins and the horrible secrets of his life."¹³⁸ I will suggest that this viewpoint is inaccurate; as the word "reenactment" implies a similarity in the solving processes of both the Sphinx's riddle and Laius' murder. Claims of similarity, however, belie the very different patterns of experience in which Oedipus finds himself during each of the two puzzle-solving scenarios.

Descriptive vs. Explanatory Contexts

¹³⁸ Segal, *Tragic Heroism*, 52.

We may begin with Lonergan's crucial distinction between "descriptive" knowing which relates things to our senses and "explanatory" knowing which "relates things to other things." The two contexts, according to Lonergan, differ only in virtue of the criterion of relevance, only insofar as further questions (within the self-correcting cycle) take the empirical investigator beyond the pragmatic interests and concerns of daily life. Further questions move the empirical investigator "beyond" the descriptive context wherein questions have ceased, since "further inquiry would lead to no immediate appreciable difference in the daily life of man."¹³⁹ When the scientist removes his lab coat and leaves for the day, for example, he immerses himself in the practical knowing of daily life, the life of the layperson. Is it not safe to assume that when he leaves his lab the scientist engages in a kind of knowing that is not scientific-explanatory? A kind of knowing that deals with the relation of things to his own interests and concerns? Perhaps *he knows* a more efficient way than does the tourist to get from Cambridge to downtown Boston in rush hour.

Whatever the example, both ordinary commonsense knowing, with its emphasis on description, and scientific knowing, with its emphasis on explanation, presuppose the single, invariant structure of knowing indicated in Chapter One. As Lonergan reminds us, both laypeople and scientists "reach their conclusions through the self-correcting process of learning ... they reach very different conclusions because, though they use essentially the same process, they operate with different standards and criteria."¹⁴⁰ Just as the biologist and the physicist are not made of

¹³⁹ Lonergan, *Insight*, 321.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 320.

different clay, neither are scientist and layperson. The layperson's knowledge often resides in the domain of ordinary descriptions. The objects of the layperson's knowledge are, as Lonergan says, "just as much an object of knowledge as any other, for it is reached by beginning from the level of presentations, by advancing through inquiry, insights, and formulation, by culminating in the critical inquiry of reflective understanding, the grasp of the unconditioned, and the rationally compelled pronouncement of judgment."¹⁴¹

And yet, even though they are separate yet complimentary domains, the problem, as Lonergan points out, is that "in principle, they cannot conflict, for if they speak about the same things, they do so from radically different viewpoints."¹⁴² Lonergan then adds, "when I say that in principle they cannot conflict, I mean of course that in fact they can and do. To eliminate the actual conflict, it is necessary to grasp the principle and apply it accurately."¹⁴³

Clearly, the notion of a conflict between what appears to be the case from one perspective, and the actual truth from another viewpoint, is central to *Oedipus Tyrannus*. So what does Lonergan mean by his claim the two contexts conflict? A simple discussion of the phenomenon of sunsets will illustrate the principle.

In his 3rd "Meditation," Descartes tells us:

I find within myself two distinct ideas of the sun. One idea is drawn, as it were, from the senses. Now it is this idea which, of all those that I take to be derived from outside me, is most in need of examination. By means of this idea the sun appears to me to be quite small. But there is

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 317.

¹⁴² Ibid., 318.

¹⁴³ Ibid., 319.

another idea, one derived from astronomical reasoning, that is, it is elicited from certain notions that are innate in me, or else fashioned by me in some other way. Through this idea the sun is shown to be several times larger than the earth. Both ideas surely cannot resemble the same sun existing outside me; and reason convinces me that the idea that seems to have emanated from the sun itself from so close is the very one that least resembles the sun.¹⁴⁵

Although he does not express the phenomenon in these specific terms, Descartes is meditating on the interplay in cognition between the descriptive and explanatory heuristic contexts: there is the sun in relation to his senses and the sun in relation to his astronomical reasoning. And yet, there are not two suns but one, a fact grasped by insight.

The question of whether one type of understanding has a better claim on the “real sun” is incoherent. Yet typical arguments from those who privilege explanatory knowing is that scientific explanation or, to use Descartes’ language, “astronomical reasoning,” demonstrates that sunsets are a systemic illusion, placing laypeople somehow in error or in a world, to use Parmenidean language, of deceptive opinion. Yet on Lonergan’s view, the layperson’s error – if he is to make one – would rest only on the way in which he verbally formulated his insights. If a man watching a sunset, for example, were asked to describe what he sees, his verbal report will be no less the formulation of insights generated from his descriptive context. “The sun looks like it’s *moving* across the sky,” he will say. His knowing, from this domain, relates the phenomenon to his senses and, further, to his past experiences of moving objects. His

¹⁴⁵ Rene Descartes, *Meditations*. (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company Inc, 2006.) p. 20.

eyes have seen, no doubt, a basketball descend along its parabolic arc into the hoop, for example, and the sun *looks like* a slower moving, fiery basketball in the sky.

More fundamentally though, his claim that *the sun looks like it is moving* is inextricably tied to his human interests and concerns. The further question, “but is it *really* moving?” is irrelevant to him. After all, he may be an accountant. He may say: who cares? It does not occur to him to probe any “deeper,” to ask further questions that might push him “beyond” his descriptive context because that sort of pursuit is irrelevant to his bean-counting concerns. More importantly, the layperson implicitly grasps the prudence of parsimonious speech. For example, he does not say, and knows not to say, “the sun is not only moving but the earth on which I stand is the center of the solar system.”¹⁴⁶

Empirical investigations, by contrast, do probe deeper, asking further questions the layperson has left untouched due to the scientist’s criterion of relevance.¹⁴⁷ The scientist in this sense is but a transformed layperson – transformed not in virtue of “what he is” ontologically but in virtue of alternating his heuristic pattern. But his new explanatory context, most importantly, is still beholden to the initial descriptive context he has left behind as his point of departure. The descriptions provided by the layperson are transformed into what Lonergan calls

¹⁴⁶ As Byrne has pointed out, even the “center” of our solar system is just another point of reference within the larger system. “A fully explanatory account,” Byrne notes, would come “only in virtue of a Riemannian geometry that relates every reference frame to every other one.”

¹⁴⁷ Conversely, the scientist also leaves aside questions that are highly pertinent to the layperson.

“scientific descriptions.” Here, “the scientist selects the relations of things to us that lead more directly to knowledge of the relations between things themselves. Ordinary description is free from this ulterior preoccupation.”¹⁴⁸ These scientific descriptions, which prescind from the initial descriptions of commonsense, become, as Lonergan says, “the tweezers by which we hold things while explanations are being discovered or verified, applied or revised.”¹⁴⁹

This point is so deceptively simple it requires additional emphasis: returning to our analogy, the scientist cannot demonstrate the sunset to be illusory without first experiencing on the level of sensible presentations the relation between the illusion and us. It is precisely the relation between the illusion and us that he holds in his own consciousness as data as he attempts to “explain” it in relation to other things. This complementarity of the descriptive and explanatory domains is precisely why, on Lonergan’s view, the explanatory viewpoint can in no way contradict commonsense, descriptive knowing. It leaves commonsense knowing intact in its domain while offering additional insights from its new specific perspective of relating things to other things. Yet as Lonergan notes, “since we are things, the descriptive relations [of things to us] must be identical with some of the explanatory relations [of things to one another].”¹⁵⁰ To eliminate any actual conflict in the two contexts it is necessary, as Lonergan says, “to grasp the above principle and apply it correctly.”

¹⁴⁸ Lonergan, *Insight*, 316.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 419.

To clarify this idea, Lonergan takes the respective propositions on sunsets and offers three cases of: 1.) ignoring the distinction of the domains 2.) denying the distinction of the domains and 3.) accepting the distinction of the domains. In the first case, if the distinction between the domains is ignored, “one faces the dilemma of choosing between the propositions”¹⁵¹:

The planets move in approximately elliptical orbits with the sun at their focus.

The earth is at rest, and the sun rises and sets.

In the second case, if one chooses to deny the distinction, “one is committed to the more rigorous choice between the propositions”:

From every viewpoint, the planets move in approximately elliptical orbits with the sun at their focus.

From every viewpoint, the earth is at rest, and the sun rises and sets.

But in the third case, if one affirms the distinction, as Lonergan suggests, “one will reject all four of the preceding propositions to assert both of the following”:

From the viewpoint of explanation, the planets move in approximately elliptical orbits with the sun at their focus.

From the viewpoint of ordinary description, the earth is at rest, and the sun rises and sets.

Only from this third position is all logical conflict eliminated: “for the qualifying reservations prevent the propositions of one universe from contradicting the propositions of another.”¹⁵² As such, the explanatory viewpoint, in its grasp of

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 319.

¹⁵² Ibid.

primary qualities, often attempts to bind itself to the terms “knowledge, real, objective,” while demoting the descriptive, commonsense view by binding it to the terms “belief, apparent, subjective.” On this view, as Lonergan says, “knowledge is science, and where common sense diverges from science, partly it is the darkness of ignorance and error, partly it is the twilight soon to be replaced by a scientific dawn.”¹⁵³

The relevance of this descriptive-explanatory dichotomy to the meaning of *Oedipus Tyrannus* is clear. As he attempts to solve Laius’ murder, Oedipus seems unable to detach himself from his own first-person, descriptive perspective. He relates everything to his “viewpoint from ordinary description” instead of relating “things to other things,” as a special prosecutor might. Oedipus, in other words, seems unable to understand that an explanatory approach would grasp his relation to other things and would, presumably, reveal himself as (at least) a potential solution. He would, like a scientist who explains why, during a sunset, the sun *seems to move* from the viewpoint of description, be able to explain all the various “seemings” within his own human identity, until all apparent contradictions are reconciled. And while this line of analysis might be construed as unfair, or blatant Monday morning quarterbacking, the irony that Oedipus has already demonstrated a prowess in precisely this sort of understanding during his encounter with the Sphinx makes it legitimate. Oedipus has already boasted an understanding which transcends seemings. Only in this narrower sense does Segal’s claim that the play is a “reenactment” of the Sphinx episode have any validity.

¹⁵³ Ibid., 318.

What, then, differentiates the riddle of the sphinx from the riddle of Oedipus' identity?

The Riddle of the Sphinx: Background

Sophocles' audience was familiar with the Oedipus myth, including Oedipus' encounter with the Sphinx, the mythical monster with the body of a lioness and the head of a woman. Yet, Oedipus' legendary encounter with the Sphinx, while absolutely crucial to understanding the irony of the play, is not specifically discussed. As Paul Woodruff notes, "Oedipus establishes his eminence by solving the riddle of the Sphinx, but the riddle itself does not loom large in the play."¹⁵⁴

Although there are a few versions, the most widely accepted version of the Sphinx' riddle is this:

ΤΟ ΑΙΝΙΓΜΑ ΤΗΣ ΣΦΙΓΓΟΣ.

**Ἔστι δίπουν ἐπὶ γῆς καὶ τετράπουν, οὗ μία φωνή,
καὶ τρίπουν· ἀλλάσσει δὲ φῆν μόνον ὅσσ' ἐπὶ γαῖαν
ἔρπετὰ κινεῖται ἀνά τ' αἰθέρα καὶ κατὰ πόντον.
ἀλλ' ὅπῃ πλείστοισιν ἐρειδόμενον ποσὶ βαίνει,
ἔνθα τάχος γυίοισιν ἀφανρότατον πέλει αὐτοῦ.*

The translation is as follows: "There is on earth a being two-footed, four-footed, and three-footed that has one name; and, of all creatures that move upon the earth and in the heavens and in the sea, it alone changes its form. But when it goes propped on

¹⁵⁴ Sophocles, O.T., xxxviii

most feet, then is the swiftness in its limbs weakest.”¹⁵⁵ Linguistically, the riddle is simply a declarative statement, albeit cryptic in content. In actuality, though, in Lonergan’s terms, the riddle discloses a question for intelligence: Who or what is this curious X with the capacity to walk on four legs, three legs and two legs at different times of the day?

When we transform the enigma into a question for intelligence, the riddle, as most riddles do, *appears* to disclose putative contradictions from the viewpoint of description. Yet we know that riddles pivot on precisely this appearance-reality dichotomy. It’s a riddle, we say, and because it’s a riddle, there must be some way to reconcile an appearance of contradiction from a real one. This is the task for intelligence that any decent riddle presents. And it is surely no coincidence that the putative contradictions to be reconciled in the Sphinx’s riddle, and the appearance-

¹⁵⁵ In the intro to his translation, Woodruff (Sophocles, O.T. 2003) includes the riddle as translated by Hugh Loyd-Jones who derives his rendering of the riddle from seven sources. Woodruff notes that Loyd-Jones’ “reading of the text is influenced by his judgment of the purpose to which Aeschylus put the riddle in Agamemnon” (xxxviii). Loyd-Jones rendering is this: “It is two-legged on land and four-legged, not one shape,/And three legged too. It changes its nature when on earth./It moves crawling or in the air or on the sea./But when it goes bustling along three legs,/Then the speed in its limbs becomes most feeble.” To me, this translation only affirms the point: that the solution to the riddle requires a departure from the descriptive viewpoint to an understanding of development across time.

reality dichotomy on which they pivot, are nearly identical to those contained in the action of the play.

In fact, as we showed in the previous chapter, Oedipus' pivotal question, posed throughout the play as he tries to solve the mystery, "how can one be the same as many?", is grounded in a similar if not identical contradiction. The appearance of the contradiction seems to be a deduction from the law of identity as a premise. Likewise, the riddle of the sphinx – which is often neatly distilled to "what has four feet in the morning, two in the afternoon, three in the evening" – is grounded in what *seems* to be metaphysically self-evident (also given the law of identity): just as one thief can't also be many thieves, creatures, *as far we have seen*, cannot change the quantity of their allotted appendages. Yet, presumably, Oedipus solved the Sphinx's riddle courtesy of a direct insight that transcended contradictory sense images, mere appearances. It seems, in other words, that the very source of his fame is his unaided ability to grasp the intelligibility beyond the illusory world of sense appearances. Thus, the elder suppliant says, "You came to Thebes, saved us from the Sphinx,/And without any help, delivered us from despair" (Lines 31-36). Bernard Knox argues that Oedipus' fame as a byproduct of this exchange is justified, writing, "In Oedipus' acceptance of the challenge of the Sphinx the great qualities of the hero of the play were all displayed. It took courage, for the price of failure was death; it required intelligence: *gnōmēi kurēsas*, says Oedipus, 'I found the answer by intelligence'; and it needed tremendous self-confidence."¹⁵⁶

¹⁵⁶ Knox, *Oedipus at Thebes*, 41.

But there are important differences between the two riddles. First, in direct contrast to the action of the play, Oedipus' encounter with the Sphinx occurs in a sort of cognitional vacuum, which is fitting, given how little attention the scene is given. We infer that when Oedipus encountered the Sphinx she was terrorizing a foreign city (Thebes). As a Corinthian, he was under no obligation to liberate Thebes. Yes, Oedipus was "*apolis*" and in need of a new home, but it nevertheless seems possible that he could have avoided the Sphinx in an effort to find a new city with fewer perilous challenges on entry. Instead, he courageously stays and, lucky for Thebes, and lucky for him, has an insight. In a solitary, insular act of understanding – which is then inexcusably confused for wisdom – Oedipus grasps "man" *qua* man. That is to say, despite the confusing, contradictory sense images the riddle evokes, Oedipus understands "man" in a detached, explanatory way, as a unity-identity-whole that develops across time.¹⁵⁷

Oedipus understands, in other words, man as an intelligibility, and is therefore able to liberate himself from the sensible changes that have caused others confusion. As most riddles do, the difficulty of the Sphinx's riddle rests on an assumed egocentrism or, at the very least, the anthropocentrism of the riddle-solver. We infer that countless others before Oedipus ruled themselves out as potential solutions, unable to transcend their descriptive knowing and understand themselves in the abstract. Thus, we might say that *from the viewpoint of ordinary description*, there is no such creature that fulfills the attributes described in the riddle. *From the viewpoint of explanation*, however, man, when understood developmentally within the process

¹⁵⁷ Recall my earlier discussion of "summoners" in Plato.

of his aging over time, does.¹⁵⁸ Lonergan's descriptive-explanatory dichotomy discloses what makes the riddle so challenging vis-à-vis self-knowledge. On the one hand, we are so close to ourselves in the descriptive sense that we understand much. On the other hand, it is precisely due to our proximity that we struggle to understand ourselves in an explanatory way. Our capacity and incapacity for self-knowledge, therefore, at once places us above the beasts but below the gods. I am reminded of the words of Alexander Pope,

Placed on this isthmus of a middle state,
A being darkly wise, and rudely great:
With too much knowledge for the sceptic side,
With too much weakness for the stoic's pride,
He hangs between; in doubt to act, or rest;
In doubt to deem himself a god, or beast¹⁵⁹

Likewise, solving the riddle of Laius' murder would seem to require a similar approach but, instead, it is the descriptive solving process itself that becomes the stuff of drama, as Sophocles deftly juxtaposes Oedipus' gifts as renowned riddle-solver (in the past) with his far more protracted, laborious and discursive struggle to solve the riddle of Laius' murder (in the present).

One obvious reason, and why we cannot accept Segal's own word "reenactment" to describe the investigation, is that this time, the setting is local and

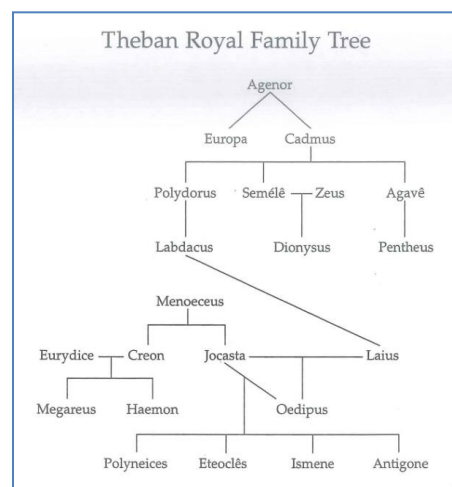
¹⁵⁸ The notion of a man's development over time, from infant, to two-footed adult, to the three-footed (cane), blind, elderly man, a man far more like Tiresias, is also mirrored in Oedipus' own development over the course of the play. As Segal notes, "Oedipus...emerges from this final trial more like a prophet than a king. He has lost his eyes but gained something of Tiresias' vision of truth" (Segal, *Tragic Heroism*, 52).

¹⁵⁹ Alexander Pope, "An Essay on Man."

personal; Oedipus does not therefore approach this problem, his own problem, with the cool, dispassionate demeanor of the detached scientist.¹⁶⁰ His inquiry is instead related to his own interests and concerns which, in contrast with the Sphinx episode, makes him more susceptible to bias and, as some commentators have pointed out, far less wise. I am reminded of one of my favorite lines from Camus' *The Plague*: "Stupidity has a knack of getting its way; as we should see if we were not always so much wrapped up in ourselves."¹⁶¹

The Riddle of the Sphinx as Metaphor for Explanatory Understanding

Most editions of *Oedipus Tyrannus* include some version of the following diagram in either the prefatory or appendix materials:



¹⁶⁰ One might object here that in his dealings with the Sphinx, Oedipus is as self-interested in solving the riddle as he is in determining Laius' murderer. If he fails with the Sphinx, he dies – he therefore couldn't be more self-interested in solving the puzzle. My claim refers more to the very nature of the puzzle and his approach to it. It is an abstract riddle (although it ironically is self-referential). Further, Oedipus is alone with the Sphinx and there is no community to save and no one else whom he may consult.

¹⁶¹ Albert Camus. *The Plague*. (New York: The Modern Library), 34.

But why include such a chart? What insights is this image supposed to stimulate?

The first and most obvious answer is that family lineage – in this case, the House of Cadmus – is central to understanding the play. Editors recognize that it behooves readers to know something about the relevant familial relations in order to grasp the meaning of the play. Here in Thebes, it seems, familial relations are not only important, they are, at times, confusing; hence the curious diagonal connecting Jocasta and Oedipus.

But there is something more significant at work here. A “family” is a term which connotes a network of relations. A “family tree” is a pictorial representation of that network, of which one individual is only a part. A family tree, in Lonergan’s terms, depicts “the relation of things to other things.” To see one’s own position on a family tree is a humbling experience, as even the unbridled egoist must acknowledge his relative smallness in a larger context. He also becomes cognizant (or at least he should) of the radical contingency of his own being and the various conditions that needed to be fulfilled to engender it.

Further, and more importantly, a family tree illustrates the multiple roles we play – as father and uncle, mother and aunt, grandson and grandfather, etc. It is somewhat ironic, therefore, that when we read *Oedipus Tyrannus* with the aid of this image in advance, we are effectively jumping the very cognitive journey Oedipus makes in the play, as he attempts to understand (see) where he fits in the whole. And so while having the image in advance certainly contributes to the dramatic irony of the play, we can’t help but think, “oh, if only Oedipus himself had such a handy

chart!"¹⁶² Instead, part of his task is to piece the chart together through his own questioning. Yet, like the riddle, to fully, truly and authentically "know thyself" (γνῶθι σεαυτόν) the Delphic oracle demands, would require an understanding that is at once connected to and detached from one's own reference frame, no small feat. The riddle adverts to three reference frames that cannot be simultaneously adopted (birth, maturity, old age). Likewise, to understand oneself as an intelligibility requires an understanding of one's past, present and future.

Attempting to see the relation of parts to wholes, as opposed to merely understanding one's own experience – as in the famous Protagorean axiom, "man is the measure of all things" – is the aspiration of scientific inquiry and explanatory understanding. Protagoras, as Segal notes, "was the best known of the Sophists..." whose sayings "express a human-centered, rationalistic speculation that is embodied to some extent in the hero of Oedipus."¹⁶³ Yet Protagoras' most famous proclamation is, "Of all things man is the measure, of the things that are, that they are, and of the things that are not, that they are not."¹⁶⁴ One of Sophocles greatest artistic triumphs is the way in which the riddle of the Sphinx, and Oedipus' success at solving it, exposes the irony of his later failure to understand himself in the context of an interrelated network far "beyond" man as its measure. As Byrne notes,

¹⁶² I should note here that it's not as if the Greeks would have been in the dark about their family lineage. The problem in Oedipus, of course, is that certain familial relations are not yet known. Instead, false parentage has deceived.

¹⁶³ Segal, *Tragic Heroism*, 9.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

Every descriptive understanding of how things are related to this or that human being will be transformed and enriched by being incorporated into a more comprehensive context. That is to say, common sense inevitably takes an individual or a particular group of human beings as the ultimate focal point of descriptive relationships. But this cannot be the whole story. Each person and human group is itself always intrinsically related to all other people and indeed to all other non-human objects – and not only in the present state of the universe but throughout the whole of time.¹⁶⁵

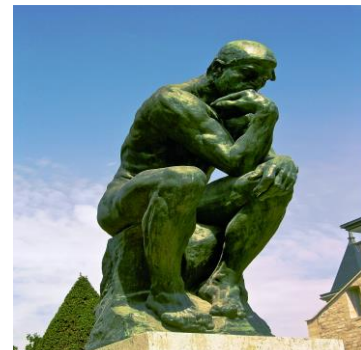
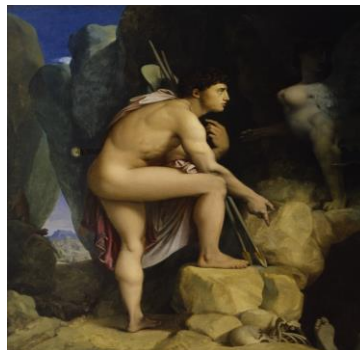
And so, we may now ask, along with Segal, if the content of Oedipus' insight is an understanding of "man" in an explanatory, relational context, why then is he unable to understand himself in that way as a potential solution to the murder-riddle? Why does he insist on making himself the "focal point of descriptive relationships" and miss the "comprehensive context?" That the famous "knower" is "blind" to the puzzle of his identity – despite perfectly functioning ocular vision – is *the* central irony of the play. What, therefore, in human cognition, makes such tragic ironies possible? And, if they are possible, may we avoid such tragic ironies in our own lives? Lonergan provides an answer.

Patterns of Experience

Because he is human, Oedipus, like us, moves in and out of what Lonergan calls "patterns of experience." When dealing with the Sphinx, for example, we presume Oedipus to be primarily in an intellectual pattern. The answer to her question is abstract, solvable in a vacuum. It requires no data collection, no practical, inter-subjective exchanges and it culminates in an explanatory understanding of "man."

¹⁶⁵ Patrick H. Byrne. "Intelligibility and Natural Science: Alienation or Friendship With the Universe?" Chestnut Hill, MA: Lonergan Workshop, 2010. p 17. Used with permission.

Even the setting indicates these features. Oedipus stands outside the city walls in the quietude of a liminal space where he can ruminate. Consider, for example, the way Jean-August-Dominique Ingres portrays Oedipus and the Sphinx in his famous paintings (below), first in 1808 and then in 1864.¹⁶⁶ In those images, Oedipus has adopted a pose not unlike Rodin's "The Thinker," his foot upon a rock, elbow resting on his knee, a contemplative. Meanwhile, in a narrow sliver of space at the bottom of each canvas Thebes waits in the distance for the return of its future king.



In stark contrast, in attempting to solve the riddle of Laius' murder, Oedipus operates in no such vacuum, for he is no longer a wanderer, "*apolis*," but a leader with a practical interest in "getting things done." He solves the mystery publically amidst the hustle and bustle of civic life, people coming and going. In this public space the exigencies of time and space bear down upon him; Thebes is dying, "plunged headlong into the depths of disaster" and "desolation wastes away the harvest/Destroys our herds and grazing fields/Blights the women and makes them

¹⁶⁶ Jean-August-Dominique Ingres, *Oedipus and the Sphinx*, 1808-27, oil on canvas, 189 x 144 cm, Louvre (pictured on the far left); Ingres, *Oedipus and the Sphinx*, 1864, The Walters Art Museum (in the middle); Rodin, *Le Penseur* in the Musée Rodin, Paris.

barren.”¹⁶⁷ Oedipus moves from person to person, inquiry to inquiry, at a feverish pace, a stark contrast to the philosophical solemnity of a Rodin *contrapposto*.

Sophocles, in other words, could not have been more explicit in alerting us to the appreciable differences in the two puzzle-solving scenarios; differences which should make us wary of Segal’s “reenactment” claim. In spite of the differences, however, there seems to be an assumption, on both Oedipus’ part and the part of his Theban “children,” that a man who once enjoyed success solving one (and only one) abstract riddle within an intellectual pattern on the outskirts of the city will be equally successful in solving a pragmatic problem within his busy civic world, as if a chess grandmaster would make a good president simply in virtue of his *technē* at chess.¹⁶⁸ If one is hunting for errors, might this be the greatest error in judgment in the entire play? Might Sophocles be offering a commentary on the dangers of placing communal faith in a man with a skill set inadequate to the task at hand? Would any of the other characters in the play have fared better?

Lonergan notes that because different patterns, motivated by different interests and concerns, elicit different questions, they can and do lead us astray – especially when the insight sought turns out to be the fruit of a neglected question, a question that might have been asked were one operative in a different pattern. So, just as he was successful in solving the sphinx’s puzzle, Oedipus eventually gets to the bottom of the second puzzle, “Who killed Laius?” Here, however, the insight comes

¹⁶⁷ Sophocles, O.T., Lines 22-27.

¹⁶⁸ In a section to which I will refer later, Oedipus even hubristically asserts his success with the Sphinx in a brazen attempt to make Tiresias feel inadequate, small and “other.”

far less readily and with far more dramatic bumps in the road, making for a better play. But why is Oedipus unable to discern that the two puzzles are, at least, not unrelated? Why does he, a rational agent in so many other ways, instead leap to conspiracies which have almost zero evidence in support of them? Why does it take him so long to discern that he is the killer when the signs are all there? Why, to formulate the question in Lonergan's terms, is he unable to shift his consciousness into a more successful pattern of experience and eradicate interferences? As Charles Segal asks, "How could Oedipus, famous riddle-solver, not grasp the truth when it is spoken so clearly?"¹⁶⁹ These are the questions to which we now turn.

The word "polymorphism" literally means "many shapes." It comes from the Greek *poly* (many) and *morphe* (shapes).¹⁷⁰ Lonergan repeatedly describes human consciousness as *polymorphic*. "The pattern in which [consciousness] flows," he says, "may be biological, aesthetic, artistic, dramatic, practical, intellectual, or mystical. These patterns alternate; they blend or mix; they can interfere, conflict, lose their way, break down."¹⁷¹ The list of these seven patterns, or "heuristic contexts," is by no means exhaustive. Patterns link together insights within determinate fields for questioning and, as such, lead to differentiated discoveries via specific types of insights.¹⁷² Lonergan further defines a pattern of experience as a "set of intelligible

¹⁶⁹ Segal, *Tragic Heroism*, 82.

¹⁷⁰ πολῦς (many) + μορφή (shape)

¹⁷¹ Lonergan, *Insight*, 411.

¹⁷² Ibid., 29. In a brief discussion of Archimedes, Lonergan implies the etymological relation between the word "heuristic" and the word "eureka," literally "I've got it!" in Greek.

relations that link together sequences of sensations, memories, images, conations, emotions, and bodily movements.”¹⁷³ Patterns are differentiated, therefore, by their varying interests and concerns which do not necessary align and, even worse, could potentially be oriented toward mutually exclusive goals – hence, “interfere, conflict, lose their way, break down.”

On the most basic level, Lonergan notes that we are obviously biological creatures and, as such, operate within a framework of our basic biology, the lowest “level” beneath all that we do. To say, then, that a pattern of experience is “biological” is “simply to affirm that the sequences converge upon terminal activities of intussusception or reproduction, or, when negative in scope, self-preservation.”¹⁷⁴ A very simple example of a potential breakdown is the brilliant theoretician on the verge of discovery as hunger or fatigue begins to overtake his inquiry. He asks, “should I eat?” or “should I sleep?” or “should I continue theorizing?” It is not long before the questions within his biological pattern begin to pull him away from his theoretical musings, perhaps to the detriment of a breakthrough the world will never know.

As Aristotle noted long ago, however, we are far more than merely biological creatures. We are symbolic animals as well. We write symphonies and operas (and PhD dissertations) for no other purpose than self-justifying joy. In these pursuits our consciousness is operative in the aesthetic pattern. Lonergan adds, “One is led to acknowledge that experience can occur for the sake of experiencing, that it can slip

¹⁷³ Ibid., 206.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

beyond the confines of serious-minded biological purpose, and that this liberation is a spontaneous, self-justifying joy.”¹⁷⁵ I myself recall hours upon hours spent in my parents’ basement with my instruments, recording music, losing track of all time, in what can only be described as self-justifying joy – it certainly was not my parents’ joy to hear countless retakes on the drum set, although now they have confirmed to me they were happy they allowed it.

A corollary to this emerging taxonomy is Lonergan’s vehement insistence that questions tied to different patterns all lead, equally, to knowledge. And while one might be tempted to dismiss the aesthetic pattern as, say, the pursuit of purposeless purpose, there is still quite a bit of intelligence behind the aesthete’s inquires. Consider Lonergan’s complete statement about the artistic pattern. This comment will be important given the attention I will pay to the dramatic pattern, which Lonergan places as a “specialization, or an extension, of the aesthetic.”¹⁷⁶

Moreover, just as the mathematician grasps intelligible forms in schematic images, just as the scientist seeks intelligible systems that cover the data of his field, so too the artist exercises his intelligence in discovering ever novel forms that unify and relate the contents and acts of aesthetic experience. Still, sense does not escape one master merely to fall into the clutches of another. Art is a twofold freedom. As it liberates experience from the drag of biological purposiveness, so it liberates intelligence from the wearying constraints of mathematical proofs, scientific verifications, and commonsense factualness. For the validation of artistic idea is the artistic deed. The artist establishes his insights, not by proof or verification, but by skillfully embodying them in colors and shapes, in sounds and movements, in the unfolding situations and actions of fiction.¹⁷⁷

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., 208.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., 306.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., 208.

The Intellectual vs. the Practical

After distinguishing between, first, the biological pattern and second, the aesthetic pattern, Lonergan discusses the intellectual pattern, in which the conscious subject is able to control the flow of incoming sense data. Lonergan says, “to the liveliness of youth, study is hard. But in the seasoned mathematician, sensitive process easily contracts to an unruffled sequence of symbolic notations and schematic images. In the trained observer, outer sense forgets its primitive biological functions to take on a selective alertness that keeps pace with the refinements of elaborate and subtle classifications.”¹⁷⁸ We may cite the intellectuals we know as anecdotal evidence to support Lonergan’s claim; those special individuals capable of losing themselves in a theoretical problem even to the detriment of their biology (forgetting to eat) and practical living (forgetting to pay the water bill).

Standing alongside the intellectual pattern, and often opposed to it, is the practical pattern of experience. Lonergan notes, “beyond the biological, the aesthetic and the intellectual, there is ordinary human living. But ordinary living is still conscious and has its own pattern of experience, a direction – namely, ‘to get things done.’”¹⁷⁹ Even the mathematician, who returns to earth from the “unruffled sequence of symbolic notations and schematic images,” may discover when he returns home a leaky faucet or an oil burner in lockout and a chagrined wife anxious to take a hot shower. This math genius must remove his “theoretical hat” and put on

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., 209.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., 210.

his “practical hat.” Human beings, in other words, “wear many hats,” an aphorism which aptly describes a fact about the human condition which Lonergan is merely elucidating: the drama of human living involves playing many roles with different “interests and concerns.” If they did not, one would wear only “one hat.” Meanwhile, because the tension of human living is often a function of the demands our different roles present to us and, as such, the different questions those roles elicit, we may face existential crisis scenarios in which questions lead to insights which disclose conflicting courses of action.

Oedipus too wears “many hats,” simply in virtue of the fact that he is a human being. We might say, first and foremost, that he is (apparently) Τύραννος (tyrant) but will soon discover that he is really βασιλεύς (king). But Oedipus is obviously much more than tyrant and king. He is a husband, a father, a brother-in-law, a son, an adopted son, a riddle-solver, and, at the very bottom, a man. In fact, it is this last identity that becomes most significant. Oedipus is a man with past experiences heretofore subordinated but now, courtesy of the unrestricted desire to know, ready to percolate to the surface and potentially disrupt his course of action as King. This is why McCoy notes, “part of the tragedy here is that Oedipus the king’s interest is contrary to Oedipus the man’s interest.”¹⁸⁰

Apart from knowing that he is king at the opening of the play, Oedipus lacks a comprehensive purchase on these other identities and the intelligibility of his past. He understands descriptively and, as such, more narrowly than he would if he could grasp himself within the larger network to be exposed from the viewpoint of

¹⁸⁰ McCoy, *Wounded Heroes*, 44.

explanation. He knows, for example, he is Jocasta's husband but does not understand that he is her son. He knows that Creon is his brother-in-law but not that he is also Creon's nephew. He knows that he is father to Antigone but not that she is also his half-sister. He knows that Polybus and Merope are his parents but not that they are his adoptive parents. He knows the riddle of the sphinx, but not the riddle of his own identity. He understands, as Saint Paul's adage goes, through a glass darkly.¹⁸¹ These other identities will ultimately be grasped in his quest for self-knowledge, but only after he conquers his biases and enlarges his descriptive context.

It is precisely Oedipus' quest for self-knowledge that represents a stark departure from the standard detective story. In that type of story, the protagonist-sleuth typically oscillates between two patterns of experience – the practical and the intellectual. The “thing to get done” is to discover whodunit, a task which will require a variety of practical insights. The sleuth must know the relevant people to interview, the appropriate tact for questioning an unstable witness, the customs of the neighborhood, the intricacies of criminal procedure, the bureaucratic red tape to avoid, traffic snags, the late night diner with the best pastrami, etc. Later, though, perhaps in the quietude of his study, the detective falls into the intellectual pattern, as he attempts, through an organizing intelligence, to unite all the sensible data he has collected into one, cohesive intelligibility, at which point he cries, “Eureka” and takes action to arrest the husband – it's always the husband. It is no coincidence that Lonergan begins the preface to *Insight* by alluding to the detective story:

¹⁸¹ *Saint Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians*, 13:12: "For now we see through a glass darkly." (βλέπομεν γὰρ ἄρτι δι' ἑσόπτρου ἐν αἰνίγματι)

In the ideal detective story the reader is given all the clues yet fails to spot the criminal. He may advert to each clue as it arises. He needs no further clues to solve the mystery. Yet he can remain in the dark for the simple reason that reaching the solution is not the mere apprehension of any clue, not the mere memory of all, but a quite distinct activity or organizing intelligence that places the full set of clues in a unique explanatory perspective.¹⁸²

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's character Sherlock Holmes, for example, is a master of practical data collection. Holmes famously cries, in one adventure, "Data! Data! Data! I can't make bricks without clay."¹⁸³ He is adept at hitting the streets and even boasts the boxing acumen to handle adversaries physically. But Holmes is equally famous for his nearly catatonic state of theorizing, a state that rivals meditation, as Watson often discovers Holmes reclining on a sofa or slumped in an armchair: "He sat frequently for half an hour on end, with knitted brows and an abstracted air..."¹⁸⁴ Later, Watson says of his friend, "Sherlock Holmes had, in a very remarkable degree, the power of detaching his mind at will."¹⁸⁵ Holmes justifies this intellectual pattern, saying to Watson, in another story, "Problems may be solved in the study which have baffled all those who have sought a solution by the aid of their senses."¹⁸⁶ Holmes even plays the violin, an original Stradivarius, leaving readers and Watson to wonder

¹⁸² Lonergan, *Insight*, ix.

¹⁸³ Arthur Conan Doyle. *The Original Illustrated Sherlock Holmes*. Seacaucus, New Jersey: Castle Publishing, 1976, 171.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 367.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 76.

whether his playing is merely a method of liberating his consciousness from the exigencies of the day's practical pattern. From *A Study in Scarlet*,

When left to himself, however, [Holmes] would seldom produce any music or attempt any recognized air. Leaning back in his arm-chair of an evening, he would close his eyes and scrape carelessly at the fiddle which was thrown across his knee. Sometimes the chords were sonorous and melancholy. Occasionally they were fantastic and cheerful. Clearly they reflected the thoughts which possessed him, but whether the music aided those thoughts, or whether the playing was simply the result of a whim or fancy, was more than I could determine.¹⁸⁷

And yet, for all of this, unlike Oedipus, we know very little about Holmes' own personal life. With the exception of a few moments, Holmes is rarely the subject of his own drama. The repressed memories of Holmes' youth rarely rise up to become relevant psychic contents. We sense that Holmes is so single-minded of purpose, in fact, that he will not allow these psychic contents to distract him from the goal. So much so, Watson reflects, "I sometimes found myself regarding him as an isolated phenomenon, a brain without a heart, as deficient in human sympathy as he was pre-eminent in intelligence. His aversion to women, and his disinclination to form new friendships, were both typical of his unemotional character, but not more so than his complete suppression of every reference to his own people. I had come to believe that he was an orphan with no relatives living."¹⁸⁸ We might add here that, on a Lonergan interpretation, Watson is incorrect in his judgment about his friend,

¹⁸⁷ Doyle, Arthur Conan. (*A Study in Scarlet and The Sign of Four*. United States: Dover Publishing Inc., 2003), p. 10.

¹⁸⁸ Doyle, *The Original Illustrated Sherlock Holmes*, 293.

Holmes. Holmes *is* an emotional character; his horizon of feelings just differs from typical people.

Oedipus Tyrannus, in contrast, is not a typical detective story. As ER Dodds points out, “despite certain similarities the Oedipus Rex is not a detective story but a dramatized folktale. If we insist on reading it as if it were a law report we must expect to miss the point.”¹⁸⁹ Further, because it is a folktale and a myth, Sophocles’ audience understands that Oedipus does not understand and can look on from a privileged viewpoint.

But Dodds is clearly underselling the play. I would argue that *Oedipus Tyrannus* is both a folktale *and* a detective story; the addition of a third pattern of experience, the dramatic, however, elevates it to a status that transcends that genre distinction, as the investigation becomes self-referential. This feature is what makes the play uniquely compelling.

We can easily imagine, for example, a hypothetical version of the play in which someone other than Oedipus is Laius’ killer; the Theban herdsman, for example. Let us imagine the play then divorced of its tragic irony. It is, instead, a straightforward detective story, not unlike a Sherlock Holmes adventure, in which Oedipus, as Holmes often is, is solicited by his people to solve the murder. If this were all, Oedipus would oscillate primarily between two patterns¹⁹⁰: the intellectual pattern of solving the puzzle for the sake of solving it and the practical pattern of finding and banishing a

¹⁸⁹ Dodds, “On Misunderstanding the ‘Oedipus Rex,’” 41.

¹⁹⁰ Obviously, one is never fully free of the biological pattern. Oedipus, after all, would still need to eat and sleep.

potential threat to civic life and order. Yes, we want to solve mysteries to help our friends; but we also want to solve mysteries for the sake of solving them.¹⁹¹ Initially, this dual-motivation, a function of two patterns, describes Oedipus as well. He has a pragmatic interest in solving the case. He tells us as much: “I do not do this for some far-off cousin/I have my own reasons for driving out this infection/The killer, whoever it may be, could kill again/And lay those deadly hands on me/As I serve this cause, so I serve myself” (Lines 137 – 141). But we also get the sense that Oedipus is a man of great curiosity; a curiosity that was dormant but which has now been rekindled. In fact, we marvel as Oedipus proceeds in the face of his own self-destruction simply because, as we discussed in Chapter One, “truth will out” and he is the man to “out it.” He wants to know who killed Laius simply because, as the old adage goes, inquiring minds want to know.

Of course, as Dodds noted above, this is not the whole plot of *Oedipus Tyrannus*. Instead, the source for the play’s tragic irony, and that which separates Oedipus in terms of genre, is the addition of a third pattern of experience – the dramatic – which complicates the landscape in profound ways, ways that make the play far more than a “dramatized folktale.” In Oedipus, the data collection process of the typical investigation story unbeknownst to the investigator sets the conditions for psychic contents within the investigator’s consciousness, in the form of memories, heretofore

¹⁹¹ We find this tension in Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes or, to use a more recent example, Doctor Gregory House from the Fox television show *House*, an overt remake of Holmes (hence the House-Homes pun). In both fictitious characters is the hint that they aren’t nearly as concerned with the practical welfare of the person to be helped. They are merely interested in the challenge of the puzzle, a fact which often bothers the ethical sensibilities of their respective counterparts Watson and Wilson.

repressed or uncritically neglected, to cascade to the surface. Soon it is those psychic contents that are questioned making the self the object of potential intelligibility. The quest for the killer, understanding the “he,” becomes identical with the quest for self-knowledge, understanding the “I.”

The Dramatic Pattern

The foundation of Lonergan’s “dramatic pattern of experience” is the rich mental life we enjoy within our consciousnesses, a function of the interplay between lower and higher levels, between unconscious processes (one’s neurology) and the phenomenological data of one’s consciousness (psychic contents). Observe a man on a commuter train as he goes through the motions of his commute – he sips coffee, fumbles with the paper, stares out the window, etc. An attractive woman sits down next to the man. He attempts to make small talk but is awkward. Before long he retreats to his staring out the window. You may never know that presently, unfolding within this man’s consciousness, a dramatic narrative is playing out, as he wrestles with the demons of an abusive childhood, his recent divorce which he believes is related to that childhood, and the resultant struggle to make meaningful connections in his adult life. This was an opportunity and he feels he has blown it once again. The anxiety sets in. The guilt. The fear.

Thus Lonergan says, “behind palpable activities, there are motives and purposes; and in them it is not difficult to discern an artistic, or more precisely, a dramatic component.”¹⁹² Lonergan’s dramatic pattern, in other words, requires us to

¹⁹² Lonergan, *Insight*, 210.

accept the claim that the psychic contents of consciousness can and do subordinate what Lonergan calls “neural demand functions.” In fact, Lonergan claims this is the first condition of the possibility of having a dramatic pattern at all: “The first condition of drama,” he tells us, “is the possibility of acting it out, of the subordination of neural process to psychic determinations.”¹⁹³ Why, we may ask, do we sometimes use the adjective “dramatic” to describe certain people?¹⁹⁴ We all know people in our lives who conduct their affairs as if they are living in a Hollywood film, as if the world is watching their every move, even when it is not. These dramatic folks seem more concerned with winning the affection of others, for example, often to their own detriment. Like our man on the train, these are people for whom the dramatic pattern of experience preselects and arranges psychic contents while excluding others.

Obviously, this model of human consciousness is a matter of dispute, especially in recent debates within philosophy of mind. And while a full discussion of “Lonergan on consciousness” would bring us too far afield here, we should point out that Lonergan is very careful to note the inverse relation as well: that neural demand functions clearly exert their influence upon the psychic. After all, we could not perceive without an optic nerve. As Lonergan notes, “Just as an appropriate schematic image specifies and leads to a corresponding insight, so patterns of change in the optic

¹⁹³ Ibid.

¹⁹⁴ I am reminded of the end of Mark Twain’s *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. The irony of the ending – which many recent scholars have argued is offensive – is that Jim, the slave, is already free, a fact which Tom Sawyer knows. And yet Tom must live a drama in fashioning a ridiculous escape plan. (See Jane Smiley’s terrific essay “Say it Aint’s So, Huck” for a fuller description of Sawyer (and Twain’s) ridiculousness).

nerve and cerebrum specific and lead to corresponding acts of seeing.”¹⁹⁵ The danger of acknowledging this necessary (but not sufficient) condition is an oversight which leads to a kind of neurological determinism¹⁹⁶ or, as Lonergan notes, to assume “neural demands are unconditional.”¹⁹⁷ On Lonergan’s view, in contrast, the pattern

¹⁹⁵ Lonergan, *Insight*, 212.

¹⁹⁶ In Chapter 4 I will discuss “determinism” as a metaphysical commitment that falls under Lonergan’s rubric of “position and counter position,” a dialectic Sophocles clearly exploits for dramatic purposes. In fact, many modern arguments which reduce our behavior to brain chemistry seem eerily reminiscent of Sophoclean fatalism. In *Oedipus at Colonus*, Oedipus essentially makes a point that we now hear in modern criminal trials deflecting personal blame to external circumstances beyond one’s control:

You rant on about taboo killings,
Foul marriages, and vile incest.
It was I who suffered these things
But the gods made it so,
Exorcising some ancient grudge
Through my bloodline.
I cannot be blamed for the crimes
I inflicted on myself and my family,
You won’t find a single reason
Why I deserved any of it.
How was it my fault
That my father received
A prediction that he would
Be killed by his very own son?
That happened before I was born –
I had not even been conceived!
But I was born, unluckily,
And yes, I did fight and kill my father,
But I had no idea who he was –
I didn’t know what I was doing.
How can you call me guilty
When I knew nothing...nothing!”

¹⁹⁷ Lonergan, *Insight*, 213.

of experience is prior and becomes the filtration system for the psychic contents.

Consider the full passage from *Insight*:

Already we have noticed, in treating the intellectual pattern of experience, how the detached spirit of inquiry cuts off interference of emotion and conation... In similar fashion, the dramatic pattern of experience penetrates below the surface of consciousness to exercise its own domination and control, and to effect, prior to conscious discrimination, its own selections and arrangements. Nor is this aspect of the dramatic pattern either surprising or novel: there cannot be selection and arrangement without rejection and exclusion, and the function that excludes elements from emerging in consciousness is now familiar as Freud's censor.¹⁹⁸

In spite of our inability to directly access the consciousness of others, we find evidence of the dramatic pattern in the symbolic, ritualistic ways in which we and others make living a work of art. This is why Lonergan locates the dramatic pattern as a "specialization, or an extension, of the aesthetic."¹⁹⁹ He adds, "Not only, then, is man capable of aesthetic liberation and artistic creativity, but his first work of art is his own living."²⁰⁰ We are not merely ants or bees who "mindlessly" perform our roles; nor are we pure intellects "devising perfect blueprints for human behavior." We have motivations and purposes of which we are conscious and which pattern our behavior – hence, Oedipus' claim, "I have my own reasons for driving out this infection." Lonergan writes, "It is true enough that eating and drinking are biological performances. But in man they are dignified by their spatial and psychological separation from the farm, abattoir, the kitchen; they are ornamented by the elaborate

¹⁹⁸ Ibid., 214.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid., 306.

²⁰⁰ Ibid., 210.

equipment of the dinning room, by the table manners imposed on children, by the deportment of adult conversation.”²⁰¹ The implication of these statements is broad. Given the data that our lives adopt ritualistic and symbolic significance, on Lonergan’s view, no reductionist metaphysical commitment could ever explain why we opt to use the good China vs. paper plates, or why, as Father Joseph Flanagan used to say, “monkeys eat, but only humans *dine*.”²⁰²

Blending and Interfering

The tragedy and irony of *Oedipus Tyrannus* therefore hinges on the “blending and interfering” of patterns of experience, and particularly the dramatic. We need only briefly examine Jocasta as the more obvious paragon of interfering patterns. The curious diagonal line we observe in the family tree (above) connects her to Oedipus as wife, a social role that has, during the action of the play, superseded her primary (biological) role to him as mother, represented by the traditional vertical line extending to Oedipus from her “horizontal” relationship with Laius.²⁰³ Jocasta’s dual-relation explains much of her psychological turmoil throughout the play, and her words and actions may become less puzzling to us when we recognize that she is straddling and negotiating two “interests and concerns” which may be mutually

²⁰¹ Ibid.

²⁰² In conversation.

²⁰³ One could also say that the diagonal line in the family tree also shows Oedipus’ dual role as son and husband and that Oedipus also straddles two conflicting roles. But unlike Oedipus, who does not recall being Jocasta’s son given his infancy, Jocasta is old enough to remember her role as mother and now, as wife.

exclusive: a mother's protective instinct vs. a wife's obligation to be truthful to her husband.

Initially, there seems to be a moral dubiousness to Jocasta's request to stop Oedipus from questioning, as she famously exhorts, "No! By all the gods, if you have care for your life,/Stop these questions. Have I not suffered enough" (1060-1061). We must recognize, however, that this request comes only *after* she, like Oedipus, has had the insight (and virtually unconditioned judgment) that Oedipus is the boy she abandoned long ago. Her insight discloses an important point: an identical insight can occur within a different horizon of meaning, as determined by the agent's pattern of experience. In other words, Jocasta's insight, which includes all the content that Oedipus' insight will include a few scenes later, is nevertheless tokened to her biological and social role. Yes, Jocasta "sees" that Oedipus is the killer; but, smuggled within that understanding is a corollary which, for Jocasta, is more devastating than the premise: she has been sleeping with the son she abandoned, a dual-atrocity that yields a dual guilt, of both of a mother and a wife. Here we have a clash between the biological pattern (a mother's biological imperative to care and nurture her child) and the dramatic pattern (the anxiety, fear and guilt that are a function of a wife's taboo relation with her husband-son).

From her point of view as mother, Oedipus been brought back from the dead. She will not suffer witnessing him hurt again and yet she knows that he, as a mature man and her husband now, is deserving of the truth of his birth. Jocasta's protective maternal instinct becomes all the more ironic given her initial decision to expose her baby to death – "And our son? He did not last three days./Laius yoked his feet and

had him thrown away –/By other people – into a wilderness of mountains” (717-719) – a decision in defiance of the protective maternal obligation as mother she now recruits. We might therefore infer that had Jocasta adopted her present pose of protective mother back then, she wouldn’t need to do so now as a wife. Or, we may read Jocasta’s desire to protect her husband as the maternal desire she denied years ago. She will not, in other words, see him destroyed twice and is therefore willing to play the role of the deceptive wife. It becomes less of a surprise that when Oedipus does understand his dismal fate, she kills herself, unable to deal with his double-death having been unable to protect him at two successive junctures in her care-giving roles, maternal and spousal.

Oedipus Tyrannus forces us to revel in the tension that arises when different patterns yield contradictory insights vis-à-vis access to potentially harmful truths. Jocasta’s cry, “Have I not suffered enough?” displays her unenviable state: a divided consciousness, in which her obligation to protect her son-husband from harm clashes against his right to know the truth. Her character raises an interesting tension vis-à-vis Lonergan’s analysis: while there is theoretically no question for which we would not *desire* the answer, there are moments in which we understand, through insight, that the maturity or psyche of either ourselves or the one who seeks the answer may be too deficient or fragile to receive it from us and thus, in certain (presumably rare) instances, suppressing the truth is justified. It seems we must be careful, though, about the authenticity of the reasons we offer for suppressing the truth. Is it in our personal interest to do so or in the interest of the person for whom the truth is being suppressed? Or is it even in the interest of the larger whole within which all persons

participate? I will address this question in a later section on communal responsibility and progress and decline. For now, we are left to delight in Sophocles' obvious doubling of Jocasta with Merope. Back in Corinth, long ago, Merope made a similar decision to shield her child from the truth out of maternal protection which, one might argue, was misguided and, not surprisingly, led to disastrous consequences.

Like Jocasta, Oedipus' patterns of experience also interfere. Clearly, Oedipus' initial goal is to "get things done," as he operates in a predominantly practical pattern. Prior to the opening scene, in which the elders exhort Oedipus in supplication, we learn that Oedipus has already had the practical insight to send Creon to consult Delphi: "I have already sent Creon, my wife's own brother,/To the Pythian oracle, Apollo's shrine at Delphi" (71-72). A hallmark of the practical pattern, Oedipus is hyper-concerned with the exigencies of time. He is not, after all, attempting to prove Fermat's last theorem in his study but, instead, trying to find a killer who could strike again. And so he says of Creon, "But he should have returned by now;/Too much time has passed since he left./I fear what might have happened – where can he be?" (73-75). Later, Oedipus tells the Chorus that on Creon's advice, he has also sent for Tiresias, another instance of a practical insight which comes prior to the public's suggestion of it. Again, Oedipus perseverates on the time-pressure: "I have seen to that already. On Creon's advice/I sent a herald to fetch him. Twice now. Where is he?/I can't believe he has not yet arrived" (287-289).

In addition to the passing of precious time, Oedipus is equally frustrated that the Theban unrestricted desire to know has become a restricted desire. He is annoyed that his fellow Thebans could have "gotten things done" but desired not to.

Creon offers what seems to be a legitimate reason for the restriction: “The Sphinx. Her riddles made us set aside/That mystery; we had to deal with the trouble at hand” (130-131). At this point, Oedipus vows to take matters in his own practical hands and, using more light and vision imagery vows, “I will see it exposed,” a line which is roughly equivalent to, “I will bring the dark things to light.”²⁰⁴ In this vow Sophocles concretizes the juxtaposition between the unrestricted desire to know with an external force of restriction (the Sphinx) and an additional self-imposed restriction at the hands of the Theban community at large (willed ignorance). It is for this committed immersion in the practical pattern of experience that Knox describes Oedipus as a man of swift action (*tachys*) in a battle against this sort of communally willed ignorance, claiming that “the man whose intelligent and courageous action made him the envy of his fellow men will not accept a life based on willed ignorance.”²⁰⁵

Further, as I mentioned earlier, Oedipus has a practical self-interest which motivates him beyond his concern for his Theban children. He acknowledges quite plainly that answering his questions is not wholly a function of “fellow-feeling.” It will serve him well too: “I do not do this for some far-off cousin./I have my own reasons for driving out this infection;/The killer, whoever it may be, could kill again/And lay those deadly hands on me./As I serve this cause, so I serve myself” (137-141). At this point in the drama, Oedipus is practically and intellectually engaged. We must ask,

²⁰⁴ ἄλλ’ ἐξ ὑπαρχῆς αὐθις αὐτ’ ἐγὼ φανῶ.

²⁰⁵ Knox, *Oedipus at Thebes*, 17,31.

therefore, at what point does Oedipus' practical pattern of experience "blend, mix, interfere, breakdown" with his dramatic pattern?

The answer to this question comes no later than the very next scene. In fact, the breakdown happens so quickly it borders on absurd. Oedipus, who up until this point seems intelligent, reasonable and responsible transmogrifies into the opposite of those, sounding ignorant, judgmental and irresponsible, launching into a wild conspiracy theory, in which he first indicts Tiresias and then Creon. His conspiracy theories, especially in spite of the explicit claims that he is the killer, become the *prima facie* evidence that he is retreating into a drama within the drama. We sense that if Oedipus could only quiet the voices of his inner narrative, and liberate himself from this pattern, he would be ostensibly more successful in the practical (and intellectual) pattern of solving the riddle of Laius' murder. He cannot, though, and at this point the real source of drama pivots to the question of whether one man will break his intellectual bad habits and conquer his biases.

The first explicit moment of the blending and interfering of the dramatic pattern specifically appears at Line 353. In his prodding of an initially reticent Tiresias, the prophet finally shouts, "You are this land's defiler, you are the curse!" Oedipus, of course, is famously incredulous. At 362, Tiresias speaks the truth again in no uncertain terms, saying, "I say that the murderer you seek is you." Not only is Oedipus again incredulous, his incredulity mounts instead of dissipating, as one might expect when a man with a reputation for wisdom doubles-down on his indictment. Then, at 450, Tiresias, offended by Oedipus' misdirected (and public and therefore embarrassing) invective, launches into a narrative that should be the proverbial icing

on the cake. It is an unequivocal retelling of Oedipus' own dramatic narrative as an outsider arriving in Thebes: "I tell you, the murderer of Laius, the object/Of your self-proclaimed manhunt,/The one you've sought for so long – he is here./He seems at first to be a newcomer from abroad,/Yet soon he'll be seen as a born Theban. But no joy/For him in that" (450-454).

This moment, and Oedipus' forthcoming response, is pivotal in appreciating the interference of the dramatic pattern. In a consciousness not so deeply subordinated by the dramatic pattern, this inter-subjective exchange would be an opportunity for learning and for serious reflection and discernment. One might, for example, say to oneself: "Here I have a man, a national treasure, known for his incredible and uncanny prophetic gifts indicting me, of all people. He has also implied that I am not a foreigner but a native born Theban. Is this even possible? Perhaps I'm missing something here." This, in other words, is the moment at which Oedipus now has at least one reason to suspect that, perhaps, appearance is not reality. Yet, instead of adopting an authentic, self-appropriated pose, he famously suspects conspiracy, shouting, "Did you plot all of this, or could it be Creon?" (378).

Unlike certain commentators in the secondary literature, I read this question as the verbal evidence of the dramatic pattern. The question, which here masquerades as a question for intelligence, lacks the authenticity of Oedipus' prior inquiries. It is not, in other words, a question the answer to which Oedipus really desires. I would argue, in fact, that Oedipus does not even believe in a conspiracy, even as he inquires about one, a strange but not uncommon psychology. His question about conspiracy reads like one raised in the heat of the moment, the sort of question

one asks when one recognizes one is guilty. It is a deflection, a smokescreen, a question that steers the inquiry away from what is being repressed in consciousness, but which is now dangerously close to rising to the surface. Since he does not yet understand and know who is, we may infer the problem is his affective self, where dramatic bias lurks.

In fact, when Tiresias replies to the question with yet another definitive answer – “Creon doesn’t plague you, you plague yourself!” (379) – Oedipus launches into a speech meant to ridicule Tiresias in an unwarranted (even cruel) *ad hominem* attack. It is no surprise that in his speech Oedipus suddenly and unauthentically recruits pointed “us/them” language, attempting to elevate himself and demean the prophet as an “other.” Instead of treating Tiresias as one of his “children” too, Oedipus lumps the prophet into a vile group of charlatans, describing them as “you people.” The “us/them” linguistic distinction heightens the irony given Oedipus’ birth as a native Theban, i.e., “one of them.” Oedipus then asks a few additional questions in his invective but what was once authentic inquiry has become highly stylized and rhetorical, even bloviating. Sophocles then further amplifies the irony by having Oedipus begin to audaciously tout his own intelligence, calling himself, with tongue in check, “ignorant Oedipus.”

Prosperity, power, skill surpassing skill –
 These should be admired, not envied.
 What jealous craving eats away at you people?
 Is it because of my tyranny? I never asked for it;
 It was handed to me by the city.
 For this, my dear old friend, loyal Creon,
 Longs to cast me out, stalking in secret,
 Ambushing me with this conniving trickster.
 You cheating old beggar! All you can see

Is personal profit. To the future you're blind!
 Tell me, when have your prophecies been proved?
 When the Sphinx sounded her deadly song
 Did you speak to save our people then?
 The riddle could not be solved by just any man.
 It needed the skills of a seer, but where were you?
 You saw no omens, you made no revelations,
 There was no divine inspiration, you knew nothing.
 Then I came, ignorant Oedipus, I silenced her
 By using my mind, not signs from the sky! (380-398)

As Segal points out, this harsh exchange closes with Tiresias shifting from clearly and unequivocally indicting Oedipus the man to clearly and unequivocally indicting Oedipus' rationality. The blind prophet shouts, "Go inside and reckon these things up and if you catch me as one who's false, then say that my intelligence in prophecy is nil" (461-462). The Greek is below:

εἴσω λογίζου: κἄν λάβῃς ἐψευσμένον,
φάσκειν ἐμ' ἤδη μαντικῇ μηδὲν φρονεῖν.

Sophocles continues the indictment of Oedipus' rationality when, like his exchange with Tiresias, Creon also demands that Oedipus assess whether he can "reckon" or "calculate" (εἴσω λογίζου) the claims he is making. After the Second Chorus [First Stasimon], which breaks up the previous exchange with Tiresias and the forthcoming exchange with Creon, Creon enters the scene in order to clarify what he has heard about Oedipus' conspiracy theory. He tells the Chorus, "Fellow citizens, this is terrible, what I hear./This accusation against me, by our ruler Oedipus,/It's outrageous. Amid all this trouble,/If he now thinks I have done him any harm,/In word or deed, any harm whatever" (513-517). The Chorus attempts to assuage Creon's hurt feelings by correctly diagnosing the psychology of Oedipus' earlier

charges. In a highly telling passage, the Chorus tells us, “But it was driven by anger, not thought./I don’t think he meant to blame you” (523-524).

Oedipus enters and, after a bitter exchange, Creon offers a compelling reason for why a conspiracy theory is a ludicrous hypothesis, asking the questions that Oedipus has failed to ask because he is too wrapped up in what I will soon call his dramatic and individual bias. Creon says, “No! Look at yourself from my point of view,/And ask this question first: Do you think anyone/Would choose to rule in constant fear/When he could sleep without trembling/And have exactly the same power?” (583-587). Line 583, which Meineck and Woodruff translate as, “No! Look at yourself from my point of view,” is extremely telling, especially in light of our previous discussion about the descriptive-explanatory dichotomy. Creon is essentially asking Oedipus to adopt a pose that would take him beyond the sphere of his limited descriptive knowledge, rooted in his senses and his feelings. Jebb renders the line as, “Not so, if you would reason with your heart as I do with mine.” And Fitz and Fitzgerald, the most literal of the three, write, “No. Reason it out, as I have done” (οὐκ, εἰ διδοίης γ’ ὥς ἐγὼ σαυτῷ λόγον). All three translations have in common a sacrifice of λόγον, or computation, reckoning, at the altar of emotion.

Like the conclusion of the exchange between Oedipus and Tiresias, Sophocles asks us to consider whether Oedipus’ apparent gifts are really legitimate. In stark contrast to his reputation, these scenes are symptomatic of a defect in intellectual character. There is a certain close-mindedness that unites them. The contemporary philosopher Quassim Cassam has written extensively about conspiracy theories and why some people find them so attractive in spite of their apparent lunacy. In his

recent essay, “Bad Thinkers,” Cassam argues that our approach to people who believe in wild conspiracy theories ought to be to critique their character, as opposed to evaluating the reasons for their beliefs. He writes, “Usually, when philosophers try to explain why someone believes things (weird or otherwise), they focus on that person’s *reasons* rather than their character traits.”²⁰⁶ Cassam then goes on to point out that this approach, of rationalizing explanations, “take you only so far.”²⁰⁷ The reason is because one tends to explain one questionable belief by pointing to more questionable beliefs that ground the first. Instead, Cassam concludes we might be better off using the phrase “intellectual vices,” borrowing from the philosopher Linda Zagzebski’s book *Virtues of the Mind*. He then adds that, “Our intellectual vices are balanced by our intellectual virtues, by intellectual character traits such as open-mindedness, curiosity and rigour.”²⁰⁸ The problem, as Cassam notes, is that “Like other bad habits, intellectual bad habits can be too deeply entrenched to change.”²⁰⁹

Perhaps most indicative of the interference and breakdown of Oedipus’ intelligent inquiry, what Cassam would call an intellectual vice, is the complete reversal he makes vis-à-vis his contemptuous attitude toward Tiresias (expressed above). As Champlin notes, “Oedipus completely and instantly rejects the charges, not seeking any clarification.”²¹⁰ Yet, only a few scenes later, when Jocasta arrives

²⁰⁶ Quassim Cassam, “Bad Thinkers.” *Aeon*. March, 2013, 2.
<<https://aeon.co/essays/the-intellectual-character-of-conspiracy-theorists>>

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 3.

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 8.

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

and awakens a “dread recollection,” Oedipus returns to Tiresias with what seems to be a newfound clarity and a concomitant respect for the blind prophet. Champlin adds, “Oedipus’ conception of Teiresias has changed twice in a brief time. Initially he exalts the seer; next he reviles him; finally, coming full circle, he begins to accord him respect once again.”²¹¹ How are we to explain this sort of wild oscillation and total lack of discernment in an otherwise rational agent? To what do we attribute this curious admixture of both rational and irrational or even, in its extreme form, the absurd?

We can find the explanation in what Lonergan calls “bias.”

The Four Biases

Lonergan’s discussion of bias becomes relevant when we ask: what has become of the dynamism of Oedipus’ cognitional structure, elucidated in Chapter 1? Why has the unrestricted desire suddenly become restricted?²¹² Why is Oedipus, an authentic questioner in the play’s initial scenes, now leaping to ridiculous questions that are leading him astray, instead of asking the more pertinent (and obvious) ones? Why does a memory from his past, heretofore repressed, suddenly enter into his

²¹⁰ Majorie Champlin. ““Oedipus Tyrannus” and the Problem of Knowledge.” *(The Classical Journal, 1969)*, p. 339.

²¹¹ Ibid.

²¹² It is important to note here that the desire has not restricted itself. As I will point out in Chapter 4, in a section on freedom and antecedent willingness, it is Oedipus’ will that overrides the desire.

consciousness as new psychic content which, when queried, leads to insights that return Oedipus to the correct path?

Patrick Byrne notes that “bias,” in Lonergan’s lexicon, “means precisely interference with inquiry and with the self-correcting sequence of questions and answers that constitutes the dynamism of the cognitional structure.”²¹³ Bias is, to use another of Lonergan’s phrases, a “flight from understanding.”²¹⁴ To borrow from Cassam, bias is an intellectual vice, the opposite of which are the intellectual virtues which Lonergan reduces to the “transcendental precepts.” In *Method in Theology*, in his chapter on the “Human Good,” Lonergan writes:

Progress proceeds from originating value, from subjects being their true selves by observing *the transcendental precepts, Be attentive, Be intelligent, Be reasonable, Be responsible*. Being attentive includes attention to human affairs. Being intelligent includes a grasp of hitherto unnoticed or unrealized possibilities. Being reasonable includes the rejection of what probably would not work but also the acknowledgement of what probably would. Being responsible includes basing one’s decisions and choices on an unbiased evaluation of short-term and long term costs and benefits to oneself, to one’s group, to other groups.²¹⁵ (my italics)

When we consider, just to take one example, Oedipus’ heated exchange with Tiresias above, we may ask, “Is Oedipus attentive?” No. The prophet repeats the pronouncement of guilt three times, almost as if Oedipus isn’t hearing them. To use a worn-out but apt adage, Oedipus hears but he isn’t listening. Is Oedipus intelligent? No. If intelligent consciousness is characterized by asking questions, it seems there

²¹³ P. H. Byrne, *Ethics of Discernment*, 64.

²¹⁴ In the last chapter we will also indict the citizens of Thebes who misattribute Oedipus’ gifts in the one domain as extending to the other.

²¹⁵ Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 53.

are far more questions to ask here, questions that clearly go beyond the sensible world. Recall Champlin's claim that Oedipus "instantly rejects the charges, not seeking any clarification." Instead of these clarifying questions, Oedipus asks rhetorical questions in the service of embarrassing the prophet: "What jealous craving eats away at you people?" (382) and, "Tell me, when have your prophecies been proved?" (390) and "When the Sphinx sounded her deadly song/Did you speak to save our people then?" (391-392) and "[The riddle] needed the skills of a seer, but where were you?" (393-394).

Is Oedipus reasonable? No. We need only recall our earlier discussion of virtually unconditioned judgments to point out that there is zero data conditioning the affirmative judgment that either Tiresias or Creon (or both) is a conspirator. In fact, there is good data conditioning the opposite negative judgment (albeit not virtually unconditioned yet) that Tiresias and Creon are not conspirators. After all, the prophet repeatedly asks to be left alone and does not want to say anything – "Please let me go home. It's for the best/You bear your load; let me bear mine" (320-321). Likewise, for his part, Creon offers a compelling narrative for why it would be ludicrous for him to conspire against Oedipus when he enjoys the benefits of being king without paying the costs: "Do you think anyone/Would choose to rule in constant fear/When he could sleep without trembling/And have exactly the same power?" (583-587) So, is Oedipus responsible? Clearly not. Unless Thebes has adopted some strange, new hallmark of responsibility that involves choosing to publicly indicting innocents without evidence.

Especially relevant to bias is the second transcendental precept, being intelligent, which, in addition to inquiry, for Lonergan means grasping “hitherto unnoticed or unrealized possibilities.” In other words, a bias occludes intelligence by precluding the subject from asking more pertinent questions that would lead to insights into these other avenues, unrealized possibilities. While this definition may appear to be a more esoteric use of the term bias, it is actually quite similar to the way the word is used in current cultural vernacular. For example, if a man is said to have a gender bias, that man has some sort of interference blocking a correct understanding of the actual state of affairs vis-à-vis gender. On Lonergan’s view, the man’s gender bias is rooted in a failure to ask all the pertinent questions which, if asked, would liberate him or her from the bias.

For example, consider the following riddle I use in my class. It is, admittedly, a bit outdated now but a few years ago it offered a sobering commentary:

A father and his young son are both in a horrific car accident together. Both have equally life-threatening injuries and are simultaneously airlifted by two separate helicopters to two different hospitals within two miles of each other. They are both wheeled into operating rooms where two different surgeons prepare to operate on them, one surgeon for each patient. The surgeon operating on the father makes the first cut and immediately begins, but the surgeon operating on the son draws back the scalpel and says, “I can’t operate on him. This child is my son!”

How is this possible?

Like the riddle of the sphinx (or the riddle of Laius’ murder), the riddle above is really a question for intelligence. The problem, of course, is that the question for intelligence – *how is this possible?* – in the biased consciousness becomes a red herring. If the father is being operated upon two miles away, how could he be the one operating in

another location? One is immediately tempted to ask: how is it possible to bi-locate? The riddle, in other words, pivots on what appears to be a metaphysical impossibility (provided, of course, one accepts as true the premise that it is impossible to bi-locate). Meanwhile, the simpler (and fairly obvious) answer is that the surgeon operating on the boy is the boy's mother. In fact, it's almost too simple an answer. Yet there are plenty of people who fail to get the insight, even plenty of women, much to their disappointment. Is their error understandable and therefore excusable? As we meditate on the riddle, the psychic contents we recruit are images of male surgeons. Surgeons, of course, are not necessarily male but bias blocks that inquiry. To the unbiased inquirer, the simple question, "but must a surgeon be male?" transcends the uniform sense data.

Lonergan discusses four types of bias which I will treat in order, all which Sophocles depicts: dramatic, individual, group and general bias. Like his discussion of patterns of experience, there is no indication that the list of biases is exhaustive. Despite this discussion, it's important to remember that Oedipus does ultimately conquer these biases and arrives at the truth in a virtually unconditioned judgment. In other words, it is telling that Sophocles has the unrestricted drive to know win the day in the end and for that, Oedipus is to be commended. It is not his flaws, therefore, but his commitment to the truth at all costs that makes him worthy of the mantle, "tragic hero." Further, when we include *Oedipus at Colonus* in the discussion, a text to which I will turn in Chapter 3, it seems that in spite of the tragic fate that Oedipus' unrestricted desire to know ultimately reveals, that same desire to know also sets the

conditions for new growth and healing in Athens. As I will point out later, this seems to be an insight that both Nietzsche and Freud missed.

Dramatic Bias in Oedipus

Like Quassim Cassam's recent work on "Bad Thinkers," mentioned above, Lonergan's discussion of bias is, at root, about flaws in our intellectual characters. Bias is conquered, in part, by what Lonergan calls "self-appropriation," the taking ownership of one's own consciousness, which would recognizing as choice-worthy Cassam's list of "open-mindedness, curiosity and rigour."²¹⁶ In fact, all four of Lonergan's biases are connected to the opposite of these: close-mindedness, an uncurious stance toward the world (lack of inquiry) and an intellectual laziness. Lonergan begins his discussion of bias within the consciousness of the subject (dramatic) and then moves outward in what I imagine to be concentric rings, treating that subject's relation to others (individual) and then the intra-communal tensions (group) within a larger field until he reaches the most pernicious bias (general) which diagnoses and treats of a particularly pervasive (and erroneous) ontological assumption.

The first and most intimate bias that Lonergan mentions is dramatic bias and is not surprisingly located within the dramatic pattern of experience (see above).

²¹⁶ As I will point out in Chapter 3, in my discussion of Theseus as symbolic of cooperative grace, the conquering of bias, for Lonergan, will also require the aid of outside source, the unconditional love of God. In other words, the ability to conquer bias comes from beyond the native resources of the biased person. That takes a self-transcendence that is beyond his native powers and beyond a merely strong-willed fidelity to the self-correcting cycle of learning. As I point out in Chapter 3, this viewpoint of Lonergan's may mark an area in which his thought does not map upon Greek tragedy.

Dramatic bias is, at root, a condition of avoidance to the point of neglect. The subject neglects the data of consciousness (psychic contents) which, if queried, might yield insights about oneself and, therefore, would set the conditions for one's growth and, ultimately, one's self-transcendence. The central feature of the dramatic bias is what Lonergan calls "scotosis" which, technically speaking is merely the condition of suffering from a scotoma, a cognitive blind spot. Lonergan says, "Let us name such an aberration of understanding a scotosis, and let us call the resultant blind spot a scotoma."²¹⁷ Lonergan relies on this ocular metaphor to further underscore the uncritical correlation between knowledge and ocular vision. Like a person suffering from a traditional ocular blind spot, the individual with dramatic bias has a scotoma in his understanding of the psychic contents of his consciousness. The blind spot is a function of introversion, of which only human beings are capable, which overtakes the biological extroversion of his animal evolutionary past. Animals, in other words, don't need to worry about dramatic bias. Lonergan writes,

This introversion, which overcomes the extroversion native to the biological pattern of experience, generates a differentiation of the persona that appears before others and the more intimate ego that in the daydream is at once the main actor and the sole spectator...The incomprehension, isolation, and duality rob the development of one's common sense of some part, greater or less, of the corrections and the assurance that result from learning accurately the tested insights of others and from submitting one's own insights to the criticism based on others' experience and development.²¹⁸

²¹⁷ Lonergan, *Insight*, 215.

²¹⁸ Ibid.

The passage above aptly describes Oedipus' heated (and dramatic) exchanges with both Tiresias and Creon; exchanges in which Oedipus' common sense is robbed and where he is unable to "submit one's own insights to the criticism based on others' experience and development." Instead, the self-correcting cycle adopts a perverse trajectory, as false insights begin to expand the scotoma and Oedipus grows even more volatile, his theories more preposterous. And while it might be argued that, at this point, Oedipus lacks "sufficient evidence" to judge himself as the killer, or that Tiresias is a reliable prophet, it does betoken an unwillingness to remain in stage in which he continues to marshal the evidence and reserve judgment (aporia).

Nevertheless, we infer that if left unchecked, Oedipus would lead himself into a world of darkness. Lonergan writes, "Insights that expand the scotosis can appear to lack plausibility; they will be subjected to scrutiny; and as the subject shifts to and from his sounder viewpoint, they will oscillate wildly between an appearance of nonsense and an appearance of truth."²¹⁹

We should appreciate the way Sophocles presents Oedipus' quarrels with Tiresias and Creon as constituting a total reversal of Oedipus' pose in the opening scenes of the play, in which the dynamism of Oedipus' questioning transformed the potentially intelligible sense data – the supplicants, the murder investigation, etc. – into the actually intelligible. In contrast, in these exchanges, Oedipus allows his fears and anxieties to run interference, possibly, if one is partial to a Freudian gloss, because he knows the truth already, because it resides latent in his subconscious. As

²¹⁹ Ibid.

Father Joseph Flanagan once wrote, describing dramatic bias, "Just as your questioning reaches from the intelligible level down into the sensible level and prepares the data of your internal or external consciousness for insights, so your anxieties and fears can direct questioning away from certain conscious data. You do not wish to understand certain data because you are fearful of making discoveries."²²⁰ Flanagan's gloss on dramatic bias here discloses an important disagreement between Lonergan and Freud. The truth of X cannot "already be known" (in the subconscious, for example) because the images that would be the condition of the possibility of judging X as true have been precluded from consciousness. You cannot literally be afraid of what you do not know.

For example, after a heated exchange with Creon, in which Creon reiterates Tiresias' claims that Oedipus is Laius' murderer, Oedipus brushes them aside in fear. This behavior is consistent with dramatic bias, as Flanagan notes, "Besides the desire to know manifesting itself in attentive questioning, there are the fears that may block or divert this questioning."²²¹ When Creon asks, at 622, "What do you want? To throw me out of Thebes?," Oedipus replies, "No, not exile. I demand your death." The suggestion of death here is harsh enough but, when coupled with the total lack of evidence, it becomes absurd. Creon asks, incredulously, "Why won't you believe what I tell you?" (625). Oedipus replies by calling Creon "contemptible" (626). Then, in a

²²⁰ Joseph Flanagan. *Quest for Self-Knowledge*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997. 81. Flanagan adds that this juncture is where "Freud's 'censor'" would appear. "Freud's 'censor' can be described as how you avoid getting insights about yourself that would reveal you to yourself in ways you fear, disapprove or even detest."

²²¹ Flanagan, *Quest for Self-Knowledge*, 80.

fit of histrionics, Oedipus laments, “Oh, my city, my city...”(629) (ὦ πόλις πόλις) to which Creon replies, poignantly, “I belong in this city, it’s not only yours!” (κάμοι πόλεως μέτεστιν, οὐχί σοι μόνω, 630.) Yet Oedipus is unmoved by what should be a powerful and thought-provoking retort. Lonergan might as well be describing Oedipus’ behavior when he writes: “Again, consideration of the contrary insight may not reach the level of reflective and critical consciousness; it may occur only to be brushed aside in an emotional reaction of distaste, pride, dread, horror, revulsion.”²²²

How, then, does Oedipus conquer the enlargement of his scotoma and ultimately shrink it? How does he move from absurd conspiracy theories to a sober discernment of the data of his consciousness and, ultimately, to the truth of self-knowledge? The short answer is that Sophocles depicts the unrestricted desire to know as wounded but not mortally wounded; the self-correcting process has been waylaid but not irrevocably lost. In fact, Oedipus returns to the path of self-discovery, ironically, when his wife takes up the questions for him. Sophocles discloses here an important point about inter-subjectivity: sometimes it is the questions of others that bring us back into the fold, as others take up the mantle of inquiry that we have temporarily shrugged off out of bias.

Jocasta returns Oedipus to the correct path by asking a basic, authentic question for intelligence. Arriving on the scene, attempting to mollify Oedipus’ concerns, she asks, “Why are you so angry?” (699). As McCoy has pointed out, because this question comes from his wife, its meaning is different than it would be

²²² Lonergan, *Insight*, 215.

had it been asked by, say, a citizen. Jocasta's question, as a wife, probes at something deeper in Oedipus, an invitation for deeper self-knowledge and his affective responses.²²³

This question has the immediate double effect of both underscoring Oedipus' disproportional emotional reaction while at the same time attempting to make it intelligible by inquiring into the reasons for it. When Oedipus tells Jocasta that he suspects Creon and that Creon has audaciously fingered Oedipus as Laius' murderer, Jocasta asks two more questions for judgment: "Was he a witness? Or is he acting on hearsay?" When Oedipus explains that it was a "malevolent soothsayer" (705) who revealed this information, Jocasta attempts to quell Oedipus' fears which, in typical Sophoclean irony, has the effect of enflaming them. She goes on to explain, to the pity and delight of the audience, that her former husband Laius received an oracle: "I won't say/"From Apollo"; it came from priests – that "Laius would die at the hands of a son/That would be born to him and me."/But Laius was killed by strangers/At a place where three roads meet. That's the story" (711-716).

This critical moment, in which Oedipus' mind begins to "reel," christens his turn inward, as introversion overcomes the extroversion native to the biological pattern. The image of the three roads is apparently powerful enough to demand sustained scrutiny and, as such, ushers in a newly returned intelligent consciousness. It is the mention of the "place where three roads meet," a place later revealed to be "Phocis" (where the road divides, "one from Delphi, one from Daulis") that triggers a memory in Oedipus' consciousness. The memory, heretofore latent, now becomes

²²³ In conversation.

questionable psychic content, potentially (newly) intelligible. The questioning of the image then sets the conditions for the emergence of more previous acts of sense experiencing from Oedipus' past (as memories) cascading to the surface. As Byrne notes, memories are "acts that recapitulate the contents of previous acts of sense experiencing."²²⁴ Oedipus suddenly becomes awash in memories, as he recruits into consciousness previous acts of sense experiencing in an effort to make what was repressed intelligible. Unfortunately for Oedipus, these memories, which are now coupled with new data, take on a negative valence. He says, "What you're telling me shakes my soul,/Sends my mind reeling one way then another" (726-727).

In contrast to the opening scenes of the play, the data to be questioned now is not the sensible data of the external world but the data of consciousness (psychic contents). When viewed through the prism of pattern and bias, it is less of a surprise that Oedipus should now recollect a very particular moment from his youth – the ramblings of a drunken dinner guest – which has clearly haunted him but which he has pushed out of consciousness until now. While some commentators have pointed out that it is odd that Oedipus has not discussed any of these events with his wife prior to this moment, we may now attribute the lack of discussion to dramatic bias, not unlike the Freudian censor. This viewpoint is consistent with a Freudian reading in which Oedipus' subconscious has selected the memory of the drunken dinner guest as the appropriate place to begin the narration of an identity he already understands. This viewpoint is slightly more reasonable than the more controversial thesis of P.H. Vellacot's article "The Guilt of Oedipus," which suggests that Oedipus "must have

²²⁴ P. H. Byrne, *Ethics of Discernment*, 43.

guessed the true story of his birth long before the point at which the play opens – and guiltily done nothing about it.”²²⁵

Of note is that the episode with the drunken dinner guest was data worthy of questioning even back then. Oedipus was deeply shaken by the moment as the moment happened and even questioned it with zeal; but we soon learn that the inquiry was abandoned. Now, in the present moment, the recollection of that data becomes the relevant data. This scene may be the ultimate testament to the unrestricted desire to know. It can only be repressed for so long. Sophocles writes,

A drunken dinner guest filled with wine
 Blurted out that I was not my father's son.
 It was all I could do that day to control my rage.
 But on the next day, I went to my mother and father
 Seeking some explanation, and they were furious
 That anyone would speak such spurious slander.
 I was consoled, but a rumor creeps in stealth,
 And soon it started to grate on my mind.
 I left in secret; my mother and father never knew
 I went to Delphi. But there, Apollo shunned me,
 Denied my questions and sent me away,
 But not before he revealed what was to come.
 Such tormenting horrors! He said I would
 Mate with my mother and reveal a race
 Too vile to stand in the sight of man.
 He said I would kill my father.
 I heard Apollo's word, and I ran,
 Tried to fell a universe from Corinth,
 To reach some place that would never see
 The fulfillment of that revolting prophecy. (Lines 779-798)

This speech is pivotal. It invites a host of inferences, especially if we suspend a deterministic reading of the play and imbue in Oedipus a freedom that Lonergan will argue we all have – a freedom to think, reflect, marshal the evidence, make

²²⁵ Dodds, “On Misunderstanding the ‘Oedipus Rex’,” 41.

judgments and, ultimately, act on those insights and judgments. First, what are we to make of this mysterious dinner guest who knows “the truth” of things? Are we to infer from this scene that some, maybe even more than a few Corinthians, knew the truth of Oedipus’ adoption but, soberly, were afraid to mention it for fear of the King and Queen’s reprisal? This would imply a culture (Corinth) fearful of the truth coming to light and that Thebes will now make the same error. In this case, Sophocles may be offering comment that “truth will out” only insofar as authentic cities accommodate authentic questioners to out it. Is Sophocles presenting Corinth as a culture of suppression at the hands of Timocratic rulers, a place where censorship reigns? Polybus and Merope, for example, may think it more politically expedient to keep the truth hidden. If, for example, their son is not their biological son, then rules of succession may be questionable, etc. But what of their personal, familial reaction to their son’s inquiry? Is it appropriate? Is it, perhaps, Sophocles’ commentary on their inauthentic characters? After all, it is one thing to keep an adoption secret from a younger child for personal reasons, but to be “furious” about “spurious slander” when the slander is actually the truth betokens a nearly pathological suppression of the truth at any cost.

Most significant about this speech is that it represents the first (but not the last) time Oedipus’ inquiry crashes into obstacles that preclude his having insights. Like the opening scenes of the play, here, Oedipus’ desire to know dominates the scene, as he tells us, “I went to my mother and father/Seeking some explanation.” Again Knox interprets this moment as yet another example of Oedipus’ “decisive action.” Knox writes, “The intelligence that will not be satisfied with half-measures or

politic ignorance is seen in his refusal to accept his supposed parents' attempt to smooth down his anger at the indiscreet revelation of the drunken guest; even then he demanded clarity, he had to know the truth, and went to Delphi to find it."²²⁶

But Knox is again too quick to give Oedipus credit, especially if the import of the lines above is that Oedipus ought to be praised as some demander of clarity. Knox fails to see that the juxtaposition of Oedipus' desire to know as a young man with Oedipus' desire to know as a mature adult reveals a major problem: what happened to Oedipus' desire in between? What became of the spirit of inquiry in the years that passed between Corinth and Thebes? Might Sophocles have structured the play as a microcosm of the structure of the development of Oedipus' life? The unrestricted desire to know is followed by a hiatus rooted in bias, followed by the triumphant return of the unrestricted desire to know.

Clearly the data, the sensible presentation of the drunken dinner guest's speech was no ordinary experience for Oedipus. We learn that it was powerful enough to override the claims made by adamant parents. His parents' claims, in other words, in spite of their force and conviction, fail to satiate his drive to know, for he says "I was consoled, but a rumor creeps in stealth,/And soon it started to grate on my mind." This claim, that the rumor "grat[ed] on my mind," is the haunting residue of unsatisfactorily answered questions. It is odd, though, that while this dissatisfaction is enough to prompt Oedipus to "flee" in the hope of satiating his desire to know, that desire apparently fades as quickly as it arrived. For at Delphi, Oedipus is rebuked by Apollo and then given the famous prophecy of incest and parricide.

²²⁶ Knox, *Oedipus at Thebes*, 41.

Oedipus reacts to this prophecy with a caprice equal to his fleeing of Corinth. Yet again, contrary to Knox's assertions, his failure to demand context or ask clarifying questions should remind us of the identical failure to do so when dealing with Tiresias. It is yet another failure in Oedipus' ability to "reckon" or "calculate" (εἶσω λογίζου).

I offer the following basic train of thought at the risk of playing Monday morning quarterback. Consider: the truth of the premise, "Polybus and Merope are my parents," requires affirmation before the action of fleeing Corinth in fear of Polybus and Merope makes any sense. For a man who begins his quest with a suspicion that his parents are not his parents, it seems odd to then let the prophecy, which assumes the premise to be verified, override this initial suspicion. Like the heated exchange with Tiresias, in which it would have behooved Oedipus to ask a few clarifying questions, when the Oracle offered its prophecy of murder and incest, Oedipus might have said to the Oracle, "Yes, but discerning whether they are actually my parents is precisely why I have consulted you. If I can affirm the fact that they are, indeed, my parents, then I will flee." The only conclusion we may draw is that Oedipus' ability to "calculate" (εἶσω λογίζου) is being overridden by the affective element of his person. Fear and anxiety are running interference, leaving us to infer that a character who had better control over the affective aspects of his personality might have taken a breath and "reckoned" that fleeing Corinth only makes sense if the judgment is affirmed.

But dramatic bias runs deep and, as Cassam reminds us, “intellectual bad habits can be too deeply entrenched to change.”²²⁷

Individual Bias in Oedipus

Henry David Thoreau once wrote, “I have yet to hear the first syllable of valuable or even earnest advice from my seniors. They have told me nothing, and probably cannot tell me anything to the purpose...If I have any experience which I think valuable, I am sure to reflect that this my Mentors said nothing about.”²²⁸

Mediate, briefly, on the absolute lunacy of Thoreau’s statement from *Walden*. The famed transcendentalist suggests that his elders have never once – once! – given him an earnest piece of advice. We are aware of the import of Thoreau’s “transcendental” philosophy that we should strive to be our own master and march to the beat of our own drum, etc., but does it follow from this premise that elders have nothing to teach? In other words, even the transcendentalist apologist, who simply describes the philosophy as a quest for individual authenticity, must acknowledge that a truly authentic person would surely be open to the advice of others. Instead, Thoreau’s seniors have not a syllable to teach him. This position seems radically biased not to mention ironic given the premium Transcendentalists place on self-knowledge.

²²⁷ Cassam, *Bad Thinkers*, 8. <<https://aeon.co/essays/the-intellectual-character-of-conspiracy-theorists>>

²²⁸ Henry David Thoreau. *Walden*. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1910), p. 10.

We know now through recent scholarship that Thoreau was a bit of an “odd duck” and the pages of *Walden* are loaded with narcissistic and egocentric ramblings. In fact, on Lonergan’s view, if we really were to find a person who seriously holds the position about elders Thoreau articulates, that person would be a textbook example of individual bias, the bias of egotism. Egotism always prescind from the premise that social order and intersubjective harmony is good. As Lonergan says, “...it remains that there is a sense in which egoism is always wrong and altruism its proper corrective.”²²⁹ The egoist, in other words, fails to ask the further pertinent questions of whether his self-proposed solution will benefit the group. “With remarkable acumen one solves one’s own problems. With startling modesty one does not venture to raise the relevant questions, Can one’s solution be generalized? Is it compatible with the social order that exists?”²³⁰

Recall, for example, Frank Capra’s Christmas classic, *It’s a Wonderful Life*. There is a powerful scene that juxtaposes the pure egotist and the one who embodies an “enlightened self-interest.” George Bailey, played by Jimmy Stewart, is en route to his honeymoon, finally given the opportunity to leave Bedford Falls, when he witnesses through the raindrops pummeling the cab window a classic “run” on the bank. He immediately delays his own interests and stops into the Bailey Building and Loan. He discovers that the ripple effect of the panic has permeated the Building and Loan as well. He finds countless townsfolk frantic in his small office, demanding their money. Bailey attempts to enlighten them as best he can, informing them of what the

²²⁹ Lonergan, *Insight*, 245.

²³⁰ Ibid.

Building and Loan *really* does, claiming “you’re thinking of this place all wrong.” Essentially, he tries to explain that their money is not physically present in the building, but invested in the hands of their brethren throughout the Bedford Falls community. When the townsfolk fail to grasp this concept – since it adverts to an explanatory knowledge they do not possess – Bailey resorts to his honeymoon savings – the brainchild of his new bride, Mary – to tide them over until the crisis has passed.

The next scene, however, is far more important. It is Capra’s most brilliant juxtaposition. We become acquainted with a hot-tempered, genuine egotist named Tom who is concerned only with his biological pattern and who demands the full amount – all \$242 dollars of it – that he has invested in the Bailey Building and Loan. Despite George Bailey’s entreaties, this pure egotist is obstinate, replying, “I’ve got \$242 dollars in here and \$242 dollars isn’t going to break anybody.” Tom cannot see beyond his own biological pattern; in this case, the better securing of his bread. He fails to pivot toward insights into the explanatory picture that would reveal that there is a way to pursue his own self-interest while recognizing that without the Bedford Falls community, he will have no self-interest to pursue. Thus, Lonergan concludes, “and while the egotist refuses to put the still further questions that would lead to a profound modification of his solution, still that refusal does not make intelligence an instrument but merely brushes it aside. Egoism, then, is an incomplete development of intelligence.”²³¹

²³¹ Ibid.

It is no surprise that in addition to his dramatic pattern and the dramatic bias which has precluded his inquiry into the psychic contents of his past, Oedipus also engages in rhetoric that elevates himself above the community. Sophocles deftly heightens the irony of this rhetoric when we discover that 1.) Oedipus is a native born Theban (and therefore, “one of them”) and 2.) he is wrong about his claims to greatness, especially in relation to intelligence, as he, unlike so many others, cannot see/understand the truth as it is unfolding (or collapsing) around him.

Examples of Oedipus’ individual bias are abundant and, like Thoreau, often find Oedipus resistant to the perspective of the aged and, in the case of Tiresias, the infirm, whom Oedipus mocks for lacking sight: [Line].

This resistance then extends to his uncle, Creon, also an elder. At line 536, Oedipus asks Creon, “What cowardice did you see in me?” Oedipus goes on to tout his riddle-solving prowess. Knox claims that Oedipus’ “insistence on himself is not mere vanity, it is justified by his whole experience, which presents itself to him as an unbroken record of success due entirely to himself; and this is no subjective impression, it is the conclusion of others...the attitude of the priest and the chorus shows that Oedipus confidence in himself is no greater than the confidence which his fellow citizens feel in him.”²³² Knox takes Oedipus as courageous in both the episode of the Sphinx and the investigation into Laius’ murder. He reads Oedipus as a man always willing to plunge headlong into the breach of ignorance. He writes, “the courage with which Oedipus assaults the unknown throughout the play is

²³² Knox, *Oedipus at Thebes*, 21.

characteristic of the man who risked his life when he answered the riddle of the Sphinx.”²³³

While I concur with Knox’s claim that Oedipus’ confidence in himself – “I will see it done” – is matched by the confidence Thebans show in him – “Save us...” – it does not follow that this mutual agreement that confidence cannot also be overweening. In fact, that may be the point: both Oedipus and Thebes are overconfident in man who, far from achieving an “unbroken record of success,” merely got it right...one time, as we showed earlier. Oedipus, on this view, is a one-hit wonder who is back in the recording studio and feeling out of his depth. More importantly, the confidence he has in himself is ultimately shown to be misguided and becomes the *prima facie* evidence for the claim that he suffers from an individual bias.

This view is consistent with McCoy’s point that Oedipus fails to consider that,

Oedipus possesses an overly confident sense of his own righteousness, a judgment of the would-be criminal as his polar opposite, a tendency to suspect or to blame others, rather than to look inwardly. He assumes an absolute division between those who are just and unjust, those who care for the city and who bring it harm, those who possess virtue and who lack it...Oedipus is unable to imagine the possibility of his own moral vulnerability.²³⁴

The best evidence of Oedipus’ overly confident sense of his own righteousness comes in his attempt to claim (reclaim) Thebes as *his* city, as if the other inhabitants are somehow less tied to it than he. Recall Oedipus’ laments: “Oh, my city, my city...” (629) (ὦ πόλις πόλις). Recall Creon’s reply: “I belong in this city, it’s not only yours!” (630)

²³³ Ibid., 15.

²³⁴ McCoy, *Wounded Heroes*, 42.

(κάμοι πόλεως μέτεστιν, οὐχί σοι μόνω). Understanding Oedipus as suffering from the individual bias of the egotist would transform his description of his fellow Thebans as “children” as less a term of endearment and more a term of disparagement, as in the paternalistic suggestion that he is the father of the city and they are *merely* children, living under his fatherly protection.

Group Bias in Oedipus

Because Lonergan locates “group bias” within the dialectic of community, my discussion of it will naturally fit better in Chapter 3, where I show the way Thebes as a community is suffering from what Lonergan calls the “long cycle of decline.” On my view, Sophocles presents Thebes (and Corinth) as immature communities (to be compared with Athens) because their development consists of an admixture of both the rational and irrational.

Group bias, for Lonergan, emerges when “society becomes stratified; its flower is far in advance of average attainment; its roots appear to be the survival of the rude achievement of some forgotten age. Classes become distinguished, not merely by social function, but also by social success; and the new differentiation finds expression not only in conceptual labels but also in deep feelings of frustration, resentment, bitterness and hatred.”

Particularly important to this discussion will be the way members of both the Theban and Corinthian communities treat the vulnerable.²³⁵ Oedipus at *Colonus*, in fact, becomes the antidote to the Theban cycle of decline, a corrective. This corrective

²³⁵ This is a point that has been eloquently made by McCoy.

is symbolized by Theseus who, far more than Oedipus, has self-appropriated. As McCoy notes, "Theseus can better understand limit in Oedipus than others because Theseus has a wisdom in which his own experience has been transformed into a considered sympathy for others. He does not express anger about his past, but rather utilizes those difficult past experiences in order to cultivate this new politically friendly relationship with Oedipus."²³⁶

General Bias and Tiresias the Outlier

In his seminal essay, "On Misunderstanding the *Oedipus Rex*," E.R. Dodds notes, among other points that I will address shortly, that for Sophocles, "as for Heraclitus, there is an objective world-order which man must respect, but which he cannot hope fully to understand."²³⁷

I prefer a softer, more refined version of Dodds' sentiment here: there is an objective world-order which man must respect and the totality of which only God understands. Nevertheless, if man aspires to understand it, incompletely, he will need to accept what Lonergan once called the "starting strangeness" that reality is grasped not by "taking a look." Instead, it is grasped courtesy of the dynamic cognitional structure I have described in the previous pages.²³⁸ In other words, I read Sophocles as unequivocal in symbolically concretizing a powerful hostility toward animal sense knowledge – as opposed to a rival view of knowledge as grasping intelligibility – and

²³⁶ McCoy, *Wounded Heroes*, 57.

²³⁷ Dodds, "On Misunderstanding the 'Oedipus Rex'," 47.

²³⁸ Lonergan, *Insight*, 22.

the way in which our embodied, “evolutionarily inherited biological sense of reality” privileges the senses, particularly vision.²³⁹ To that end, Sophocles populates the play with repeated assaults on the agents of sense, most obviously, the eyes: “...he tore out the long pins/Of beaten gold that adorned her clothes,/Lifted them up, and plunged them into his eyes.” Yet Sophocles also recruits sound as another specious source: “Could I ever meet the eyes of my people?/Never! If only I could stem the stream of sound,/Then I’d shut away my broken body/Hearing silence, seeing nothing:/Sweet oblivion, where the mind/Exists beyond the bounds of grief” (1385-1390).

This assault on the inadequacy of the senses as constituting knowledge marches to its climax, Oedipus’ eye-gouging, which is the ultimate indictment. As Dodds notes, by this point in the action, “if he [Oedipus] could choke the channels of his other senses he would do so.”²⁴⁰ It is no coincidence that as Oedipus comes closer and closer to “the truth,” affirmed not by looking but by his virtually unconditioned judgment, Sophocles depicts a sort of inverse proportion between objectivity and reliance upon the senses: the more “objective” Oedipus becomes in his character, the less dependent he is on his animal senses until, when finally in complete possession of the “objective truth,” Oedipus is totally blind.²⁴¹

²³⁹ P. H. Byrne, *Ethics of Discernment*, 67.

²⁴⁰ Dodds, “On Misunderstanding the ‘Oedipus Rex,’” 43.

²⁴¹ McCoy points out that Oedipus’ model for knowledge must shift from sight to touch at the end of the play and then, later, in *Oedipus Colonus*. “While the Oedipus Rex is dominated by images of knowledge as sight, in *Oedipus at Colonus*, we see a man whose main entry into the world of sensation comes through hearing and through his daughter Antigone’s touch, as she leads him from place to place in his

Objectivity, therefore, has a dual aspect in *Oedipus Tyrannus*: it is a thing to be achieved as well as an attribute of one's character. If it is true that we become what we most intend, as Aquinas suggests, the person who intends objectivity, in fidelity to the self-correcting cycle, will become a more and more "objective" person. As Byrne notes, "Objectivity, therefore, like discernment, is both the quality of a person as well as something achieved by such persons."²⁴²

In a curious twist, Sophocles' assault on sense-knowledge dovetails with the fourth (and most complicated) bias Lonergan mentions in *Insight*: general bias. Lonergan writes, "Besides the bias of the dramatic subject, of the individual egoist, of the member of a given class or nation, there is a further bias to which all men are prone. For men are rational animals, but a full development of their animality is both more common and more rapid than a full development of their intelligence and reasonableness."²⁴³

For Lonergan, general bias is the most pernicious of the four biases because it essentially hides in plain sight, deeply woven into the fabric of the extroverted orientation of our animal selves. Byrne points out that general bias might therefore

exile" (McCoy, *Wounded Heroes*, 49) . McCoy also cites Long, who claims "the model of touch, rather than sight, changes the way in which Oedipus relates to the objects of his knowledge" (Christopher Long, "A Father's Touch, a Daughter's Voice: Antigone, Oedipus and Ismene at Colonus," presented at the 2010 Sophocles Colloquium, University of Utah, November 2009). While it is true that touch and hearing must, out of necessity, fill the void left by the absence of sight, I find this less a commentary on the drawbacks of sight and strengths of hearing and touching as it is yet another example of Sophocles attempting to enlarge our conception of rationality as transcending *all* sense modalities.

²⁴² P. H. Byrne, *Ethics of Discernment*, 67.

²⁴³ Lonergan, *Insight*, 250.

be called “ontological bias” because it reaches deep into our metaphysical assumptions about “the real,” assumptions that are the byproduct of our animal heritage. General bias, adds Byrne, “derives from the disparity between our animality and our search for answers to questions for intelligence and reflection.”²⁴⁴ Given our animality, we have a hardwired tendency to treat the real as the “already out there now,” to use Lonergan’s phrase. This tendency to treat the real as identical with the spatially extended leads naturally to courses of action which privilege common sense knowing as omni-competent and tend to dismiss any form of knowledge that it is not consistent with an “empirical verification criterion of meaning.” As Byrne notes, “to someone whose sense of reality is closely tied to the methodical procedures of the hard empirical sciences, the insights and virtually unconditional affirmations of humanists and philosophers will seem no more than soft opinions about vagaries – certainly not tough knowledge about the really real.”²⁴⁵

For example, in the background of the play is the art of prophecy (and soothsaying in general). This art purports to have knowledge “beyond” the pragmatic word of sense experience. Prophets and soothsayers provide a sort of understanding of the world and universe that, at the time it is given, cannot be empirically verified and therefore easy to (hubristically) dismiss. Consider how dismissive (and cruel) Oedipus becomes with Tiresias:

Tell me, when have your prophecies been proved?
 When the Sphinx sounded her deadly song
 Did you speak to save our people then?
 The riddle could not be solved by just any man.

²⁴⁴ P. H. Byrne, *Ethics of Discernment*, 66.

²⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 69.

It needed the skills of a seer, but where were you?
 You saw no omens, you made no revelations,
 There was no divine inspiration, you knew nothing.
 Then I came, ignorant Oedipus. I silenced her
 By using my mind, not signs from the sky! (390-398)

Worse, Oedipus then launches into a pointed indictment of the old man's infirmities, which, not coincidentally, become attacks on Tiresias' sense modalities, particularly blindness, when the obvious irony is that relying too heavily upon his senses is precisely Oedipus' problem. Oedipus shouts at Tiresias, "Your ears and your mind are as blind as your eyes...Never-ending night shrouds you in darkness, you're harmless to those of us who see the light" (16).

On the bitter exchange between Oedipus and Tiresias, Segal notes that "this passage also shows how oracle and riddle complement one another as the two sides of Oedipus' tragic situation. The riddle points to his success and intelligence in saving Thebes and winning his high position. The oracle reveals his helplessness and ignorance before the larger powers that surround his life."²⁴⁶ Reading this exchange through the prism of Lonergan allows us to treat Tiresias' gifts figuratively. He is the agent or representative of a kind of understanding that transcends empirically verifiable sense data. Oedipus, because he is trapped at this point in general bias and of equating knowing with taking a look, fails to give this other form of knowing – which aspires to grasp the intelligibility of the whole universe, not simply a regional outpost – a shot.

Ultimately, Oedipus learns his painful lesson which, as mentioned earlier, is as much about coming to understand what knowing actually is as it is about coming to

²⁴⁶ Segal, *Tragic Heroism*, 81.

understand his own identity. In his famous insight (detailed in Chapter 1), Sophocles has Oedipus, in spite of his senses, affirming something about reality that is separated in space and time and not a byproduct of his sense experience. He affirms its truth in spite of his eyes, in spite of taking a look. Instead, he affirms the truth of his identity because it has finally become intelligible, after all these years, as a function of his questions. Tiresias is blind, indeed. But he still understands. He knows, perhaps better than anyone, that human knowing is more than "taking a look." Tiresias, in other words, is vindicated in showing Oedipus the central error Lonergan points out: the view that, "What is obvious in knowing is, indeed, looking. Compared to looking, insight is obscure, and the grasp of the unconditioned is doubly obscure. But empiricism amounts to the assumption that what is obvious in knowing is what knowing obviously is."²⁴⁸

In her essay "'Oedipus Tyrannus' and the Problem of Knowledge," Champlin argues a similar point but does so by connecting Sophocles to the great Parmenides. She writes, "Since there is considerable evidence that his stout defendant and pupil, Zeno, resided for a time in Athens, visited the residence of Pericles, and taught several prominent Greeks there, one is just in assuming that Sophocles, who also frequented Periclean circles, was acquainted with Parmenidean monism. Indeed broad hints of Parmenidean influence appear in *Oedipus Tyrannus*."²⁴⁹

Champlin goes on to adduce a connection between the play and its Parmenidean influence, locating Oedipus as an Everyman, with the throngs of "know-

²⁴⁸ Lonergan, *Insight*, 44.

²⁴⁹ Champlin, "'Oedipus Tyrannus' and the Problem of Knowledge," 342.

nothing” mortals who live by the deceptive senses and who are thus deceived into “the way of opinion.” She cites Tiresias as “the spokesman for intuitive truth in the drama, so Parmenides is his counterpart in the poem; as Oedipus, the Everyman, lived in a state of self-deception, so for the same causes do the uncritical throngs mentioned in Parmenides’ poem.”²⁵⁰

The takeaway, in other words, is what Lonergan points out in an essay called “Cognitive Structure,” that human knowing “involves many distinct and irreducible activities: seeing, hearing, smelling, touching, tasting, inquiring, imagining, understanding, conceiving, reflecting, weighing the evidence, judging.”²⁵¹

In essence, the systematic bias pervasive throughout the play is the failure to recognize “the incommensurability of experiential content with intelligible content.”²⁵² In a nutshell, what Oedipus understands fails to match what he sees. The irony of Sophocles’ position is that while one might be tempted to read the play as a vindication of an ancient art or religious custom, it is really, instead, an indictment of those who would reduce knowing to one sense modality, a pose which merely reaffirms the basic axiom that there is “more than meets the eye.” This is far from a controversial or “anti-rational” stance. “

By far, Champlin’s most intriguing point is the connection she draws between Parmenides use of the word for “method” or “right road.” Champlin notes the index

²⁵⁰ Ibid., 345.

²⁵¹ Bernard Lonergan. “Cognitive Structure” (*Collection*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), p. 207.

²⁵² P. H. Byrne, *Ethics of Discernment*, 53.

of Diels' *Fragmente* to show that Parmenides used the word ὁδός seven times and, as such, should be regarded as the "originator of the use of the word ὁδός to mean a 'method' of inquiry" (344). She asks, "Is it too bold to make a conjecture that Sophocles appropriated this use of the word ὁδός and from precisely this source, inasmuch as the play is one in which Oedipus pursues truth by the 'method' of persistent investigation?"

In the end, Oedipus' hostility toward Tiresias becomes symbolic of all four biases. First, as dramatic bias, Oedipus' fears interfere with his ability to consider the prophet's words as true or, at the very least, as possibly true. Second, as individual bias, Oedipus elevates himself over and above Tiresias, and even the rest of Thebes, even gloating that the prophet was little help during the Sphinx's reign of terror. Third, as group bias, Oedipus (and Jocasta) identify Tiresias as an "other." He is quickly lumped into a "group" above which Oedipus' group is superior. But it is the fourth bias, general bias, which becomes most important in assessing Sophocles' commentary on the ontological error. Oedipus' *ad hominem* mockery of the blind man becomes symbolic of a general bias against people who do know in a different way. If we take Tiresias as symbolic of any kind of understanding that is not merely "taking a look" (a fact made obvious by the irony of his blindness) we see that the play is loaded with indictments of soothsaying. And while I am not trying to suggest that soothsaying is legitimate business, the attack on soothsaying is really an attack on a kind of knowledge that is not a function of "sight." In fact, as Knox points out, this time-period in Greece was one of deep emerging skepticism about the art.

More importantly, the pattern in which Oedipus now finds himself is an inter-subjective, inter-personal one involving a cast of other characters such as Creon, Tiresias, Jocasta and various messengers with whom Oedipus must engage. Oedipus proceeds with a confidence that is fueled by one past success – his solving the riddle of the Sphinx. But, we must ask, should Oedipus be this confident? Is the present puzzle similar to the one he famously solved? Clearly, Oedipus and the suppliants think it is. But their assumptions are rather strange. The real irony of the play becomes a systemic failure, both on Oedipus' part and the Thebans, to recognize that the present dilemma is not the same as the last one.

Likewise, Oedipus is coming to understand himself as a part of a whole, a related network of personal and civic relationships beyond his local sphere, just as the family tree diagram explains. So, while the Greeks may have relied on prophecy as an agency (albeit flawed) of understanding the "Divine Order," this attempt is no less true than today's efforts in physics to see how we fit. The Greeks, in this sense, were correct and the text is no more archaic than our attempts now. If we want to read Oedipus as somehow a "vindication" of the ancient (archaic) worldview, it is only a vindication insofar as the ancient worldview is not in the slightest archaic. We still strive to understand our place, just as Oedipus does on the microcosmic level. As Lonergan notes, explanatory understanding, "Reveals to man a universe of being in which he is but an item in a universal order, in which his desires and fears, his delight and anguish, are but infinitesimal components in the history of mankind."²⁵³

²⁵³ Lonergan, *Insight*, 498.

Concluding Thoughts

At this point I must anticipate what might be perceived as a danger in my argument. One might ask, why are you making all these points about Oedipus' failure to understand or his failure to understand what it means to understand when the horrible fate that befalls him has befallen him long ago, prior to any of these failures? In other words, it's not as if we may attribute his fate to these failures, as in, "See? This is what you get when you don't understand properly." Dodds' has made this very point and in a highly effective way. He argues that even if we could discern some kind of error on Oedipus' part, "it would have no direct relevance to the question at issue. Years before the action of the play begins, Oedipus was already an incestuous parricide; if that was a punishment for his unkind treatment of Creon, then the punishment preceded the crime which is surely an odd kind of justice. 'Ah,' says the traditionalist critic, 'but Oedipus' behaviour on the stage reveals the man he always was: he was punished for his basically unsound character.'"²⁵⁴

All of Dodds' points are well-taken. We cannot, after all, indict Oedipus for some kind of moral failure in human knowing when much of the tragedy that befalls him occurs prior to that failure. Further, it would be hard to argue that the pollution implies vice, at least in the Aristotelian sense of choice and knowledge of particulars. My analysis would be incomplete then if it did not purport to show that the failures of Oedipus' understanding are symptomatic of a systemic failure that predates him and which is expressed by the behavior of his parents, his adoptive parents, Jocasta and his Theban community – the attempt to restrict the unrestricted drive to know.

²⁵⁴ Dodds, "On Misunderstanding the 'Oedipus Rex'," 39.

If, however, we can show that this failure is what Lonergan calls the social surd – the admixture of rational and irrational – and that *Oedipus at Colonus* ultimately demonstrates the love and healing and, ultimately, redemption that ultimately comes from adopting a more authentic rationality, complete with an affective element – then our analysis will be fair. After all, as Dodds points out, moral flaws are often intellectual flaws at root and the average Greek did not make a distinction between the two. This is a point to which we now turn, as we apply the foregoing analysis to the cultural and communal level.

Chapter Three: There is no “I” in *Colonus*

Introduction

The past two chapters were devoted to an analysis of the dynamic operations of a single consciousness: that of Oedipus. Against this background we can now enlarge that discussion to treat of the milieu in which Oedipus’ consciousness operates and the way in which other conscious subjects interact with him within that milieu. After all, Sophocles’ portrayal of particular communities and places is as vivid and complex as his portrayal of particular individuals.

The “enlargement” of our analysis is consistent with what Lonergan calls “generalized empirical method.” Recall that prior to this chapter we have been discussing a single cognitive event, insight, and the various interferences with that event, biases. Recall also that the method by which Lonergan treats insight and bias is not the empirical method of natural science but a generalized method which “stands to the data of consciousness as empirical method stands to the data of sense.”²⁵⁵ We would be remiss, therefore, if we did not extend that method to the outer worlds of the play. This approach entails a discussion of the larger communities in which Oedipus acts, namely Thebes and *Colonus* (and to a lesser extent, Corinth) in an effort to analyze not only, as Lonergan says, “the data within a single consciousness but also with the relations between different conscious subjects, between conscious subjects and their milieu or environment.”²⁵⁶

²⁵⁵ Lonergan, *Insight*, 268.

²⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

As I will show, this approach leads to a description of the communities of Thebes and Corinth as “cities in decline,” a function of bias, and *Colonus* as a region of redemption and healing, a function of a more compassionate intelligence, symbolized by Theseus, who stands as a far closer approximation to wisdom than any of the other patriarchal figures populating the play. Unlike Theseus, it seems that Creon, Polyneices, Etocles and even Oedipus himself (like Laius before him) continue to engage in violent, obstinate, patriarchal politics, a group bias which precludes them from hearing other (especially female) vulnerable voices. In a point which McCoy has stressed, Sophocles’ portrayal of Theseus’ commitment to intelligence and compassion in *Oedipus at Colonus* represents a “stark contrast to Creon’s relative impulsiveness.”²⁵⁷ Further, Theseus’ circumspect comportment also represents a stark contrast to Oedipus’ fiery obstinacy with Polyneices and, further still, Theseus’ courageous willingness to take responsibility of the tense situation in *Colonus* stands in stark contrast to Oedipus’ unwillingness to take any responsibility over his own calamity.

I will further argue that Theseus’ commitment to *xenia* (guest-friendship) and *aidos* (mercy) underscore Lonergan’s claim that healing and love are capable of reversing the mischief and decline that bias causes. As he says, “Where hatred sees only evil, love reveals values” and “Where hatred reinforces bias, love dissolves it” and, finally, “love can undo the mischief of decline and restore the cumulative process of progress.”²⁵⁸ One of the corollaries of my viewpoint is that while nihilistic readings

²⁵⁷ McCoy, *Wounded Heroes*, 55.

²⁵⁸ Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 55.

of *Oedipus Tyrannus* are certainly possible in a vacuum, those readings should be counterbalanced, or at least tempered, by *Oedipus at Colonus*, as the unintelligence and irresponsibility of bias (which may lead to the darkness of meaninglessness suggested in *Oedipus Tyrannus*) is reversed by Theseus' compassionate overture. Of course, this reversal turns out to be short-lived and the tragic cycle of decline continues in the *Antigone*, as Creon hoists the mantle of biased patriarchal obstinacy, failing, like Oedipus, to self-appropriate his own biases until he recognizes them in a direct insight which, also like Oedipus', comes too late.

Cycles of Decline and the Social Surd

No community is perfect. In any given community, amidst its intelligible schemes, rational programs and good people, one also finds unintelligible schemes, irrational programs and evil people. All communities, in other words, are an admixture of the rational and the irrational. Lonergan uses the phrase "social surd" to describe the extent to which a community cumulatively deviates from perfect authenticity and moves instead toward irrationality. He borrows the term from mathematics where "surd" connotes an irrational number that cannot be simplified, like $\sqrt{2}$ as opposed to $\sqrt{4}$. In *Insight*, Lonergan writes, "...the social situation is the cumulative product of individual and group decisions, and as these decisions depart from the demands of intelligence and reasonableness, so the social

situation becomes, like the complex number, a compound of the rational and irrational.”²⁵⁹

Like Plato’s city-soul analogy, Lonergan adduces in *Insight* a parallel between the biased community and the individual biased consciousnesses which constitute that community. The “surd” within the individual (his unintelligible schemes, irrational behaviors and evil actions) is a function of the biases discussed in Chapter 2. As Byrne notes, “Since this surd, rather than perfect authenticity, characterizes the lives of most people, to a lesser or greater extent, it poses the profound question about the possibility of living a truly good, authentic life.”²⁶⁰ It follows from this that the possibility of finding an authentic community is equally questionable. Instead, more often than not, we find communities composed of biased individuals, unable to achieve authentic intellectual conversion. The ability to live an authentic life, therefore, may very well be hindered by one’s communal conditions; these conditions may constitute a significant hindrance to one’s effective freedom, a phrase which I will discuss later.²⁶¹ In an essay entitled, “The Absence of God in Modern Culture,” Lonergan notes, in cultures exists “the disastrous possibility of a conflict between human living as it can be lived and human living as a cultural superstructure dictates

²⁵⁹ Lonergan, *Insight*, 651.

²⁶⁰ P. H. Byrne, *Ethics of Discernment*, 314.

²⁶¹ I am reminded of Gideon Rosen’s recent distinction between homogenous and heterogeneous communities. Consider, for example, the “Hitler Youth” of Nazi Germany. Can a teenager be morally responsible for the atrocities of the Holocaust within a community that has so successfully indoctrinated him? I will return to the question of “external forces” precluding authentic choosing in Chapter 4 which is an extended discussion of Lonergan’s views on freedom and moral impotence.

it should be lived.”²⁶² Communities with this special kind of tension – especially when the “cultural superstructure” is biased but the individual within it aspires not to be – are likely to encounter what Lonergan calls a cycle of decline which he subdivides into a “short cycle,” fueled by group bias and a “long cycle,” fueled by general bias.

After treating “common sense and its subject” in Chapter 6 of *Insight*, Lonergan moves to an analysis of “common sense as object” in Chapter 7. Lonergan has in mind here the “network of human relationships” that the practicality of common sense eventually engenders. Whereas in primitive times human beings might have been content to identify “the good” with the simple satiating of desire, civil communities must enlarge their notion of “the good” to include what Lonergan calls the “good of order.” The goodness of order and, inversely, the badness or evilness of chaos seems self-evident enough. Lonergan explains that the good of order “consists in an intelligible pattern of relationships that condition the fulfillment of each man’s desires by his contributions to the fulfillment of the desires of others, and similarly protect each other from the object of his fears in the measure he contributes to warding off the objects feared by others.”²⁶³

The pinnacle of the good of order is what Lonergan calls “Cosmopolis” which, presumably, is the closest approximation to perfect authenticity, a community in which all individuals within it have, through their unrestricted desires to know, most closely approximated the ever-moving horizon of total self-appropriation. Further, whatever Cosmopolis ultimately is – Lonergan initially treats it as an unknown X and

²⁶² Lonergan, *A Second Collection*, 103.

²⁶³ Lonergan, *Insight*, 238.

then describes some of its more obvious attributes and non-attributes – its success will ultimately come down to its ability to indemnify itself against the slings and arrows of chance.²⁶⁴ In a passage crucial to the forthcoming analysis, Lonergan says, “The challenge of history is for man progressively to restrict the realm of chance or fate or destiny and progressively to enlarge the realm of conscious grasp and deliberate choice.”²⁶⁵ As I will attempt to show in Chapter 4, adverting to the concept of “fate” in an effort to explain the trajectory of one’s life, on Lonergan’s view, amounts to a failure to exercise one’s effective freedom – in short, moral impotence.

It follows that a community composed of individuals who advert to fate, as opposed to attempting to “enlarge the realm of conscious grasp and deliberate choice,” would be about as far from a Cosmopolis as possible. In fact, there are plenty of instances throughout both *Oedipus Tyrannus* and *Oedipus at Colonus* in which what Oedipus attributes to fate might be, from a Lonergan perspective, construed as a failure, on the part of either Oedipus or his predecessors, to “enlarge the realm of conscious grasp and deliberate choice.” There are plenty of characters throughout the plays, in other words, who could have been more discerning but who attribute their lack of discernment to fate. Further, their lack of discernment often sets the conditions for limiting the sphere of choice for their progeny, limiting their effective freedom. A community, in other words, of individuals who have not enlarged this realm will find itself in decline. We need only consider, as a preview, the way in which

²⁶⁴ For a full description of the attributes of Lonergan’s “Cosmopolis” see *Insight*, pgs. 263-267.

²⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 253.

the sphere of choice open to Antigone has been woefully contracted by, first, the bias of her grandfather (Laius) and, second, the bias of her father, Oedipus and, third, the bias of her uncle, Creon. And while she fights admirably against these conditions, they constitute such a limit that her actions may seem, especially to her, “fate-bound” even when they are not.

The Shorter Cycle

The “shorter cycle” of decline, according to Lonergan, is fueled by group bias. Group bias, which I have delayed discussing until now, is essentially individual egotism raised to the level of a group, in which one group exerts its dominance over another. Of the “shorter cycle,” Lonergan writes, “The shorter cycle turns upon ideas that are neglected by dominant groups only to be championed later by depressed groups.”²⁶⁶

One of the most vivid examples of the way in which decline can be caused by both group bias is illustrated in Frédéric Bastiat’s famous ["Pétition des marchands de chandelles"](#) (“The Candle-Maker’s Petition”).²⁶⁷ In that essay Bastiat offers a tongue-in-cheek satirical example in which the candle makers in 19th century France, fearful of the economic “theory” of laissez faire capitalism, petition the state to take measures to literally block out the sun in the hopes of protecting their candle-making industry.

We come to offer you a wonderful opportunity for your — what shall we call it? Your theory? No, nothing is more deceptive than theory. Your doctrine? Your system? Your principle? But you dislike doctrines, you have a horror of systems, as for principles, you deny that there are any

²⁶⁶ Ibid., 232.

²⁶⁷ I could also add here that “general bias” is also operative in this scenario.

in political economy; therefore we shall call it your practice — your practice without theory and without principle.

We are suffering from the ruinous competition of a rival who apparently works under conditions so far superior to our own for the production of light that he is *flooding* the *domestic market* with it at an incredibly low price; for the moment he appears, our sales cease, all the consumers turn to him, and a branch of French industry whose ramifications are innumerable is all at once reduced to complete stagnation. This rival, which is none other than the sun..."²⁶⁸

While this example is clearly a Swiftian *reductio ad absurdum*, it nevertheless points to the problem Lonergan is highlighting – that groups often have a “blind spot” (scotoma) when it comes to assessing whether some changes constitute an aggregate good for society in general. Consider the more recent (and real) example of *Uber*. In many American cities, particularly the city of Boston, the transportation infrastructure has not kept pace with population growth. Transportation, in other words, has become the equivalent of a declining research program. The *Uber* app burst upon the scene and was wildly successful (particularly among young people) because it provided a needed service and, through the power of its technology, allowed riders to connect with drivers in mutually beneficial ways. No longer did young people have to wait, sometimes for hours, for taxis after the bars closed at 2 a.m. and the MBTA had shut down (inexplicably) at 1 a.m, leaving a curious hour gap.²⁶⁹

²⁶⁸ Frédéric Bastiat. “The Candle-Maker’s Petition.”
<http://bastiat.org/en/petition.html>

²⁶⁹ Not surprisingly, one of the reasons for the MBTA’s early shut down was because of the Taxi drivers’ earlier lobbying to block the MBTA from offering late night service: fewer public transportation options, more fares.

Not surprisingly, lobbyists representing taxi drivers in many American cities (including Boston) immediately fought *Uber*, petitioning state and local government to stop *Uber* in various creative (bureaucratic) ways. Instead of recognizing that *Uber*, while certainly not perfect in its own right, constituted progress, efficiency and order when compared the present state of affairs, the taxi drivers' collective could not see beyond their own narrow group interest. Rhetorical appeals were made to highlight the historical significance of taxis, the implication of which was taxis are not unlike moving historical landmarks and should be protected as such. The taxi in the American city was a development, we were told, we could not afford to lose. The taxi industry was, in other words, unable to regard the technological change as being in the "general good of society." Thus, in *Insight*, Lonergan writes,

Were all the responses made by pure intelligences, continuous progress might be inevitable. In fact, the responses are made by intelligences that are coupled with the ethos and the interests of groups, and while intelligence heads for change, group spontaneity does not regard all changes in the same cold light of the general good of society. Just as the individual egoists puts further questions up to a point, but desists before reaching conclusions incompatible with his egoism, so also the group is prone to have a blind spot for the insights that reveal its well-being to be excessive or its usefulness at an end.²⁷⁰

The most significant group bias in the Oedipus cycle is so enshrined in the cultural milieu that it nearly hides in plain sight. It is the group bias of patriarchy to the disparagement of women. As Professor Christopher Constan reminds students before surveying Greek tragedy, we must always recall that the Greeks were 1.) patriarchal 2.) slave-holding and 3.) xenophobic.²⁷¹ The history of Greek philosophy,

²⁷⁰ Lonergan, *Insight*, 248.

for example, is populated only with men who are presented to eager undergraduates as bearers of the “cultural flower of the age.” “But development,” as Lonergan writes, “guided by group egoism, is bound to be one-sided. It divides the body social not merely into those that have and those that have not but also makes the former the representatives of the cultural flower of the age.”²⁷² Greek tragedy, in contrast to Greek philosophy, offers us a glimpse of patriarchal characters who may present themselves as “representatives of the cultural flower of the age” but who are, in actuality, wilting under the weight of their own chauvinism, symbolized by their uncontrolled rage and/or obstinacy. Instead of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, we have Laius, Oedipus and Creon, just to name a few.

There are, however, glimpses in the Oedipus cycle in which that one-sided patriarchal violence gives way to what Christopher Long has called a “politics of the in between,” which is typically ushered in by compassion and love, often at the hands (and voice) of a woman.²⁷³ In “A Father’s Touch, A Daughter’s Voice,” Long argues that Sophocles deftly recruits the act of touching to be symbolic of a “politics of the between.” He sees *Colonus* as a region, along with its leader, Theseus, as the vanguard of a new type of community, one rooted in compassion and mutual interdependence,

²⁷¹ In his general lecture “Why Tragedy?,” delivered to students in the Perspectives Program, Christopher Constan of the Boston College classics department often begins with these three points as a reminder.

²⁷² Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 54.

²⁷³ Consider, if only as a preview, the way in which Antigone and, to a lesser extent, Ismene, are treated as props or bargaining chips throughout *Oedipus at Colonus* despite Antigone’s sober counsel and rhetorical gifts.

as opposed to the violent patriarchal politics that has dominated Thebes and which has, ostensibly, led to its present decline. He writes,

For the grove of the Eumenides marks the struggle between the politics of patriarchal domination driven by the compulsion to grasp and possess and the politics of compassion animated by the desire to be touched and recognized. In and around the sacred grove of the Eumenides, a politics rooted not in violence and retribution, but in mutual dependence, compassion and respect emerges for a moment before succumbing again to the repetition compulsion endemic to patriarchal politics.²⁷⁴

Long's analysis fits Lonergan's model despite the fact that there is, in Long's politics of compassion a self-regard as opposed to true self-transcendence. In *Oedipus at Colonus*, Antigone's love for her father becomes the *prima facie* evidence that, as Lonergan says, "love can undo the mischief of decline and restore the cumulative process of progress."²⁷⁵ Unfortunately, also in keeping with Lonergan's notion of decline, Antigone's tender touch (and her voice) are ultimately disregarded by stubborn men. And so, while there are glimpses of a new and more authentic way of proceeding, ways in which patriarchal obstinacy yields to healing, these glimpses disappear behind the elongated shadows of brash men like eclipsed sunlight behind the shadow of the moon. Long concurs, writing, "Yet, the possibilities that open at such moments of truth can dissolve as suddenly as they appear, for old habits reassert themselves, compelling the repetition of the very destructive modes of relation that led to crisis in the first place."²⁷⁶ In a point to which I will return shortly, "the

²⁷⁴ Christopher Long. "A Father's Touch, A Daughter's Voice." 2018. p. 10. Working Draft. Used with permission.

²⁷⁵ Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 55.

²⁷⁶ Long, "A Father's Touch, A Daughter's Voice," 1.

repetition of destructive modes of relation” is analogous to the peaks and troughs, like a sine curve, of Lonergan’s short cycle of decline.

The Longer Cycle

In contrast to the shorter cycle, with its peaks and troughs, the longer cycle of decline, according to Lonergan, is far more protracted and occurs on the level of history, and represents an inverse of the kind of progress that higher viewpoints make in mathematics and empirical science. Instead of higher viewpoints which lead to a flourishing community, a scenario arises in a community in which,

each successive viewpoint is less comprehensive than its predecessor. In each stage of the historical process, the facts are the social situation produced by the practical intelligence of the previous situation... Finally, at each stage of the process, the general bias of common sense involves the disregard of timely and fruitful ideas; and this disregard not only excludes their implementation but also deprives subsequent stages both of the further ideas to which they would give rise and of the correction that they and their retinue would bring to the ideas that are implemented.²⁷⁷

The upshot of the longer cycle of decline is that while common sense rises above dramatic, individual and group biases, it is still not up to the task of achieving the long term (theoretical) insights for a future. One of the central problems is the way in which communities rely on common sense as opposed to more forward thinking, theoretical ideas. One is reminded of Socrates’ warning that the voice of the visionary philosopher in the crow’s nest will be disregarded by the deckhands on his “ship of state.” He asks his interlocutors, “Don’t you believe that the true pilot will really be called a stargazer, a prater, and useless to them by those who sail on ships

²⁷⁷ Lonergan, *Insight*, 254.

run like this?" (489a).²⁷⁸ And so, when it comes to finding solutions to persistent and growing problems, "common sense accepts the challenge, but it does so partially."²⁷⁹ As such, the longer cycle leads to three consequences according to Lonergan: 1.) The social situation deteriorates quickly. 2.) Detached and disinterested intelligence seems more and more irrelevant 3.) Detached and disinterested intelligence is ultimately surrendered at the altar of short-term (commonsensical) gains. These consequences set the conditions for the "social surd," defined above.

A modern example of this phenomenon, in which the general bias of common sense disregards "fruitful and timely ideas" may be found in Pope Francis' most recent encyclical, *Laudato Si*, in which he cites commonsensical objections to the environmental crisis, from "practical relativism" to the "need to protect employment."²⁸⁰ These, on Lonergan's view, would constitute the rallying cry for short-term gains, presumably at the expense of long-term theoretical solutions. If, for example, the problem of "climate change" turns out to be as catastrophic as some say – a big "if," to be sure – then history will look back on the present period as one in which many sacrificed forward-thinking, theoretical solutions (electric cars, hydrogen, nuclear power, etc.) on the altar of immediacy and commonsense,

²⁷⁸ Plato, *The Republic*, 489a.

²⁷⁹ Lonergan, *Insight*, 253.

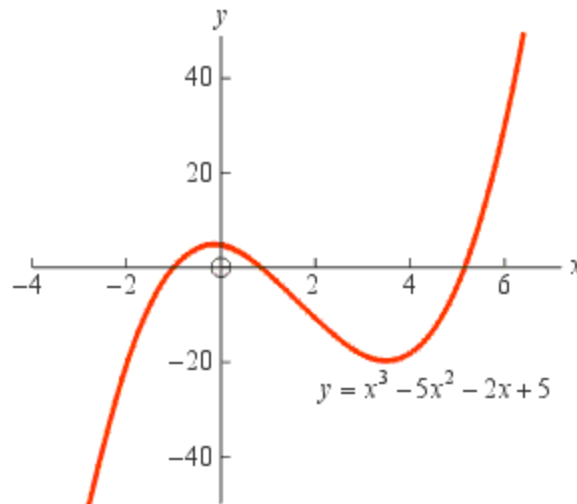
²⁸⁰ Pope Francis, "Laudato Si," http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html <Accessed 2/21/19>

provincial thinking. The past 50 years may be viewed as a curious admixture of circumspect intelligence suppressed by the social surd.

The good news, on Lonergan's view, is that this surd, which is at the root of decline, can be conquered by the triumvirate of intelligence, healing and love. The central metaphor on which Lonergan relies is the differential. He writes that the dialectic of history involves "the concrete unfolding of linked but opposed principles that are modified cumulatively by the unfolding."²⁸¹ For Lonergan, history is the product of the way in which the differentials of intelligence, bias and healing/love interact. Byrne nicely characterizes the three differentials as: 1.) Intelligence (Reasonableness and Responsibility) 2.) Bias (or sin) and 3.) Redemption (Love as healing biases). As Byrne has pointed out, we may visually represent as a heuristic structure Lonergan's schema via the three differentials in a graph of a cubic polynomial equation. For example, the graph of the equation $y = x^3 - 5x^2 - 2x + 5$, pictured below, might represent a city in which insights flourished until bias wreaked havoc for a time (the dip in the graph) before love and healing (courtesy of direct and inverse insights²⁸²) correct the trajectory:

²⁸¹ Lonergan, *Insight*, 269.

²⁸² A note on inverse insights. Lonergan adds, "Then if it [the surd] is to be understood, it must be met by a parallel compound of direct and *inverse insights*, of direct insights that grasp its intelligibility and of inverse insights that grasp its lack of intelligibility" (*Insight*, 651, my italics). An "inverse" insight in Lonergan's vocabulary is a special kind of insight that grasps the absence of intelligibility. In an inverse insight one recognizes that there is nothing to be grasped, primarily because there is no intelligible pattern in the data. In the practical world, in which the surd (a mixture of rational and irrational) reigned, one would need inverse insights to understand the irrationality in a particular scheme. A fuller discussion of inverse insights can be found in *Insight* in Chapter 1 on page 43.



As the graph above would indicate, the good news is that all is not lost; decline, in other words, is not irrevocable. After all, X^3 has a positive coefficient (1). If the decline of a culture is a function of its bias, insofar as bias constitutes a departure from reasonableness and responsibility, the decline may be reversed through healing and love. Lonergan writes, “Where hatred plods around in ever narrower vicious circles, love breaks the bonds of psychological and social determinisms with the conviction of faith and the power of hope.” A religious community, for example, takes for its mission the healing and love that comes from self-sacrifice in the hope of correcting a cycle of decline. Thus Lonergan adds that “a religion that promotes self-transcendence to the point, not merely of justice, but of self-sacrificing love, will have a redemptive role in human society inasmuch as love can undo the mischief of decline and restore the cumulative process of progress.”²⁸³ Incidentally, there is a sense by the end of *Oedipus at Colonus* that Oedipus will play a quasi-religious self-sacrificing and redemptive role for Attica.

²⁸³ Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 55.

Thebes in Decline: Miasma as Metaphor...But a Metaphor for What?

We know that in *Oedipus Tyrannus*, Sophocles goes to great lengths to portray Thebes as a city in precipitous decline. Recall that as the play opens Thebes finds itself befouled by *miasma*, or pollution. Thebes has “plunged headlong into the depths of disaster” and that “desolation wastes away the harvest/Destroys our herds and grazing fields/Blights the women and makes them barren.”²⁸⁴ On one reading, *miasma* becomes a metaphor for forces beyond our control, forces against which our inquiries seem fruitless, or, if fruitful at all, reveal only how little we know and, in light of this fact, how impotent we ultimately are in acting. We would be especially impotent, or so it would seem, at restricting, as Lonergan says, “the realm of chance or fate or destiny.” *Miasma*, on this reading, symbolizes the terrifying possibility that our universe may be an unfriendly one, to use Lonergan’s phrase, in which unintelligibility and irrationality reign. As Charles Segal points out,

Antigone and *Oedipus* raise questions about the power of Enlightenment Man and suggest that his life is still surrounded by the mysterious forces of the archaic worldview, forces less amenable to human understanding and control. According to this older paradigm, nature is not merely an inert, passive object for human domination but an organically connected network of animate beings that stand in delicately balanced, mutually responsive relations to one another. Imbalance or violation in one area will produce some kind of disturbance in another; and the resultant disaster and its ramifications may be on a far greater scale than the original crime.²⁸⁵

Segal is correct insofar as Sophocles provides many speeches to support, (especially if a reader is already inclined to such a bleak metaphysics) a reading of the

²⁸⁴ Sophocles, *O.T.*, Lines 22-27.

²⁸⁵ Segal, *Tragic Heroism*, 11.

play that is hostile to rationality and to the possibility of finding meaning. On that kind of reading, the unrestricted desire to know leads only to despair and hopelessness, when we perceive (but don't understand) "mysterious forces" which can become, to paraphrase Shakespeare's Banquo, "instruments of darkness" that lead to our demise.

This pessimistic viewpoint was made most famous by Nietzsche, who writes, "Wisdom, the myth seems to whisper to us, is an unnatural abomination: whoever plunges nature into the abyss of destruction by what he knows must in turn experience the dissolution of nature in his own person. The sharp point of wisdom turns against the wise man; wisdom is an offence against nature."²⁸⁶ Nietzsche's viewpoint essentially holds that Sophocles' tragedies only reaffirm the pessimistic judgment rendered by the satyr Silenus in the presence of King Midas. After learning that Silenus, the teacher of Dionysus, is reputed to know the best thing to know, Midas vows to capture him. When Silenus finally has "fallen into his hands," the intrepid satyr still will not speak. Finally, but only when compelled, does Silenus break "out in shrill laughter and says: 'Wretched, ephemeral race, children of chance and tribulation, why do you force me to tell you the very thing which it would be most profitable for you *not* to hear? The very best thing is utterly beyond your reach not to have been born, *not* to be, to be *nothing*. However, the second best thing for you is: to die soon.'"²⁸⁷

²⁸⁶ Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 48.

²⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 26.

Nietzsche is of course correct that there are, admittedly, moments in *Oedipus Tyrannus* which seem to affirm Silenus' pessimistic (virtually unconditioned?) judgment that ours is an unfriendly universe. For example, in the 5th Chorus, Strophe A, we hear the chorus ask,

Oh, what a wretched breed
 We mortals are:
 Our lives add up to nothing.
 Does anyone, anyone at all
 Harvest more of happiness
 Than a vacant image,
 And from that image fall away?
 You are my pattern,
 Your fortune is mine,
 You, Oedipus, your misery teaches me
 To call no mortal blessed (1186-1190)

Later, in *Oedipus at Colonus*, the chorus chillingly repeats Silenus' dictum almost verbatim, chanting, "The best is never to have been born/Or, once alive, die young/And return to oblivion" (1225-1228). It seems clear in lines such as these that Sophocles is dramatically exploiting the subsequently well-explored position that there exists an inverse proportion between knowledge and happiness, the basic equation of which is that the more intelligent one becomes, the less happy one will be, as knowledge of "the truth of things" discloses the horrors of a universe always and forever conspiring to chew us up and spit us out. This is a trope famously championed by the British Romantics, under the influence of Rousseau, extending from Wordsworth to Coleridge and reaching its pinnacle in Shelley's *Frankenstein*, in which "the monster" becomes more and more disillusioned (and bitter) the more educated he becomes. Clearly, Sophocles too encourages his audience (at the very least) to consider the possibility that some questions, when pursued, may be

dangerous if not catastrophic to their pursuer and it would therefore follow that a better trajectory for a human being would be to remain innocent and ignorant or, if Silenus is correct, dead.²⁸⁸ This position would imply, to invert the famous JS Mill line, it would be better to be a satisfied pig than a Socrates dissatisfied.

In *Wounded Heroes*, McCoy uses the helpful phrase “epistemological reversal” to characterize this trope. McCoy points out that throughout *Oedipus* there is a “reversal of the epistemological order, where the discovery of new knowledge becomes an evil and leads to misery instead of joy.”²⁸⁹ One might be tempted to construe this “reversal” as constituting a rejection of a basic premise in Lonergan’s work that avows the intrinsic goodness of questioning. In fact, Sophocles seems to go to great lengths to subvert, as McCoy writes, the “normal experience of understanding wisdom or seeing the truth as a joyful experience, one that satisfies our desire to understand, a natural fit between what we want and the world itself.”²⁹⁰

One is reminded of Macbeth’s famous lament in Act V, Scene 5 that “Life’s but a walking shadow, a poor player/that struts and frets his hour upon the stage/And then is heard no more. It is a tale/Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,/signifying nothing.”²⁹¹ *Oedipus Tyrannus* might also be said to depict the human experience as

²⁸⁸ I am reminded of an anecdote the historian Paul Johnson includes about Einstein. “He lived to see moral relativism, to him a disease, become a social pandemic, just as he lived to see his fatal equation bring into existence nuclear warfare. There were times, he said at the end of his life, when he wished he had been a simple watchmaker.” (Paul Johnson. *Modern Times*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1991. Pg. 4)

²⁸⁹ McCoy, *Wounded Heroes*, 46.

²⁹⁰ Ibid.

fumbling in the darkness down a path believed to lead to happiness and authenticity but which only crumbles with our footfalls. We cannot choose not to choose and when we do choose, we act with incomplete understanding. As Blondel once wrote, "I act, but without even knowing what action is."²⁹² This precarious human condition reaches its zenith, of course, in Oedipus' killing of his own father "accidentally." The very possibility of this would have been a horrifying notion to the average Greek. As McCoy points out, "Arguably, for many Ancient Greeks, the concept that one could accidentally kill one's father, in ignorance, is even more upsetting than the idea of choosing to do so."²⁹³

For Bernard Knox (and Charles Segal), the prodigious fear of our best-laid plans crumbling beneath us, presumably without cause, may take as its model the person of Pericles. Knox specifically pursues this line of analysis in an effort to show that the Athenian audience would have recognized Pericles in Oedipus' character. Further, they would have adduced the connection, one which Lonergan also draws, between the character of the individual and the character of the larger community of which they were a part to the point at which Oedipus' biases would have appeared to them to be Athens' biases. Knox's analysis flows from the premise that the Athenian community would have seen itself, warts and all, reflected in the play, as Sophocles intentionally wove within the narrative contemporary cultural commentary, a

²⁹¹ Shakespeare. *The Tragedy of Macbeth*.

²⁹² Maurice Blondel. *Action*. (Notre Dame, Indiana: Notre Dame University Press, 1984), p. 3.

²⁹³ McCoy, *Wounded Heroes*, 43.

common tactic of the tragedians.²⁹⁴ “Tragedy,” says Knox, “was conceived in terms of contemporary situations and attitudes. Such an assumption is justified not only by many incidental details in this play, but also by the regular practice of Athenian tragic poets.”²⁹⁵

As Knox points out, one of Pericles’ more famous claims, recounted in Thucydides, is eerily reminiscent of Oedipus’ way of proceeding throughout the play. As Pericles famously said, “We do not believe that discussion is an impediment to action. We are unique in our combination of most courageous action with rational discussion of our projects, whereas others are either overcourageous from ignorance or made cautious by reasoning.”²⁹⁶ Pericles was also reputed to have said that Athens’ defeat of Persia was due to “intelligence rather than chance.”²⁹⁷ Knox’s argument culminates in a brilliant (and apt) comparison between Oedipus as a character and the character of Athens at the apex of its political dominance, summarizing the connection between both as,

A constant will to action, grounded in experience, inspired by courage, expressing itself in speed and impatience but informed by intelligent reflection, endowed with the self-confidence, optimism, and versatility of the brilliant amateur, and marred by oversuspicion and occasional outbursts of demonic anger – this is the character of Athens and Oedipus alike ...²⁹⁸

²⁹⁴ It is important to note that calling the audience the Athenian community is misleading. The audience at Sophocles’ plays would have been only a small percentage of the actual “community.” Segal writes, “all the male citizens and possibly (but not certainly) their wives, along with resident aliens and foreign visitors” (15).

²⁹⁵ Knox, *Oedipus at Thebes*, 62.

²⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 77.

²⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

Given the connection between Oedipus and Pericles, Thebes and Athens, most terrifying to the Greek audience then was the prospect that, like Oedipus', Athens had, to paraphrase Eliot, "seen the moment of its greatness flicker and, in short, was afraid." The "unforeseen catastrophe," to use Charles Segal's phrase, of the great plague that struck Athens between 429-425 may therefore have been the source for Sophocles' use of miasma. Segal writes, "*The Oedipus* is generally regarded as a response to events of this period. An unexpected, supernatural-seeming disaster suddenly sweeps away brilliant hopes; confidence in human reason and calculation is shattered, and greatness swiftly turns into misery."²⁹⁹ Just as Pericles lost everything in the grip of the plague in spite of his greatness, Oedipus too is struck down, in spite of his gifts for riddle-solving and swift intelligent action.

Pericles' death from the plague may have inspired the theme of Oedipus' fall. Events beyond human control thwart a leader's victory for his city, as with Pericles' careful planning for Athens' victory over its enemy Sparta in the Peloponnesian War and Oedipus' salvation of Thebes with his victory over the Sphinx. The play could, then, have been seen by Sophocles' contemporaries not just as a warning against pride or confidence but as a compassionate recognition that a great man's noble enterprise can collapse because of unforeseen events, or simply as an objective statement of life's uncertainties, of which Pericles was the most striking instance.³⁰⁰

It should come as no surprise at this point in our analysis that Lonergan too is sympathetic to this worldview and, in spite of an overall sanguine view of our capacity for authenticity, nevertheless offers his own "compassionate recognition that a great

²⁹⁸ Ibid.

²⁹⁹ Segal, *Tragic Heroism*, 12.

³⁰⁰ Ibid., 13.

man's noble enterprise can collapse." In *Method and Theology*, he asks the following provocative question for judgment: "But is the universe on our side, or are we just gamblers and, if we are gamblers, are we not perhaps fools, individually struggling for authenticity and collectively endeavoring to snatch progress from the ever mounting welter of decline?"³⁰¹

Far from an epistemological reversal, Lonergan's implicit answer to this question is woven into the unrestricted desire to know which, while leading perhaps to uncomfortable insights, can and does also set the conditions for insights (and inverse insights) into corrective measures and, therefore, redemption. In fact, the upward slope of our graphic illustration of the mischief that bias (group and general) causes within the historical life of a community illuminates a position that stands opposed to the counter-position of Nietzsche and others. It is my contention that this opposing position may be defended with equal zeal when *Oedipus at Colonus* is included in an analysis of *Oedipus Tyrannus*, as the idea of an "epistemological reversal" faces significant challenges.

Further, I would argue that as an exemplar of the Athenian par excellence, Pericles, in spite of his untimely death, only reaffirms in his speech above Lonergan's earlier claim that the progress of a community is proportional to the extent to which it indemnifies itself against chance – via intelligence, or, in this case, a courageous intelligence – and that this indemnification is what ultimately separates a flourishing community from a declining one which, in contrast, presumably falls victim to the

³⁰¹ Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 102.

trappings of various biases – including, but not limited to, reasoning to a fault, the so-called “paralysis of analysis” – which preclude intelligent, discerning action.

The most important thread in this strand of argument holds that while it is true that Sophocles goes to great lengths in the opening of *Oedipus Tyrannus* to show that Thebes is a city in decline in which innocents are suffering without cause, Oedipus, through his questioning, does ultimately discover the cause: himself. The concrete situation is not, after all, unintelligible, even though Oedipus’ existential situation, including questions about the value of and apparent inevitability of suffering may still be unintelligible to him.

Nature has disclosed a serious problem, to be sure, but the unrestricted desire to know has also disclosed a solution courtesy of insight. Further, in spite of numerous references to the inexorability of fate and the impotence of human agency, Sophocles also goes to great lengths to portray the present pollution (miasma) as the byproduct or cumulative effect of undiscerning human choices that have, over time, “worked mischief” in the cycle of progress. Here the analogy between miasma and the great plague of Athens begins to break down when we, as audience, ask the question for intelligence, “but what is the cause of the miasma in the play? Is it a random event with no etiology? Or, is it the byproduct of human agency?” It is hard, in other words, to totally accept the notion that the actual historical plague, an “unforeseen catastrophe” in the traditional sense, is totally analogous to the “unforeseen catastrophe” of Oedipus’ fall, especially when Sophocles depicts a long train of abuses of intelligence and responsibility (and even hatred) which cumulatively modify and even accelerate the rate of decline depicted in the narrative.

A biological plague, in other words, is not the byproduct of accumulating bias within the consciousnesses of many disparate individuals but the miasma Sophocles so vividly depicts in *Oedipus Tyrannus* is.³⁰²

Consider, first, the “differentials” of Laius and Jocasta and, then, second, Polybus and Merope and the way in which their behaviors cumulatively magnify the surd. First, Laius and Jocasta make an immediate, almost knee-jerk decision to commit infanticide, a heartless and evil choice at worse; an undiscerning and capricious one at best. Sophocles provides no indication that the choice to kill the baby Oedipus, the most vulnerable of the vulnerable, was a decision reached by an assiduous ethics of discernment, as if such a decision ever could be. Jocasta merely says, “And our son? He did not last three days./Laius yoked his feet and had him thrown away – /By other people – into a wilderness of mountains” (717-719). We can only infer from this revelation that there was little questioning of the choice on Laius’ part and, in keeping with the group bias of patriarchy, we sense there was also no marital discussion about the fate of the boy.³⁰³ Was Jocasta’s a voice considered in the choice? Did she consent to it? Would her consent even matter in such a surded

³⁰² And yet, there is still a sense in which even the spread of certain contagions and viruses that might be reduced to irresponsible human behavior.

³⁰³ I might also point out earlier versions of the Oedipus myth offer reasons why Laius may have received such a dire prophecy. For example, Euripides’ *Chrisyppus* (no longer extant) describes Laius’ abduction of Chrisyppus, the bastard son of King Pelops, king of Pisa, and the Nymph Axioche. Laius’ rapes Chrisyppus, an action so vile it offends the gods and brings about something more than miasma – agos. That Sophocles excludes the reason from *Oedipus Tyrannus* makes Laius seem more a victim of chance than someone deserving of a curse.

milieu? In the pivotal exchange just prior to his insight, Oedipus calls the choice callous:

Herdsmen: Your wife's the one who'd answer best.

Oedipus: She gave it to you?

Herdsmen: She did, sir.

Oedipus: For what reason?

Herdsmen: So I would destroy it.

Oedipus: Her own baby? So callous. (Lines)

We may infer that Laius no doubt abused his privileged position as monarch in recruiting "other people" to carry out the deed instead of getting his own hands dirty with the blood of an infant.³⁰⁴ In fact, as we see in *Oedipus Tyrannus* with the appearance of the Theban herdsman, Laius' choice to recruit "other people" proves to be one which, to paraphrase Macbeth, "returns to plague its inventor." The network of other actors who aid and abet the original crime may, in fact, be more evidence of "group bias." At first glance, the Theban herdsman seems to be the exception that proves the rule, insofar as he disregards the royal command by handing off the baby Oedipus to the Corinthian shepherd. And yet, from another angle, one might also add the Theban herdsman to the growing list of individuals who suppress the truth when, apparently, upon returning to Thebes after handing off the baby Oedipus, he chooses not to disclose this fact to Laius or Jocasta. Obviously, he has a strong motivation in not doing so (self-protection) but one wonders if this instinct constitutes an individual bias. Needless to say, the Theban herdsman's choice to disobey the

³⁰⁴ That there are "other people" who carry out Laius' command may be additional evidence of group bias. We do know, however, that the Shepherd ultimately decides (authentically?) to disregard the command and thus may be the exception who proves the rule, additional evidence that group bias may be conquered (although, clearly, the shepherd had his own motivations).

command is grounded in pity. When Oedipus asks him, “Then why did you give him to this old man?”, the Herdsman tells us, “I took pity on him, sir” (1178-1179). As Byrne has pointed out, “the Shepherd’s choice to disregard the command as a result of his affective self, the feeling of pity, foreshadows precisely what Oedipus is unable to do at the end of the play: pity himself and thus disregard his own command to punish himself.”³⁰⁵

Sophocles then doubles-down on this parental irresponsibility in describing the surded behavior of Corinth’s monarchs as well, Polybus and Merope, as they collude in their deception, hiding the truth from their son.³⁰⁶ Not only do they flat-out lie to Oedipus when met with his authentic inquiry, they even feign (apparently) indigence at the rumor. Oedipus tells us,

A drunken dinner guest filled with wine
 Blurted out that I was not my father’s son.
 It was all I could do that day to control my rage.
 But on the next day, I went to my mother and father
 Seeking some explanation, and they were furious
 That anyone would speak such spurious slander. (779-784)

The notion that Polybus and Merope could have been “furious” at what they identify to the curious adolescent Oedipus as “spurious slander” only heightens the severity of their sophistry. They know well the truth and, were they more discerning (and therefore more intelligent and responsible) they might have come to a shared parental judgment, rooted in discernment, that their adolescent son deserved the truth. Instead they uncritically decide to restrict the unrestricted desire to know by

³⁰⁵ In commentary on a draft of this paper. I include the comment verbatim because it nicely recruits the Theban herdsman in a way that I totally failed to consider.

offering their own “spurious slander” (an irony which is not lost on us) which then sets the conditions for Oedipus’ decision to flee Corinth and seek the Oracle. The chain of events, while apparently fate-bound from one perspective, might actually be construed, from the perspective of Lonergan, as the cumulative effect of irresponsibility.

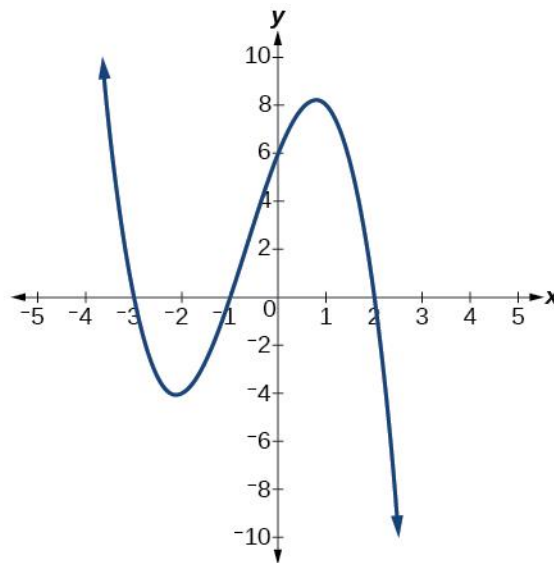
Obviously, Polybus and Merope’s lie does not achieve the desired effect but instead, in typical Sophoclean fashion, achieves the opposite effect, as Oedipus tells us, “I was consoled, but a rumor creeps in stealth,/And soon enough it started to grate on my mind./I left in secret; my mother and father never knew/I went to Delphi” (785-787). In these lines we see that while the unrestricted desire to know may have been quelled temporarily (“I was consoled, but...”) the desire could not be suppressed for long. Recall our earlier discussion in Chapter 2 that “truth will out” but only insofar as authentic subjects “out it” through inquiry and insight. Polybus and Merope’s undiscerning choice to lie sets the conditions for an emotional adolescent, now all alone on the road, having been deceived by those entrusted to be honest, to make the ultimate rash decision to slaughter a man at mysterious “place where three roads meet”:

I traveled to a place where three roads meet
 And saw a herald coming toward me
 Followed by a horse-drawn carriage,
 And seated inside, a man, just as you said,
 We met, then the herald and the old man
 Ordered me out of their way, forcing ahead.
 Run off the road, I furiously struck the driver,
 The old man saw this and as his carriage passed
 He cracked his two-pronged goad down on my head
 And I swiftly smashed my walking stick square
 Across his shoulders; he spun headlong out of his carriage,
 And I killed every last one of them, there and then. (802-813)

We may now add to our accumulating list of irresponsibility that the rage-filled murder described above, the condition for which is adolescent confusion initiated by a parental lie, and which could have been but was not ameliorated, sets the conditions for a now King-less Thebes. A King-less Thebes in turn sets the conditions for Oedipus' role in occupying the vacant throne and, as such, his subsequent decision to immediately bed a woman 20 years his senior, another undiscerning choice given the prophecy he has just received.

Reviewing this chain of events in this manner – that is, against the backdrop of inauthentic choices which cumulatively accelerate communal decline – only further illuminates the absurdity of Jocasta's own worldview, one that offers almost zero hope in human intelligence indemnifying itself against chance. She asks, "Why be afraid? Chance governs human life,/And we can never know what is to come./Live day by day, as best you can" (Lines 977-980). If chance really did govern human life, Jocasta, why take steps to kill your baby? We hear in these lines the voice of a woman powerfully indoctrinated by a contradictory cultural superstructure that is at once hostile to questioning, to the point of advocating a total surrender of the power of human intelligence, and yet advocates taking swift action, like infanticide, to avoid future deleterious effects. Yet this defeatist attitude should come as no surprise given that Sophocles makes the figureheads of these communities, kings and queens, go to the greatest lengths to restrict the unrestricted desire to know. The trajectories of both Thebes and Corinth might therefore be represented by the graph below, where the initial plummeting of the curve is Jocasta and Laius' decision to kill their vulnerable child, the rising of the curve is Oedipus' intelligent inquiry in Corinth,

which could have been fruitful, and the second plummeting of the curve Polybus and Merope's inauthentic choice to shield their child from a truth to which he was entitled.



The hostility to questioning, which precludes the curve from rising upward again, comes further into relief when Oedipus chastises his Theban “children” for neglecting the spirit of inquiry that, if embraced, would have discovered the identity of their king’s killer far earlier. Recall his shouts, “Your ruler had been murdered! What crisis/Could have kept you from a complete investigation?” (128-129). Oedipus’ reopening of the investigation becomes the moment the curve turns upward again where it will rise until the “epistemological reversal.” Meanwhile, the speech is loaded with the irony that the habit of restricting the unrestricted desire to know was (apparently) inculcated upon Oedipus, at least for a time, between his departure from the Sphinx and the present time of suppliants arriving at his palace gate. We are left to infer that at some point around the time he was crowned King of Thebes, even Oedipus stopped asking all of the questions he had been asking about his identity.

Thebes, apparently, has that effect on people. And so, in spite of his reputation for intelligence and swift action, sustained discernment and self-appropriation are not among his virtues in Thebes.

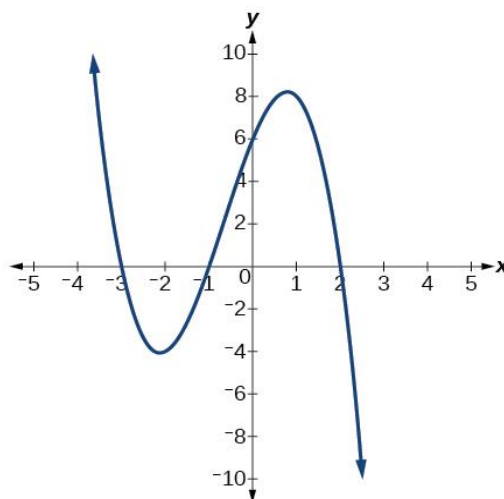
ἄγος and μίαισμα: A Modern Retelling of the Oedipus Myth

Consider the following story. It might even make for an excellent Hollywood script. Imagine the CEO of some Fortune 500 company, an industrial corporation perhaps. This CEO is beloved by his underlings for having swept in years earlier and, through his cleverness, saving the corporation from a hostile takeover. The CEO has thrived off that reputation for years and, even as an outsider, has won over the hearts of his employees of whom he now thinks as his children.

But now, when we meet him in the first scene, things are in decline. Profits are down and layoffs are inevitable, as rumors swirl regarding the corporation's environmental responsibility. The shareholders approach the CEO in supplication, asking him to take the lead on discerning the cause of the rumors which have caused stock shares to plummet. He vows to conduct an internal investigation of the corporation's business practices. The CEO's questions lead to insights that, long ago, in a moment of heightened emotion, he authorized policies that circumvented certain regulations. It turns out that the Corporation has been polluting a small town and that now there is an abnormally high rate of cancer. The CEO recognizes that the investigation, if continuously pursued, will provide needed healing for the town and possibly even save the Corporation's reputation but, in doing so, it will also destroy him, as he discovers that it was his directive, long ago, which caused corners to be cut. His interest and concern as a CEO, in other words, conflicts with his interest as an

ethical human being. In the end, he chooses to expose his indiscretions, resigns and, maybe, he gouges out his eyes in front of the board in the final scene.

Now, it is true that the fictitious scenario described above, if played out, would constitute an “epistemological reversal” of sorts. The CEO’s unrestricted desire to know, is in this instance, would bring despair. But despair for whom? For the CEO, yes. But certainly not for the community suffering from the pollution. Instead, his questions and investigation would constitute the beginning of a communal healing process that has been too long delayed by either the CEO’s narrow self-interest (individual bias) or the Corporation’s narrow group interest (group bias). In fact, a graph of the situation depicting the decline of the corporation might be different from the one depicting the fate of the polluted community. Strangely enough, the “upswing” for the community might even be said to begin the moment the CEO begins to inquire into himself and, as such, the so-called “epistemological reversal” is, when viewed holistically, the beginning of the road to healing in spite of it constituting the beginning of the end of the CEO’s identity and, consequently, his happiness.



Now add the following dimension to the story: in addition to the human toll, the outrage over the pollution that the Corporation has brought about through its own irresponsible policy comes from two distinct camps. On the one hand, the environmental movement, which is primarily secular, sees the polluted town as an assault on nature itself. On the other hand, there are the religious objectors who see the corporation's actions as an irresponsible assault on a covenant made with God to be stewards of the world.³⁰⁷

These two types of objectors, hardly foreign to us today, appear in Sophocles too, as he deftly uses the concept of pollution to symbolize the imbalance that has been caused by the unintelligent, biased or evil actions. In *Wounded Heroes*, McCoy, citing Parker, points out that the ancient Greeks recognized two forms of pollution: ἄγος and μίασμα. As McCoy notes, "While μίασμα is the idea of something being polluted in the sense of contaminated, the term ἄγος also means more specifically something directed against the gods and their rules – not only contaminated, but also

³⁰⁷ See, for example, Pope Francis' *Laudato Si*, in which he calls for a dialogue between the two camps of environmentalists: "201. The majority of people living on our planet profess to be believers. This should spur religions to dialogue among themselves for the sake of protecting nature, defending the poor, and building networks of respect and fraternity. Dialogue among the various sciences is likewise needed, since each can tend to become enclosed in its own language, while specialization leads to a certain isolation and the absolutization of its own field of knowledge. This prevents us from confronting environmental problems effectively. An open and respectful dialogue is also needed between the various ecological movements, among which ideological conflicts are not infrequently encountered. The gravity of the ecological crisis demands that we all look to the common good, embarking on a path of dialogue which demands patience, self-discipline and generosity, always keeping in mind that 'realities are greater than ideas.'" (http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html)

‘unholy’.”³⁰⁸ Like today, there are more than a few secular environmentalists who treat harming the environment as an offense against nature *qua* nature (miasma). Other environmentalists, inspired by a religious injunction to be stewards of God’s world, treat harming the environment as an offense against nature but also as an unholy act against the source of nature itself (agos).

There is a sense in which Lonergan’s distinction between bias and sin mirrors this dichotomy. For Lonergan, what is a bias from the human perspective can also be a sin against God from God’s perspective. Take the egoist, for example. On the one hand, the egotist is guilty of individual bias and is to be chastised for the deleterious effect he has on his community (and possibly nature) by elevating his own good over the good of others and contributing to the social surd. On the other hand, he has committed the sin of pride, the greatest of all sins. From the perspective of “the gods,” or in this case, the Christian God, he has duplicated the choice that Lucifer makes, elevating himself above God. And, like our example, the egotist might be equally rebuked by the secular humanist for his egotism and by the Christian for committing the sin of pride. Most importantly, my modern version of the Oedipus myth above demonstrates in a more pronounced way that whether one prefers a secular perspective or a religious one, the pollution that has wreaked havoc on the community is ultimately a function of the inauthentic and undiscerning behavior of people within the community and that one person’s identity and happiness may be sacrificed at the altar of communal healing.

³⁰⁸ McCoy, *Wounded Heroes*, 43.

Further, I would argue that, in the end, the two opposed ways of reading miasma as metaphor – either as the byproduct of uncritical, undiscerning human action or, on the other hand, as pure chance – are not necessarily as mutually exclusive as they initially seem. We can, as an audience, be asked to meditate on both possibilities in our world – on the one hand, pollution that is the byproduct of a natural order the machinations of which we do not yet know and may never know, and, on the other, pollution of the sort of which human agency is the demonstrable cause. Both seem equally disconcerting, but it seems clear that when *Oedipus at Colonus* is added to the equation, Sophocles seems far less concerned with cause and blame but instead with the larger question of, what can human intelligence and compassion do in the face of such decline? What weapons have we in our arsenal to ameliorate this kind of suffering? In other words, “*Colonus*,” when added, seems to indicate that Sophocles offers ample evidence against a totally pessimistic, fatalistic (Nietzschean) reading. Instead, Sophocles provides a narrative that fits the Lonergan paradigm of historical process. Human beings, it seems, are adept at causing problems through bias and evil. Yet they also have the wherewithal, via intelligence, healing and love, to correct them. And, in spite of our inevitable failures, some communities seem closer to a horizon of conversion than others. The question is: how?

***Colonus* as Antidote**

If Knox’s view is correct that Thebes *is* Athens in the metaphorical sense given the premise that, according to Knox, “tragedy was conceived in terms of contemporary situations and attitudes,” we must now ask, “what, then, is *Colonus*?”

What did the Athenian audience see in *Colonus*? A new Athens? A return to the promise of the old Athens? An Athens which treats women differently than its present patriarchy? An Athens which treats strangers differently than its present xenophobia? A healthy Athens, devoid of plague? A healing land? A land of redemptive possibilities?

In this section I offer a close reading of *Oedipus at Colonus* which endeavors to show that we may understand *Colonus* as a region that accommodates the healing of the mischief caused by bias. The first piece of data to suggest this reading is, quite simply, its location. *Colonus* is, after all, a liminal space, a trope which has never failed to garner mysteriousness in accommodating various reversals. The word “liminal” comes from the Latin “limen” which means “of or pertaining to a threshold.” A liminal space is therefore neither here nor there. It stands between two clearly defined boundaries. The gloaming, for example, is neither night nor day and adopts an air of mystery to us because it transcends the binaries (day/night, off/on, fight/flight) our brain enjoys.

Shakespeare, for example, sets the opening scene of *The Tragedy of Macbeth* in a “desert place.” It is a place between the Scottish castles where, as Mathew Arnold once wrote, “ignorant armies clash by night,” and which accommodates the three Wyrd sisters (who have no allegiance to any monarchy) as they work their dark magic. Later, the witches go to meet Macbeth “upon the heath,” another liminal space where, paradoxically, battles can be “lost and won” and where “fair is foul and foul is fair.” Even gender distinctions are blurred in the liminal space, as Banquo says of the

witches, "You should be women/And yet your beards forbid me to interpret/That you are so."³⁰⁹

Like Shakespeare, Sophocles too relies on and profits from the symbolism of the liminal. *Colonus*, neither Thebes nor Athens, is a liminal threshold that accommodates new possibilities. Antigone says, "Oedipus – Father, I can see the city walls./Off in the distance but I think this place/Must be sacred" (15-18). When Oedipus asks, at line 52, "Where are we?" the local replies: "This is sacred territory, all of it...The ground were you tread/Is called the 'Bronze Way',/The Threshold of Athens" (54-59). Not only is it threshold to Athens, *Colonus*' physical beauty stands starkly opposed to the dark cloud of miasma hovering over Thebes and from which Oedipus, also befouled, has departed. The Chorus proudly describes *Colonus* to Oedipus, whose haggard body with its violent wounds, stands in stark contrast to the beauty of the grove, a contrast which Sophocles will mirror in Oedipus' appearance when compared with Theseus':

Stranger, this is gleaming *Colonus*,
Horse country, beautiful meadows,
Where the mournful trills of nightingales
Haunt the shadows of green glades
Garlanded in the gods' ivy,
The deep color of dark wine.
Here intricate berry-filled briars
Twist around lush vines,
Never scorched by the sun
Nor struck by storms. (668-677)

Because *Colonus* can accommodate new regenerative possibilities, it represents, in our graphic depiction of decline and progress, a limit; a locus where the

³⁰⁹ Shakespeare, William. *Macbeth. The Norton Shakespeare*. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1997). I.3.45-47.

line is neither plummeting nor rising. This makes it a place of stillness and beauty, as the description implies. *Colonus* is also symbolically important as a place not simply because it is sacred space and, as Woodruff says, “threatening or violating people who belong to the gods seems to be a characteristic transgression of Theban tyrants” (lix) but because it is undefined, *Colonus* can be inclusive of “the other.” As McCoy notes, “Sophocles is innovative in his use of *Colonus* as the locale of Oedipus’ burial, and refers not to Athens, but to Attica (the countryside surrounding Athens), as if to emphasize the inclusion of both country and city as part of Athens’s full identity.”³¹⁰ Like Macbeth’s “desert place” and “heath,” *Colonus* accommodates a temporary reversal: a reversal of the typical patriarchal structure that has dominated *Oedipus Tyrannus*.

As Christopher Long points out, the liminal character of *Colonus* sets the conditions for a “politics of the in between” in which the typical obstinate patriarchy may be infiltrated (for a short window of time at least) with another mode, a more authentic mode, of doing things. Long notes that the Oedipus of *Oedipus at Colonus* must now learn in a totally different way; he must rely on touch. Further, because he is now wholly dependent on another, he finds it difficult, at least initially, to fall back on his famous obstinate egotism. It is obvious in the opening scenes of the play that not only is Oedipus deferring to Antigone’s eyes to guide his body; he is equally indebted to Antigone’s voice as he defers to her judgment in guiding his decisions.

The Chorus, for example, demands Oedipus move from his seated position in the grove of Eumenides, saying, “Decrepit beggar./If you’ve something to say, say

³¹⁰ McCoy, *Wounded Heroes*, 61.

it/But not on sacred land./Speak to us from a place,/Where words are allowed./Keep silent until/You have left forbidden ground.” Upon hearing this command, Oedipus turns to Antigone, asking, “Antigone, what should we do?” (170). She replies with wise and prudent council by suggesting, as Theseus will later do, that Oedipus ought to do something he has become famous for failing to do: attentive listening. “Father, we must respect their ways/And listen to what they want” (171-172). Moments later, when the Chorus has learned Oedipus’ identity, they seem to renege on their claim (which Oedipus has, perhaps too eagerly, taken as a promise) that, “No one will remove you from your refuge,/Old man, not against your will” (176-177). Now they shout, “Get away! Get out of our land!” (226). Again Antigone intervenes by offering an argument rooted in pity for the vulnerable. Her rhetorical gifts are eloquent. They are gifts that went unheard in Thebes, but here, in *Colonus*, they are allowed to reverberate with both a measured intelligence and a keen awareness of the psychology of her audience:

Please, you are god-fearing men;
 You have heard what my father did,
 And even though he knew nothing
 You refuse to tolerate him at all.
 But at least feel sorry for me, please,
 And let me plead my father’s case.
 I am not blind; look into my eyes
 And imagine your own child begging
 For you to be treated with dignity.
 You are the only people we can turn to,
 It’s as if you were now our gods,
 Dare we hope to have your good grace?
 For the sake of everything that you love,
 Your children, wives, possessions – or the gods.
 The gods guide us all. Can anyone
 Escape the paths they set for us?
 There’s not a man on earth who can. (237-254)

Antigone's question to the Chorus at Line 249, which is both genuine and rhetorical, "Dare we hope to have your good grace?," is the first appeal to some form of *aidos* (αἰδοῦς).³¹¹ Here, Meineck translates the word as "grace" but elsewhere it is rendered as reverence or compassion or mercy.³¹² Antigone's question to the Chorus here foreshadows the question Polynices will ask of Oedipus at the end of the play at Line 1268, when Polynices more boldly recruits the personified Mercy, the female deity who, like Dike (Justice), "was said to stand with Zeus as he dispensed his power."³¹³ Polynices asks Oedipus, "Who am I to dare to ask you for help?/All I know is that Mercy/Stands beside the throne of Zeus/And has her hand in all this work."³¹⁴ As Woodruff and Meineck point out, "The word is a complicated one, *aidos*, one of many that introduce aspects of reverence."³¹⁵ Nevertheless, the foreshadowing and the irony is clear: Antigone is exhorting the Chorus (citizens of *Colonus*) to do for her and her father what her father will refuse to do at the end of the play, showcasing his irremovable patriarchal obstinacy. Antigone asks the Chorus to consider her as a family member, "But at least feel sorry for me...I am not blind; look into my eyes/And imagine your own child begging/For you to be treated with dignity," hoping they will

³¹² τὸν ἄθλιον αἰδοῦς κῦρσαι: ἐν ὑμμι γὰρ ὡς θεῶ κείμεθα τλάμονες.

³¹³ Sophocles, O.C., 2003, pg. 186, see the footnote for line 1267.

³¹⁴ The Greek is below:

ἀλλ' ἔστι γὰρ καὶ Ζηνὶ σύνθακος θρόνων
Αἰδῶς ἐπ' ἔργοις πᾶσι, καὶ πρὸς σοί, πάτερ, (1268)

³¹⁵ Sophocles, O.C., lxvi.

be unable to reject the call of family. Oedipus, in contrast, will reject precisely this call. As Woodruff claims, “Few ancient Greeks could have rejected the call of family, but Oedipus rises above it. And in doing so, he rises above Polynices’ call for what we have rendered ‘mercy,’ along with most other translators (line 1268).”³¹⁶ Ironically, at this early moment in the play, Oedipus is moved. His daughter’s powerful and tender exhortation seems to reinvigorate him, as he launches into a long speech exhorting the Chorus to accept him, even suggesting in the speech that he still believes his fate is the direct effect of Jocasta and Laius’ “unspeakable” actions. Oedipus’ continued insistence upon his own blamelessness (a Theban attribute, perhaps) is now counter-balanced by Antigone’s resolve, made possible here in *Colonus*, in taking responsibility for him as not only his physical guide but voice.³¹⁷

Theseus and the Transcendental Precepts

In his introduction to Peter Meineck’s translation, Paul Woodruff claims of *Oedipus at Colonus* that, “This could have been a play about how good Theseus is, and how fine Athens is in consequence. But *Oedipus at Colonus* is not about Theseus, who is little more than a prop in this play, because nothing happens to challenge him and because he brings nothing to the stage that might surprise us.”³¹⁸ Woodruff’s assessment, however, is incorrect in light of my previous analysis. Theseus’ behavior is surprising when considering him within the “surded” milieu of patriarchal obstinacy in which he finds himself and to which we have become accustomed by the

³¹⁶ Sophocles, O.C., lxvi

³¹⁸ Sophocles, O.C., lxv.

time we finish *Oedipus Tyrannus*. Further, if Theseus is a “prop,” then he is a prop only insofar as he is a foil to Oedipus and Creon. This may be true. Yet his role as foil to the two stubborn patriarchs is critical to understanding *Oedipus at Colonus* as representative of Lonergan’s claim that healing and love may correct the social surd. That Oedipus’ body becomes a boon to Athenian prosperity is less about Oedipus’ character and more about Theseus’ free decision, rooted in discernment, to accept the polluted man with compassion. Theseus is, therefore, far more than a prop.

Theseus confidently enters the scene at Line 551, mitigating the tension and assuaging both Oedipus’ and the Chorus’ anxiety. He identifies his dual motive: compassion and empathy. He says, “I’ve come out of compassion/To ask what exactly you and your poor/Daughter want from us here in Athens” (557-559). He then adds, “You should know that once I too/Was an exile and had to struggle to survive,/So how could I ever allow myself to ignore/The pleas of one so lost in desperation?” (563-566). He concludes with a statement indicative of a circumspect wisdom regarding life’s ever-changing circumstances and the fickle nature of chance: “I know that I’m just a man and that tomorrow/May hold nothing more for me than you” (567-568). Theseus, no stranger to struggle and exile, is totally unfazed by Oedipus’ presence in his kingdom and makes the extraordinary gesture of sheltering a polluted man. Theseus, in other words, has self-appropriated his own situation and has keenly discerned precisely what Oedipus failed to discern in *Oedipus Tyrannus* – that no man is truly safe. Any man can be unhorsed, irrespective of his reputation and, given this dire existential fact, a little compassionate empathy goes a long way despite pollution. Like Christ to the leper, Theseus’ extraordinary gesture of compassionate empathy

stands in direct contrast to Oedipus' rather brutal proclamation to "punish the killers by force" before even learning the situation and the potential extenuating circumstances. As McCoy points out, "Theseus offers an alternative to wounding words, words of reception and hospitality. While Oedipus is convinced that the truth of his life will be too shocking, or his history too revolting once told, Theseus receives his full story in compassion, even sharing a bit of his own story in return."³¹⁹

Structurally, Theseus' entrance softly echoes the opening of *Oedipus Tyrannus* insofar as the tension (and plot) is rooted in a suppliant exhorting a king with a reputation for wisdom to fix a problem. Yet Sophocles seems to want the audience to recognize some key differences, not the least of which is that Theseus, who is truly βασιλεύς (king) not Τύραννος (tyrant) but will soon discover that he is really boasts a number of important attributes Oedipus lacked. Theseus is authentically compassionate, empathetic and wise and, perhaps most tellingly, maintains an unflinching control over the affective dimension of his character. He has, in other words, appropriated all of Lonergan's transcendental precepts: he is attentive, intelligent, reasonable and responsible. We sense immediately that these are the very attributes that will have the power to heal the mischief of bias which, heretofore, has led to the decline of Thebes. Sophocles proceeds to amplify these precepts by juxtaposing Theseus against two characters who are "surded" – Oedipus and Creon – and whose city, Thebes, has, not surprisingly, fallen into the ultimate state of decline – civil war.

³¹⁹ McCoy, *Wounded Heroes*, 111.

As Woodruff notes, scholars disagree on why Theseus chooses to take such risks for Oedipus. In fact, one might object that throughout these opening exchanges we are not required to take Theseus' claims about his own motivation at face-value. Perhaps Theseus has a selfish motive he is concealing, just as Oedipus vowed to solve the mystery of Laius' murder partially out of self-protection. This viewpoint seems at odds, though, with Sophocles' intentional choice to reveal the prize of receiving Oedipus until after Theseus' opening speech in which he commits to the polluted man. Theseus, in other words, is unaware that there will be any benefit and has little evidence to think of Oedipus as somehow a savior for his city. In fact, from his perspective at the time of his intervention, there can only be conflict in aiding Oedipus. Only after this initial compassionate overture does Oedipus say, "Theseus, such kindness and eloquence./You know me, my family, and where I'm from,/All that remains is for me to explain/Why I've come and what it is I want" (569-572). When Theseus asks for an explanation, Oedipus tells him, "I have a gift to give you:/My own broken body – not much to look at,/But appearances can deceive,/And it has the power to bring you great good" (576-579). At the end of the exchange we are made to believe that Theseus' commitment to compassion and empathy for the vulnerable, without "counting the cost," as the saying goes, will somehow bring about good, a central metaphor of the play. Love, in other words, may have the power to correct the aggregate mischief that the various forms of bias depicted in *Oedipus Tyrannus* have wrought on Thebes and which now threaten Attica courtesy of the two patriarchal Theban interlopers, neither of whom is βασιλεύς, Oedipus and Creon.

When Oedipus informs Theseus of his refusal to return to Thebes, in spite of the new development that his family desires his return, Theseus, keeping with the transcendental precepts, tells Oedipus, “Be reasonable, anger only makes matters worse” (591). This is the first of many lines throughout the play which indicate the problem of Oedipus’ rage – his rage will be alluded to by both Creon and Antigone later. If we take Knox’s instruction that we should assess a character based on what other characters say about him, then these moments seem to indicate that Sophocles wants to reiterate here the problem of Oedipus’ affective self, lest it be downplayed or washed out by discussions of inexorable fate. In fact, throughout *Oedipus at Colonus*, Oedipus’ rage is continually cited by multiple characters as being somehow opposed to attentiveness, intelligence, reasonableness and responsibility whereas Theseus is unflappable in these.

After Oedipus delivers his dire new prophecy about the way in which his presence will create enmity between Athens and Thebes (two communities which enjoyed an ancient friendship), Theseus shows the kind of stalwart leadership that Oedipus attempted to show in the opening scenes of *Oedipus Tyrannus* when he vowed to discover Laius’ killer. Theseus tells us that he must honor Oedipus’ wishes for two reasons: hospitality and reverence. He points out that *xenia* (guest-friendship) requires him to do so. As Woodruff notes, Theseus cites a “particularly strong form” of *xenia* when he “calls Oedipus *doruxenos* – spear-friend (line 632). Spear-friends come to each other’s defense, and that is exactly what will happen

between these two. Theseus will defend Oedipus from Creon, and Oedipus (much later) will defend Theseus' descendants from Theban invasion."³²⁰

Why call Oedipus a "spear-friend"³²¹ when the two have never met prior to this encounter? The reason is because Theseus must also show reverence (*aidos*) for the sacred space upon which Oedipus stands. He says, "I must show respect for such good intentions,/Not just for the sake of hospitality/But because he has sought sanctuary with the spirits./Reverence forbids me to throw away this gift;/Therefore I am inclined to allow him to stay/And incorporate him within our city" (631-637). Later, when Oedipus expresses his fear that he will be forced to leave *Colonus*, and that Theseus is unaware of the power of the Theban threats, Theseus replies in a bold proclamation that shows that not only is he compassionate, empathetic and wise, he is courageous enough to see his compassion, empathy and wisdom applied. To use Aristotle's dichotomy again, Theseus is not merely a man of *deinotes* but a man of *phronêsis* and *andreia*. He tells Oedipus in no uncertain terms that the exiled, vulnerable Theban is in "his care now." This vow solidifies Theseus' role as protector of the vulnerable.

I know this: No one will take you away
Against my will. I don't care for threats –
They're just angry, bloated boasts,
A sound mind evaporates a threat.

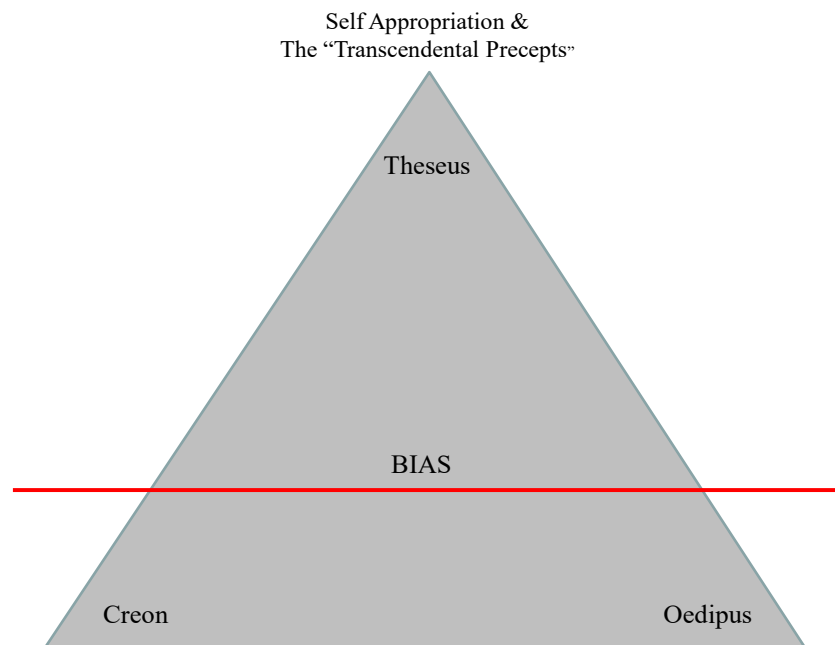
³²⁰ Sophocles, O.C., lxiv.

³²¹ The Greek is below:

τίς δῆτ' ἄν ἀνδρὸς εὐμένειαν ἐκβάλοι /
τοιούδ', ὅτῳ πρῶτον μὲν ἢ δορύξενος /
κοινή παρ' ἡμῖν αἰέν ἐστιν ἐστία;

These Thebans can brag and gloat
 About how they'll come and seize you,
 But I think they'll find their journey
 A little rougher than they imagine.
 Don't worry; you are in my care now. (658-664)

Creon enters the scene and, like Oedipus, becomes a dual foil to Theseus, specifically in reference to the transcendental precepts. He appears inattentive, unintelligent, unreasonable and irresponsible. Sophocles begins to construct a triangular arrangement between the three patriarchs, with Oedipus and Creon at the base of the triangle and Theseus at the top. Theseus' moral superiority enlarges as the play continues, as Oedipus and Creon seem to grow smaller, and can only bicker in their biased, patriarchal obstinacy.



This triangular structure is no more apparent than in the cycle of speeches beginning with Creon at line 728 and ending with Theseus at 1041. Creon's initial overture, an exhortation for Oedipus to return to Thebes, is pure sophistry. In his appeal, he totally

disregards Antigone's presence and the loving bond she has forged with her father, a bond which has kept him alive for years. Instead, Creon identifies himself as Oedipus' only kin, saying, "I'm not here at the behest of any one man,/No, all of my citizens urged it,/After all, I am his nearest living relation" (737-738). Creon's claim here is loaded with irony. He claims that he is Oedipus' "nearest living relation" when, in reality, there is no one closer than Antigone, who is both sister and daughter to Oedipus and, as if to concretize the closeness of the relation, physically connected to the hapless blind man on the stage. Creon disregards both the genetic and physical fact, looking right through Antigone in typical patriarchal chauvinism and in spite of the fact that he is actually unrelated, genetically, to Oedipus. He continues to use the power of rhetorical persuasion, appealing to the idea that Thebes is Oedipus' true home and that in *Colonus* he is but a stranger in a strange land. Oedipus sees through the ruse, saying, "There's nothing you wouldn't sink to!/Perverting a seemingly honest plea/To suit your twisted schemes" (761-763).

When Creon's sophistry with words fails, he resorts to the ultimate act of patriarchal power: physical force, might over right. He forces a woman (Antigone) against her will, an act resembling rape. He shouts, "Guards! Get the girl – if she won't come/Of her own accord, use force" (826-827). Further, removing a suppliant from a sanctuary by force was considered impious; the request therefore foreshadows Creon's later impiety and physical brutality in *Antigone*. Recall that at the end of that play Creon will abduct Antigone again and physically restrain her by entombing her, only to recognize his ignorance and irresponsibility too late, shouting,

Oh, howl for the sins of a stubborn mind,

Evil-minded, death-dealing! O you who are witnesses,
 You saw those who killed and those who died,
 All in one family,
 Cry out against the sacrilege that I called strategy!
 Oh, howl, my son, my young son, for your young death.
 Ah! Ah!
 You were expelled from life
 By my bad judgment, never yours (1261 – 1269).

But here, in the grove of the Eumenides, Creon maintains his individual bias (egotism) and his role as representative of a group bias (patriarchal chauvinism) that preclude him making good judgment. He then proceeds to identify, without grasping the irony, two attributes that he believes are Oedipus' downfall but which are also his own: a lack of wisdom and rage. On 804, he shouts, "It's a shame. All these years and still so unwise;/You're a disgrace, even in your old age" (804-805). Then, later, "You may have won your victory for now,/But one day you'll learn that your temper/Has turned you against your own./Your rage has always been your downfall" (852-855). These comments remind us that in spite of Oedipus' status as "a good man in a bad way," as the Chorus of *Colonus* dubs him, Creon believes that Oedipus has failed to appropriate the transcendental precepts, particularly reason and responsibility.

Oedipus is, of course, devastated by the abduction, which constitutes a severing of his one remaining human bond (Ismene notwithstanding). Yet Creon soon raises the stakes when, in an even more brazen display of patriarchal power, he attempts to abduct Oedipus against his will in spite of the city's laws. Creon, in other words, begins to resemble "tyrannus" in the Platonic sense now. This scene is strikingly ironic, given that Creon's name means law and that he will be the defender of law in *Antigone*. In fact, when the Chorus challenges Creon, asking "You think our city has no laws?," he replies with a sentiment that seems more fitting for Antigone's

voice, "When a man is right, the weak can beat the strong" (879-880). Sophocles' audience could only have interpreted this statement ironically given Creon's character in *Antigone* which they already knew well. Further, they would no doubt have recognized what is fast becoming the most sobering indictment of his character: a lack of any philosophical consistency. In their own ways, both Creon and Oedipus, through their behaviors in *Colonus*, become exemplars of contradiction, the great enemy of reason.

Theseus returns to the scene again and rightly expresses moral indignation at the kidnapping of the girls. He turns to Creon directly and says, "You're staying right here, until/These girls are returned to me/And I see them with my own eyes/What you've done appalls me/And dishonors you and your country" (909-912). In a direct indictment of Oedipus, he also says, "If I were to let my emotions rule,/This man would barely escape/With his life..." (905-907). We recognize, importantly, that Theseus is by no means unemotional. In fact, he is appalled. Yet he will not let his emotion override his reason; instead his affective self works harmoniously with his reason. He takes quick, intelligent action to retrieve the girls and to keep Oedipus safe. He will not have a political scandal. This is *tachys* (swift action) but, unlike Oedipus, here it is authentically and correctly applied. He says,

At all costs they must prevent
 These girls from leaving our territory;
 Otherwise this foreigner will
 Get the better of us all
 And make me look ridiculous (902-906).

Refusing to be intimidated, Theseus then rebukes Creon for his vulgar display of power and his lack of respect for the rule of law. He says, "You see, this is a city

that respects/Justice and holds the law in high regard./Yet you just barge your way in,/Grabbing whatever you want,/Thinking you can dictate your terms/With barbarity and brute force!" (914-918). Then, in keeping with his commitment to empathy, he asks Creon to envision the reverse scenario in the hope of pricking the spurs of Creon's empathy. He asks Creon to ask of himself a question for intelligence which, if pursued, would lead to an insight regarding empathy. Theseus asks, "What if I came to your country,/Even if I had right on my side,/Ignored the rule of law there,/And simply started abducting people?/Inconceivable! Because I know how a foreigner/Is supposed to behave as a guest abroad" (925-928). Obviously the implication here is that Creon has asked no such questions. Instead Creon's various biases have amputated his unrestricted desire to know.

The next scene is pivotal, as Sophocles turns to a depiction of the two "surded" characters, Oedipus and Creon, in a verbal battle of patriarchal stubbornness which only further discloses a total lack of discernment of their parts. They are balanced against each other and below Theseus, who now seems to hover even higher above them, as he has far more closely approximated self-appropriation in his courageous empathy. There is no better exchange to underscore the point that Sophocles is not hostile to rationality but recognizes instead that, as McCoy puts it, "the rational itself includes an affective element."³²²

To begin the exchange, Creon expresses astonishment that the Athenians would even care to be involved in Oedipus' saga, saying "I never imagined that your people/Would care quite so much/For the fortunes of my hapless family" (941-943).

³²² McCoy, *Wounded Heroes*, 57.

We sense, though, that this astonishment is more sophistry, as he then parlays the discussion of his “hapless family” into an opportunity to publically twist the knife, cruelly reminding the Chorus and the audience (and Oedipus) of Oedipus’ crimes, using lurid imagery and provocative language: “I was certain that they would never/Accept a man who murdered his father,/And committed incest – a foul pariah,/An outcast with a monstrous blood” (944-947). Again, this speech becomes ironic given what the audience knows about Creon’s role in *Antigone* as the cold, sober, unemotional law-giver. Sophocles again showcases the contradictions woven into Creon’s character and the lack of philosophical consistency.

Oedipus, of course, is incensed by this public rehashing of his deeds. He shouts, “This man is contemptible! Have you no shame?” (960). Oedipus then launches into one of the most important speeches in the entire Oedipus cycle. It will be the first and last time we hear his own thoughts on his crimes and they are, to say the least, surprising. The implication is that Oedipus has only deigned to publically discuss his crimes because Creon has already “gone far beyond the bounds/Of decency” and, as such, there is no longer any incentive for Oedipus to keep quiet in the name of etiquette. His willingness to broach the subject is also no doubt a function of the plot point that Antigone is not present in the scene to listen to the lascivious details of her conception through incest.

Before listening to Oedipus’ full speech below however, we must recall that here is a man who has been in exile now for years and, presumably, has had the opportunity to take an inventory of his tragic fall from multiple angles. In spite of this opportunity, there is zero indication that Oedipus accepts any – any! – responsibility

for his present state. The denial of responsibility, a transcendental precept, becomes even more ironic given Theseus' commitment to take responsibility, even as a stranger, over Oedipus, as if to say, "If you won't own up to your situation, I will for you." I include the entire speech in its entirety to stress its importance.

You rant on about taboo killings,
 Foul marriages, and vile incest.
 It was I who suffered these things
 But the gods made it so,
 Exorcising some ancient grudge
 Through my bloodline.
 I cannot be blamed for the crimes
 I inflicted on myself and my family,
 You won't find a single reason
 Why I deserved any of it.
 How was it my fault
 That my father received
 A prediction that he would
 Be killed by his very own son?
 That happened before I was born –
 I had not even been conceived!
 But I was born, unluckily,
 And yes, I did fight and kill my father,
 But I had no idea who he was –
 I didn't know what I was doing.
 How can you call me guilty
 When I knew nothing...nothing!
 And my mother? How dare you
 Make me speak of that marriage.
 She was your sister – shall I go on?
 Yes, you've gone far beyond the bounds
 Of decency, why then should I keep quiet?
 She gave birth to me, a cursed birth,
 But she too was ignorant of it all.
 My mother also bore my children:
 It is disgusting, her everlasting shame!
 Yet you seem to delight in degrading
 Her name and defaming me.
 I don't want to talk about it any more
 Except to say that I will not be blamed
 For that union nor the killing
 Of my father, and yet here you are

Continuing to hurl abuse at me.
 Just tell me this: if a man approached
 You right now and threatened your life,
 What's the first thing you would do?
 Would you defend yourself from harm
 Or stop to ask if he might be your father?
 Unless you have some sort of death wish,
 I'm sure you'd meet his assault, like for like,
 Without considering the future at all.
 That was exactly my situation out on that road.
 It was all decided by the gods, and if
 My father could be brought back to life,
 He'd agree with everything I've said.
 However, you have no respect for Justice:
 You'll say and do anything if it suits your
 Purpose, and you spout your filth
 At anyone who will listen to you. (963-1003)

Oedipus then concludes this speech by essentially reminding Creon that he has chosen the worst place in all of Greece to attempt to steal a suppliant because, unlike Creon and his henchmen, "The Athenians respect the laws of the gods/More than any other people in Greece" (1006-1007). Yet far from exonerating him, Oedipus' speech has the unintended consequence of showcasing how similar he is to Creon. The speech is merely a fitting testament to the way in which we so often let ourselves off the hook when it comes to our own moral culpability. No one would deny that Oedipus was unlucky. No one would deny the merits of the "moral luck" style of argument, so fashionable today, that Oedipus was born into a situation in which, perhaps, the odds were stacked against him.

Nevertheless, Oedipus' retrospective analysis displays a staggering obstinacy and clearly betokens a failure to question his own calamity in a circumspect, intelligent way. This lack of questioning is consistent with the hostility to questioning which, as I detailed above, both Corinth and Thebes have inculcated within him. Not

once, for example, does Oedipus ask, "In retrospect, did I really need to be so rash?" Not once, does Oedipus ask, "Was it a good idea to marry a woman 20 years my senior given the prediction?" Not once, does Oedipus ask, "Would it have been better if I had continued my questioning until I was in a position to make a virtually unconditioned judgment about the identity of my parents?" Instead we hear a man whose voice is full of the same stubbornness and paternal violence that one might argue got him into trouble in the first place. In fact, his speech is reminiscent of the literally questionless speech we cited in *Oedipus Tyrannus* when he vows to punish the killers by force without entertaining even the possibility of mitigating factors. Woodruff correctly notes,

Oedipus is full of excuses: ignorance and self-defense in the case of his father; and, in the case of his mother, the improbable plea that the city of Thebes forced marriage upon him. But, as we have seen in the case of stepping on sacred ground, there is no excuse for the transgression. He has been polluted by what he did, and he knows it very well (1131). His string of excuses is a kind of bad faith. They allow him to avoid facing up to his failings, his savage angers, his careless feet, his jumping to conclusions, his passion for controlling any situation in which he finds himself.³²³

Further, Oedipus' claim above that if Laius were somehow brought back to life then he'd agree with his son is steeped in irony. It is an irony that is lost on Oedipus – he does not question it, of course – but which might be discerned if he had self-appropriated his own situation. Oedipus does not seem to grasp that his decision to kill Laius at Phocis, "the place where the three roads meet," was borne out of a rashness he inherited from his father. It is no surprise, therefore, that were Laius alive he would approve of such a violent act, as he is the very man who seems to have

³²³ Sophocles, *O.C.*, lxix.

conferred this biased tendency to rage upon his son. Like father, like son. As Creon said earlier of Oedipus, “Your rage has always been your downfall” (855). Oedipus’ failure to admit that he may have had at least a little something to do with his own downward trajectory moves us beyond the pity we feel for him at the end of *Oedipus Tyrannus* to a newfound assessment that he is simply pathetic and obstinate. Therefore, his role at the end of the play as a powerful gift to Athens must be less about his character and more about Theseus’ compassion in taking him in.

Even if one adopts the viewpoint that Oedipus is but a victim of an unfriendly universe, and that we must face this unfriendly universe (look into the abyss) is the ultimate point of the play, this fact in no way precludes circumspection from the hero. In fact, I am reminded of a poignant scene in Arthur Miller’s *The Crucible*, in which the reluctant hero-martyr, John Proctor, is facing the gallows. His wife, Elizabeth, comes to him at the behest of the ecclesiastical court. They hope she will convince him to save himself by signing a false confession that will wrongly indict others. She consents to meet with her husband but refuses, out of principle, to tell him to sign to a lie. Throughout the play Miller portrays Elizabeth as the perfect Puritan woman. She is “Goodwife” Proctor, the moral exemplar of the play. Her husband has cheated on her with a 17 year old girl and, in doing so, has set in motion a hysterical calamity that has caused the death of countless innocents in Salem. And yet, in this final meeting between husband and wife, in an ironic moment of healing and reconciliation that is the fruit of infidelity, Elizabeth, presumably through extended discernment in jail over three months, has come to recognize that she played a part, albeit small, in Proctor’s lechery.

ELIZABETH: I have read my heart this three month, John. (*Pause.*) I have sins of my own to count. It needs a cold wife to prompt lechery.

PROCTOR, *in great pain*: Enough, enough—

ELIZABETH, *now pouring out her heart*: Better you should know me!

PROCTOR: I will not hear it! I know you!

ELIZABETH: You take my sins upon you, John—

PROCTOR, *in agony*: No, I take my own, my own!

ELIZABETH: John, I counted myself so plain, so poorly made, no honest love could come to me! Suspicion kissed you when I did; I never knew how I should say my love. It were a cold house I kept! (*In fright, she swerves, as Hathorne enters.*)³²⁴

Elizabeth's words are not only a startling admission of culpability; they serve to humanize her in a way that was lacking in the opening acts of the play. There she was presented as always, almost robotically, occupying the moral high ground. Here she is presented as a woman who has asked even more pertinent questions about that high ground only to have the (religious) insight that she too had a part in the calamity. Her acknowledgment that "it needs a cold wife to prompt lechery" in no way exculpates her husband but it does acknowledge that multiple conditions must be fulfilled in order for an event to occur. This startling admission only makes Elizabeth seem more discerning and, therefore, more admirable. In contrast, Oedipus expresses not even a modicum of self-ownership and personal responsibility. His character now is, as we pointed out in Chapter 1, consistent with his character the end of *Oedipus Tyrannus*, obstinate and cocksure to the last.

Sophocles tempers this quarrel between Creon and Oedipus with the return to the stage of Antigone (and, off stage, Ismene). Antigone tells her overjoyed father that, "Theseus and his men/Rescued both of us" (1103-1104). We note that Theseus finds Antigone, a woman, important enough to save and worth the risk whereas

³²⁴ Arthur Miller. *The Crucible*. (New York: Penguin Books, 1982), Act IV. p. 137.

Creon's only acknowledgment of her presence is to abduct her. The rescue, which has healed part of a fractured family, cements Theseus' legacy as the vanguard of healing and champion of the vulnerable; he has lived up to his word and foiled the abduction without fanfare: "As for the way we won the fight/I've no need to gloat about that" (1146-1147). Oedipus is so moved by the gesture, he celebrates the new community he has discovered; a community which is committed to healing and compassion. He tells us, "In all my wanderings, this is the only place/Where I have found truth, honor and justice./I am well aware of how much I stand in your debt,/Without your help I would have nothing at all,/Let me shake your hand, dear king,/And kiss your cheek in deep gratitude" (1125-1128). Theseus' compassion has opened Oedipus' eyes (at least for the moment) to a different mode of patriarchy; it is authoritative but not authoritarian, firm but loving.³²⁵ McCoy eloquently points out that Oedipus is finally able to "see" himself through his blindness from the perspective of another who accepts him irrespective of his wounds and "cursed" status:

When Theseus goes to rescue Ismene and Antigone from their uncle, he tells his army to go to a crossroads in order to bring them home (901). We might remember that the murder of Oedipus' father also took place at a crossroads. This 'second crossroads' at which Theseus' men act is representative of a turning in Oedipus' fate. While the first crossroads was the site of his pollution, this second crossroads becomes the locus of his own acceptance. In listening to and receiving Oedipus' story, a story that heretofore has only caused him shame, Theseus allows Oedipus to participate in a kind of self observation of himself from the perspective of others. While Oedipus has already learned some compassion for himself in the years since his exile from Thebes, this compassion and a kind of peace arise when he can see himself through Theseus' eyes. His blindness, he learns, is not only the metaphorical

³²⁵ I am indebted to Boston College Professor William Kilpatrick's distinction between three types of parents: authoritarian, authoritative and permissive. I'm not sure if this taxonomy is his exclusively but I recall learning it in his Adolescent Psychology class, circa 1998.

blindness he had of his own identity in the murder and incest and his literal, self-inflicted blindness. Oedipus has also been blind to the possibility of full reconciliation and acceptance into the community.³²⁶

Upon extending his hand in gratitude to Theseus, Oedipus remembers his own pollution and recoils: “But what am I doing?/I’m a vile wretch/You must not touch me,/I’m stained with indelible evil!/No, you must never touch me” (1131-1135). Theseus shows, yet again, a circumspect empathy, having witnessed Oedipus so moved in the presence of his reunited children. His actions indicate that, contrary to Oedipus’ proclamation, nothing is indelible; intelligent human action has the power to rectify the mischief of bias. Theseus says, “It’s perfectly natural that you/Would indulge yourself a little/In greeting your own children./I understand, you should think/About them before me” (1138-1142). Again, Theseus shows an uncanny ability to see the world from the perspective of the other. This comes from asking the further question for intelligence, either implicitly or explicitly, “what must it be like to be in their shoes?”

Despite the newfound understanding Oedipus gains in this scene, vis-à-vis the virtues of mercy and compassion, the understanding proves to be short-lived, as old biases seem to die hard. The arrival of Polynices brings into relief that while Oedipus’ biases have been quelled temporarily, they are far from dead. In the final section of the play, as Polynices arrives upon the scene initially as a stranger, Sophocles unites the voices of Theseus and Antigone into a mini-chorus of practical wisdom, placing the protector of the vulnerable with the vulnerable one herself on the side of reason, wisdom and compassion. They both encourage Oedipus not to fall victim to his own

³²⁶ McCoy, *Wounded Heroes*, 54.

imperious ways and, at least, listen to Polynices. Again, both are presented as foils to Oedipus' obstinacy, suggesting in unison that wisdom dictates that Oedipus should, at least, "hear him out." Oedipus calls Polynices an "enemy" and says, "To hear him would torture me" (1173-1174). Theseus replies, "Can't you at least listen to what he has to say - /He can't force you to do anything./What harm could there be in hearing him out?" (1175-1177). He then reminds Oedipus that if wisdom is not enough to compel the hearing, sacred obligation is, "You have a sacred obligation/To a suppliant, that's heaven's law" (1179-1180). This is the same sacred obligation to which Theseus deferred in giving Oedipus a hearing at the opening of the play. Oedipus, in typical fashion, fails to recognize the irony that in denying Polynices a hearing, he is undermining the very obligation that has heretofore guaranteed his safety in *Colonus*. Further, Theseus defers to something outside himself (sacred space) as the source for overcoming bias.

Antigone, ever humble in her role as woman and child, and sensing the opportunity for potential healing and growth, adds, "Father, I know I'm too young/To give you advice, but please listen/To me now. Let the king have what he wants;/At least then you will do right by the gods" (1181-1183). We can only take these lines ironically, as Antigone is clearly old enough to give her truculent father advice and that a culture whose dictum is to deny the voice of young women stands on the wrong side of reasonableness. Further, in yet another moment indicative of his lack of discernment, Oedipus fails to discern an additional irony: that, genetically speaking, just as Antigone is no less his daughter than his sister, Polynices is no more his son than his own brother, given the incestuous union with Jocasta. In continuing to

uphold and perpetuate the enmity between himself and Polynices, Oedipus is effectively doubling the fraternal quarrel that has raised his ire in the first place – between Polynices and Eteocles. It is yet another moment indicating the contradictions within Oedipus' thinking – contradictions which would be rooted out if Oedipus deigned to self-appropriate.

The scene concludes with an exchange that may be the best summation of the viewpoint that *Colonus*, in all of its liminal beauty, represents an antidote to Theban patriarchal obstinacy and is therefore symbolic of the healing and redemption that can reverse group bias. As Oedipus, Creon and now Polynices flex their muscles and bloviate in anger, Antigone, with Theseus approving, says with equanimity,

You are still his father, and even
 If he had committed the worst offenses
 Against you, it is simply not right
 To meet them wrong for wrong.
 Show him some kindness.
 You are not the only father
 To have had a prodigal son
 Who has provoked anger.
 Let your friends pacify you,
 Forget here and now
 And consider things past;
 Remember what you were forced
 To endure on account of your parents.
 You know very well how rage
 Only serves to breed evil.
 Your own blind eyes testify to that.
 Do this for us and don't be so harsh,
 You have been treated so kindly here,
 Return their generosity and show compassion. (1189-1203)

It is fitting that Peter Meineck chooses to translate Line 1190-1192 with "You are not

the only father/To have had a prodigal son.”³²⁷ For in the more famous prodigal son story from the *Gospel of Luke*, the father famously shows a supernatural compassion toward his returned son. The human – all too human – thing to do in the situation would be to rage against his returning son for being so profligate and irresponsible and yet, the father shows a grace and mercy (*aidos*) that it is so shocking because it seems beyond our essential human capacity. But the father’s grace must be shocking in order to be a fitting metaphor for God’s grace. Oedipus, in contrast to Theseus and Antigone, is “human, all too human.” While he indeed consents (reluctantly) to the meeting with Polynices, it ends badly as his temper flares. And while the sour note may seem to be an inevitability or fate-bound, now, in the light of our analysis of the social surd, it seems more like a byproduct of habitual bias which has shrunk the range of Oedipus’ effective freedom.

As I mentioned earlier, Polynices, for his part, claims to be seeking Mercy³²⁸ but we get the sense that, like Creon, he too acts in self-interest. He needs his father’s power to win the civil war he wages against his brother. He tells Oedipus at line 1345-1346, “With you on my side – victory!/Without you – I am lost.” As Long points out, Polynices gives Oedipus the opportunity to “reflect upon the present situation from an intergenerational perspective.” Oedipus hears these words but, of course, he does not listen. He tells us that he has really only listened to Polynices out of respect for Theseus (totally neglecting Antigone’s role in persuading him, of course). He then

³²⁷ Jebb’s translation reads: “Other men too have evil offspring and a sharp anger, but they hear advice and are charmed from their mood by the gentle spells of friends.”

³²⁸ Mercy (*Aidos*) was, like Justice (*Dike*), personified.

pulls the curtain back on his son's self-interested motives, saying, "You forced out your own father,/Denied him house and home,/Turned him into a tattered old tramp!/And now you come here/Crying your eyes out to see me/In such a state. Are these tears for me – /Or your own similar predicament?" (1357-1360). Oedipus fails to discern in these lines that, as Shakespeare acknowledges in *Macbeth*, "blood will have blood" or, as Antigone pointed out to him earlier, "Rage only serves to breed evil." Oedipus, in other words, in his obstinacy, resists the mantle of his privileged position as father to be the agent of familial healing, via grace and mercy, simply because he cannot see past an emotional grudge. This failure exposes the crucial irony of the ending: in spite of his forthcoming role as a "supernatural" protector of *Colonus*, Oedipus misses the opportunity to act "supernaturally" in the realm of real life. Instead, human all too human, he becomes like the Delphic oracle to his own son and can only perpetuate the cycle of patriarchal violence and bias. His actions become analogous to his own father's choice to commit infanticide long ago and his words to Polynices, "You have no father, just this curse" become eerily reminiscent of his own childhood:

Get away from me, you bastard!
 You have no father, just this curse:
 You'll never occupy Thebes;
 You'll never return to Argos;
 You'll kill your own brother;
 Your own brother will kill you"
 I curse you in the name of Tarturus,
 Father of never-ending darkness,
 In the name of the Furies and Ares
 Who infected your brain with violence.
 Go and tell that to your confederates
 And hear it echo in the streets of Thebes.
 This is the blessing that Oedipus
 Has conferred upon his sons! (1385-1396).

Consistent with our model, *Colonus* ends with a tribute to love (φιλεῖν) and restoration imagery not unlike those found in the prophetic books of the Hebrew Bible (*Amos* and *Hosea* come to mind). The Messenger, who delivers the news of Oedipus' death, provides Oedipus' final words to his daughters. They are words of love.

When Oedipus heard these mournful cries,
He opening his arms up wide and said:
"Children – this is the day, I have to go.
All things come to an end, and you are now free
From the burden of caring for me. I know
How difficult this is for you,
But there is one small word that can soothe –
And that is 'love.' I loved you more than
Anyone else could ever love, but now
Your lives must go on without me. (1610-1619)³²⁹

It seems Oedipus' tragic story will produce a supernatural good – but for Athens, not for surded Thebes, and only as a result of Theseus' extraordinary if not supernatural overture. Athens, like its king, will become a community rooted in the transcendental precepts. We do not lose sight, in the fog of Oedipus' obstinacy, that

³²⁹ The Greek is as follows:

ὁ δ' ὥς ἀκούει φθόγγον ἐξαίφνης πικρόν,
πτύξας ἐπ' αὐταῖς χεῖρας εἶπεν: ὦ τέκνα,
οὐκ ἔστ' ἔθ' ὑμῖν τῇδ' ἐν ἡμέρᾳ πατήρ.
ὄλωλε γὰρ δὴ πάντα τὰμά, κούκέτι
τὴν δυσπρόνητον ἔξετ' ἀμφ' ἐμοὶ τροφήν:
1615σκληρὰν μὲν οἶδα, παῖδες: ἀλλ' ἐν γὰρ μόνον
τὰ πάντα λύει ταῦτ' ἔπος μοχθήματα.
τὸ γὰρ φιλεῖν οὐκ ἔστιν ἐξ ὅτου πλέον
ἢ τοῦδε τάνδρὸς ἔσχεθ', οὗ τητώμεναι
τὸ λοιπὸν ἤδη τὸν βίον διάζετον.

Theseus has been paying keen attention to the saga and remains open to the many insights about the human condition that have been revealed in the grove of Eumenides. Long writes, the play “builds again toward a more hopeful possibility, for if Antigone’s voice falls upon the deaf ears of Oedipus and Polyneices, it is perhaps heard by Theseus, for he too was there when she offered counsel to her father and he shows himself compassionate and open to persuasion.”³³⁰

Likewise, at the end of his chapter on the “human good” in *Method in Theology*, Lonergan offers the following key point: “As self-transcendence promotes progress, so the refusal of self-transcendence turns progress into cumulative decline.”³³¹ This point aligns with the end of “*Colonus*,” as we witness Oedipus’ failure to achieve a level of self-transcendence that would have him admit to at least a modicum of culpability.

As Woodruff notes,

We look in vain for this play to show us what we have learned to expect toward the end of ancient tragic drama – a scene in which the hero recognizes where he has gone wrong and a scene in which the hero’s actions lead to a reversal of fortune. Our Oedipus does not know himself any better at the end of the play than at the beginning. On his last day, he has only one regret – that he did have regrets immediately after learning whom he had killed and whom he had married. Now, in place of regrets, he has excuses.³³²

In fact, Sophocles’ portrayal of Oedipus at the end of *Colonus* is quite the opposite of a man who has experienced the self-transcendence of, say, Lear, who, as Woodruff also notes, represents an opposing trajectory. In contrast to Oedipus, “Lear loses

³³⁰ Long, “A Father’s Touch,” 16.

³³¹ Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 55.

³³² Sophocles, O.C., lvi.

control of events as his life draws to its close, and he learns both to understand himself and to accept his weakness as a 'poor forked creature.'" ³³³ Instead it is Theseus who becomes the vanguard for hope. As McCoy has argued, it is Theseus who is "the true hero of *Oedipus at Colonus*, for he is the reversal of Oedipus, a man who began in exile, but ends in gentle rule...Theseus is the true possessor of wisdom in this dialogue, even as Oedipus is Athens guarantor of its longevity."³³⁴ Oedipus' final moments therefore, when viewed from a perspective that sees Theseus as hero and vanguard of redemption, present yet another challenge to the Nietzschean reading of Sophocles. Given all that Nietzsche has to say about Sophocles' apparent indictment of "wisdom as an offence against nature," one wonders if he ever read *Colonus* and, if he did, how he could reconcile those words with the play? In fact, Nietzsche did read "*Colonus*." In *The Birth of Tragedy*, he writes, about the play's conclusion,

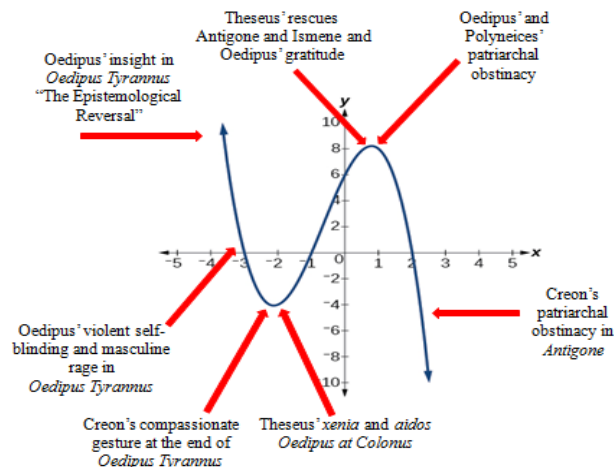
We encounter this same serenity in *Oedipus at Colonus*, but here it is elevated into infinite transfiguration; in this play the old man, stricken with an excess of suffering, an exposed, purely as a *suffering being*, to all that affects him, is contrasted with the unearthly serenity which comes down from the sphere of the gods as a sign to us that in his purely passive behavior the hero achieves the highest form of activity, which has consequences reaching far beyond his own life, whereas all his conscious words and actions in his life hitherto have merely led to his passivity. Thus the trial-knot of the story of Oedipus, which strikes the moral eye as inextricably tangled, is slowly unraveled – and we are overcome by the most profound human delight at this matching piece of divine dialectic. If our explanation has done justice to the poet, the question remains whether the content of the myth has been exhausted thereby; at this point it becomes plain that the poet's whole interpretation of the story is nothing other than one of those images of

³³³ Sophocles, O.C., lvi.

³³⁴ McCoy, *Wounded Heroes*, 62.

light held out to us by healing nature after we have gazed into the abyss.³³⁵

This reading of *Colonus* jibes with Nietzsche's basic attack on stillness, passivity, inactivity and asceticism. It is odd, however, that Nietzsche attributes the healing ending as a function of human passivity and that Oedipus' redemptive death is, on Nietzsche's view, like "light held out to us by healing nature." Nietzsche's viewpoint neglects that it is Theseus' freely chosen compassionate and loving gesture which sets the initial conditions for the possibility of the "light of healing nature." Thus, on my reading, the Oedipus cycle may be more accurately represented by the image below:



Theseus as Anticipating Cooperative Grace

At this juncture in my analysis I should point out that, despite the emphasis I have placed upon a sustained, intellectual effort which aspires to fidelity to the self-correcting cycle of learning, bias cannot, on Lonergan's view, be conquered by that sustained intellectual effort alone. Our wills are not that strong. We need help from

³³⁵ Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 47.

a source beyond us. Lonergan was, after all, a Jesuit priest and is unequivocal in his claim that, ultimately, bias is conquered only by an unconditional love which is a gift from God. He points out that, in the Christian tradition, it is the gift of grace – “God’s love flooding our hearts through the Holy Spirit given to us” – that is a necessary precondition for correcting the mischief of bias. This is not to say that the self-correcting cycle becomes obsolete. Quite the contrary. In the language of logic, the sustained intellectual effort of the self-correcting cycle of learning is a necessary but not a sufficient condition to conquer bias. Yes, religious conversion in a person is a new, existential level of consciousness but, as Lonergan writes, this new orientation in no way,

interferes with or weakens his devotion to the truth. He still needs truth, for he must apprehend reality and real potentiality before he can deliberately respond to value. The truth he needs is still the truth attained in accord with the exigencies of rational consciousness. But now his pursuit of it is all the more secure because he has been armed against bias, and it is all the more meaningful and significant because it occurs within, and plays an essential role in, the far richer context of the pursuit of all values.³³⁶

Although an extended discussion of religious conversion need not detain us here for too long, it is still valuable to our analysis to note that Lonergan describes three “modalities” of self-transcendence: “Intellectual conversion is to truth attained by cognitional self-transcendence. Moral conversion is to values apprehended, affirmed and realized by a real self-transcendence.”³³⁷ We have already seen these first two moments of self-transcendence in *Oedipus Tyrannus*, as Oedipus goes beyond

³³⁶ Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 242.

³³⁷ Ibid.

himself to understand and know the truth of his identity and then, when he fails, due to his distorted affective self, to achieve an analogous moral conversion by asking questions of value (see Chapter 1).

We have not, however, seen the third mode of self-transcendence, religious conversion, which, for Lonergan, is an unrestricted being in love with a “mysterious, uncomprehended God.”³³⁸ This unrestricted being in love constitutes a third form of self-transcendence and, retrospectively, will appear to be an “undertow” felt in all pursuits. Lonergan claims that unrestricted being in love is “total and permanent self-surrender without conditions, qualifications, reservations ... a dynamic state that is prior to and principle of subsequent acts. It is revealed in retrospect as an under-tow of existential consciousness, as a fated acceptance of a vocation to holiness, as perhaps an increasing simplicity and passivity in prayer. It is interpreted differently in the context of different religious traditions.”³³⁹

Drawing on Augustine, Lonergan cites the distinction between operative grace, which is “the replacement of the heart of stone by a heart of flesh, a replacement beyond the horizon of the heart of stone” and the social element, cooperative grace, “the heart of flesh becoming effective in good works through human freedom.”³⁴⁰ If bias is to be conquered, in other words, the ultimate ground for that conquering will come from a liberation outside the agent’s own native resources. And while unrestricted being in love is analogous to the unrestricted

³³⁸ Ibid.

³³⁹ Ibid., 241

³⁴⁰ Ibid.

desire to know, the analogy breaks down in relation to both its agency and its ultimate orientation – whether toward this world or another. Thus, in *Method and Theology*, Lonergan writes,

All human pursuit of the true and the good is included within and furthered by a cosmic context and purpose and, as well, there now accrues to man the power of love to enable him to accept the suffering involved in undoing the effects of decline. It is not to be thought, however, that religious conversion means no more than a new and more efficacious ground for the pursuit of intellectual and moral ends. Religious loving is without conditions, qualifications, reservations; it is with all one's heart and all one's soul and all one's mind and all one's strength. This lack of limitation, though it corresponds to the unrestricted character of human questioning, *does not pertain to this world*.³⁴¹

On the one hand, this viewpoint would seem to represent a juncture at which Lonergan's thought simply does not and cannot apply to a classical text, such as *Oedipus Tyrannus* or *Oedipus at Colonus*. Lonergan's notion of unrestricted being in love (with God) and his further distinctions of operative and cooperative grace would seem to be anachronistic.

And yet, if we recall the final line of the passage above, Lonergan claims that unrestricted being in love is "interpreted differently in the context of different religious traditions."³⁴² Perhaps there is a sense, then, in which Theseus' almost otherworldly commitment to reverence (*aidos*) for the sacred space of Colonus, and his compassionate commitment to care for the stranger (*xenia*), more closely approximates or, at the very least, anticipates the almost supernatural dynamism of the authentic moral conversion Lonergan seems to have in mind. As we have seen,

³⁴¹ Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 242, my italics.

³⁴² *Ibid.*, 241

there are moments in which Theseus relies on the dynamism of his own native intelligence and others in which something beyond him seems to be at work, as if a precursor to the supernatural moral disposition of the father in Luke's "Parable of the Prodigal Son."

Now, it is true that within the secondary literature on *Oedipus at Colonus* there is a debate about Theseus' motivations, especially given his mythical past.³⁴³ Here I am taking the Athenian version of Theseus. As McCoy reminds us, "In the Athenian sensibility, Theseus was seen as the unifier of Athens, who brought all in Athens to live together (συννοικισμός) under a common ruler and a capital city, instead of being a number of demes or villages."³⁴⁴ It is this Theseus who, although he cannot be situated within the Christian tradition, anticipates a human capacity for self-transcendence that seems beyond merely a strong-willed exertion of native intelligence. Further, Theseus, in his care for Oedipus and reverence for the space, seems to recognize that his self-transcendence may be integrated into the life of his city, even including Oedipus, a polluted one, in his scheme. As McCoy points out, Theseus construes Oedipus' wounds not as "mark of his necessary exclusion from society" but, instead, as "constitutive of his humanity."³⁴⁵ Theseus, in other words, becomes the closest approximation to a character possessed of an individual grace (also, *aidos*) who then applies what he understands, knows and feels in a proto,

³⁴³ See Woodruff and Meineck's introduction to *Oedipus at Colonus* in *Theban Plays*. Page lxvi. Some of the scholars mentioned are Reinhardt (1947), Blundell (1989) and Wilson (1997).

³⁴⁴ McCoy, *Wounded Heroes*, 59.

³⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 54.

operative grace. This description seems to fit insofar as the result of Theseus' efforts, at least in Sophocles' world, becomes a corrective antidote against bias in Athens. Ironically, despite being used by Theseus as an instrument of cooperative grace in Athens, Oedipus himself is incapable of the self-transcendence (and is even incapable, as we have shown, of moral transcendence) and his city, Thebes, is condemned to suffer decline in the next generation as bias in all its forms reigns supreme.

We might conclude then that while Theseus' commitment to *aidos* and *xenia* is not the full unrestricted "being in love with a mysterious, uncomprehended God" that Lonergan describes, he is certainly a closer approximation than is Oedipus. For in contrast to Theseus, as McCoy notes,

The Oedipus of *Colonus* is an angry man, despite what his initial words about learning endurance might seem to indicate. While Oedipus seeks pity for himself and his polluted state, he shows little compassion for what might have led his sons to pursue lives apart from accompanying him in his wanderings. His focus on whether they are living 'good' lives centers entirely around whether their devotion to their father has been sufficient. There is more than a little irony in Oedipus' judgment of his sons; after all, his parricide would seem to exceed their negligence of him in degree of moral failure.³⁴⁶

The Last Lines of *Colonus* and the Apparent Revocability of Fate

We may now transition to Chapter 4, a discussion of human freedom, by drawing attention to what is said at the very end of *Oedipus at Colonus* vis-à-vis the possibility of correcting, via intelligent human agency, the cycle of decline. Significant in these final lines is that Sophocles provides every indication that the tragedy depicted in *Antigone* is not a *fait accompli*. In fact, Antigone's words to her brother

³⁴⁶ Ibid., 50.

(and to us) seem to be sobering reminders that if bias is corrected, the cycle of decline can and will stop and that stopping it is well within our essentially human potential. In light of this insight, the coming tragedy Sophocles depicts in the *Antigone* is, on my view, less about the continued family curse and more about the inability of patriarchs to rise above their biases and the constricting conditions they cumulatively set for their progeny.

Recall that in light of the curse his father Oedipus has called down upon him, Polynices asks his sisters to remember him and give him proper burial rites, anticipating the dialectical conflict of the *Antigone*. In yet another moment indicative of Antigone's wisdom (and also disregarded), she sums up the ontological status of freedom in the play lest we forget. She tells Polynices, "Save yourself before it's too late –/Call back your forces, spare Thebes" (1416-1417). When Polynices refuses out of a typical masculine pride and bravado, fearing he will lose his army's respect, Antigone identifies that her brother's flaw is her father's (her other brother), asking at line 1420, "Why do you always burst into anger?"

Antigone, who has by now established herself as a voice of insight, then sums up the freedom-determinism dichotomy, lines which offer us a direct insight into how Sophocles must have viewed the metaphysical "rules" of his created universe: "Can't you see, you are fulfilling his curse./He's already said you are going to die!" (1424-1425). A few lines later, she asks, "Brother, will nothing change your mind?" (1431). Polynices replies with an exhortation to what is, almost paradoxically, willed fatalism, Nothing can stop it now.
I see my way ahead,
Though my father and his curses
Make it a harrowing journey.

I just hope that Zeus will bless you
 With a happier future, especially
 If you honor me with a proper burial
 When I die. Let me go now;
 You'll never see me alive again. (1432-1438)

Nevertheless, in spite of this fatalistic proclamation, at the very end of the play, Antigone says, "Send us back home to Thebes./We must try to stop the slaughter/And save both of our brothers" (1769-1771). Sophocles provides zero indication here that Antigone is not free despite the fact that we, as audience, know in advance Antigone's plans will fail. The dark irony of these lines would not have been lost on Sophocles' Greek audience who, when watching "*Colonus*," would have been quite familiar with the *The Antigone* which was composed in 441 BC, roughly 40 years earlier than *Tyrannus* and *Colonus*. In a point to which I will now turn in the final chapter, a discussion of freedom and determinism, this exchange seems to sum up the ontological status of human freedom vis-à-vis the concept of "fate" in the play. Antigone gives every indication that her brother is effectively free to choose not to return to Thebes and meet his so-called "fate." Her brother, however, so indoctrinated by the surded Theban milieu whence he fled, is far too biased and the scotoma in his thinking essentially precludes him from exercising his effective freedom which would enlarge the "luminous area" of choice out into what Lonergan calls the "penumbra."

Chapter Four

The Surrounding Penumbra: Freedom, Decision, Moral Impotence and Liberation in the Theban Plays

Introduction

In Chapter 3, I argued that *Oedipus Tyrannus* and *Oedipus at Colonus*, when taken together, showcase the way in which a community may be either hostile to or friendly toward the unrestricted desire to know of its citizenry. Recall that not one but two sets of monarchs, Laius and Jocasta of Thebes and Polybus and Merope of Corinth, attempt to suppress Oedipus' unrestricted desire to know which, I argued, set conditions for the realization of disastrous consequences. I adduced from their decisions a viewpoint, consistent with Lonergan's, that a culture generally hostile to questioning becomes an irresponsible and biased culture and, therefore, inevitably declines, as Thebes and Corinth indeed do.

In contrast, *Colonus*, with its intelligent and gracious monarch, Theseus, at the helm, represents a community of potential; a community more open to questioning and one whose denizens achieve insights that set conditions for realizing new courses of action, specifically healing. Within the liminal space of *Colonus*, Oedipus, the byproduct of biased Corinth and Thebes, enjoys new insights via Theseus' grace which "open" his eyes to the heretofore denied possibility of real wisdom (as opposed to cleverness) as well as the possibility of a compassionate community. Recall Oedipus' words to Theseus: "In all my wanderings, this is the only place./Where I have found truth, honor and justice./I am well aware of how much I stand in your debt,/Without your help I would have nothing at all" (Lines 1125-1128). As McCoy

rightly notes, Oedipus has “been blind to the possibility of full reconciliation and acceptance into the community.”³⁴⁷

Nevertheless, in spite of *Colonus*’ power to “open” his eyes to the *possibility* of self-transcendence, Oedipus, unlike Creon in *The Antigone* for example, remains obstinate and fails to *actualize* self-transcendence in his decisions and action, a comment on the way in which his Theban and Corinthian infused “scotosis” may have irrevocably tainted his “antecedent willingness,” an important Lonergan phrase to which I will return shortly.

At this point in my analysis one might object, asking, but can we really *blame* Oedipus for his failure to discern and take ownership of his own calamity? After all, it was not his fault that he was abandoned by his parents, a pivotal decision which, in one sense, set all forthcoming events in motion. Worse, if we try to lay blame on Oedipus, don’t we, as Dodds warns, make the same mistake as the Victorian critics, perverting Aristotle’s *hamartia* into the dubious and anachronistic concept of the “tragic flaw”?³⁴⁸ After all, Oedipus’ fortune changes, as Aristotle correctly notes, from good to bad “not through badness of character but on account of a great missing of the mark.”³⁴⁹ Oedipus, in other words, is a victim of perverse circumstance.

³⁴⁷ McCoy, *Wounded Heroes*, 54.

³⁴⁸ E.R. Dodds, “On Misunderstanding the ‘Oedipus Rex’.” (*Greece and Rome*, 1966).

³⁴⁹ Aristotle. *Poetics*. Trans. Joe Sachs. (Newburyport, MA: Focus Publishing, 2005), 1453a. Hereafter referred to as *Poetics*. In a point to which I will return, the concept of “hamartia” is, for Aristotle, a “great missing of the mark” in the sense of a mistake or error made in ignorance, not a vicious character.

One may further object that there are more philosophically extravagant reasons for why blaming Oedipus might be a dubious enterprise. I have already argued, for example, that a community hostile to questioning will invariably present challenges to any agent living within the so-called “cycle of decline” in his attempt to achieve authenticity, as he absorbs through indoctrination the perverse attitudes and habits of his cultural milieu, neglecting those questions that would liberate both him and his fellow citizens. Recall Byrne: “Since this surd, rather than perfect authenticity, characterizes the lives of most people, to a lesser or greater extent, it poses the profound question about the possibility of living a truly good, authentic life.”³⁵⁰ It may be the case that, because we find ourselves living within the surd, we become irrevocably biased via indoctrination, unable to develop the habits necessary to fully capitalize on the freedom of which we seem ontologically capable. And if we are incapable, then pinning blame to the agent may indeed be misdirected.

For example, as we showed in Chapter 2, contrary to the Messenger’s suggestion that he chose freely (“The worst pain is self-chosen, deliberate” (1231)), Oedipus’ supposed “choice” to gouge out his own eyes did not seem at all to be function of rational self-consciousness, deliberation or discernment, in line with some of the other choices he makes, but rather an impetuous decision that we inferred was the byproduct of poor habits that, apparently, germinated in Corinth and were, apparently, allowed to flourish in Thebes.³⁵¹ Viewed from another equally

³⁵⁰ P. H. Byrne, *Ethics of Discernment*, 314.

³⁵¹ Ironically, this is a choice Oedipus too cites as one of his most freely chosen: “But I did this...By my own hand. Why should I have eyes/When there is nothing

deterministic angle, might we argue that Oedipus' "choice" to gouge out his eyes is yet another byproduct of the rage he inherited from his father, Laius? Oedipus might therefore be symbolic of the human surd: he is an admixture of the rational and the irrational, discernment and caprice. His failure to take any ownership of his fate may be yet another example of the overwhelming power of these external forces (environmental and genetic) and the consequent impotence of human willingness.

These concerns, and the trajectory of this kind of analysis, leads inevitably to the proverbial elephant in the room: human freedom. It is not, after all, self-evident that we are free to pursue authenticity. We live in a world beset on all sides with obstacles, ranging from physical restraints to incomplete information to total cultural indoctrination. In fact, a viewpoint that holds we are radically free (and by extension, blameworthy in many instances) might be deemed an extra-philosophical assumption, a naïve metaphysical stance. Isn't it the case that too many obstacles preclude us from achieving self-appropriation? And if we are truly precluded from achieving authenticity by sundry external forces, such as a biased, declining culture on the one hand, or, perhaps, as more recent arguments go, our neural substrate on the other, then we are not free. And if we are not free, Lonergan's analysis becomes irrelevant, does it not?

And yet, this question, of whether we truly autonomously choose the trajectory of our own lives is, quite explicitly, at the heart of *Oedipus Tyrannus*. Was Oedipus fate-bound to become an incestuous parricide? Could he have chosen

sweet to see?" (1333-1335). This poor diagnosis is perhaps yet another example of Oedipus' failure to self-appropriate.

otherwise? Does an expectation that he will achieve some sort of intellectual conversion at the end of the play betoken a naïve worldview about the things we can control in life? Do we even have the right to demand such a conversion? These kinds of questions lead to a hermeneutical crisis of sorts; they naturally lead us away from and out of the text and become broader metaphysical questions that we begin to ask of ourselves. Are we free? Are we fated to do what we do? Are the concepts of freedom and fate mutually exclusive? What do we even mean by them? That a play could elicit such a barrage of metaphysical questions is the hallmark of Sophocles' power as a dramatist.

In light of these questions, I follow, if only as a preliminary step, Charles Segal's exhortation that in order to offer any fresh approach to *Oedipus Tyrannus* one must "remove a few layers of misconception."³⁵² The first misconception identified by Segal is this: "This is *not* a play about free will versus determinism." He later adds, "the issues of destiny, predetermination, and foreknowledge are raised as problems, *not* as dogma."³⁵³ In fact, as Dodds also points out, the modern "position and counter-position," to use Lonergan's terminology, which pits free will vs. determinism, would have been anachronistic if applied to a 5th century dramatist and his audience. Instead, Sophocles offers, at least implicitly, a kind of compatibilism, to use another anachronistic phrase; certain actions are "fate-bound" but, as Knox adds, almost as a warning to any would-be determinist interpreter, "Neither in Homer nor in Sophocles does divine foreknowledge of certain events imply that all human actions are

³⁵² Segal, *Tragic Heroism*, 53.

³⁵³ *Ibid.*, 54.

predetermined... Certain of Oedipus' past actions were fate-bound; but everything that [Oedipus] does on the stage from first to last he does as free agent."³⁵⁴

I will suggest here that if that if Segal's claim is true, namely, that there is no metaphysical dogma to be extracted from Sophocles' work, the unintended irony of the play is that it nevertheless affirms a dogma in spite of itself: that human freedom is enlarged by human intelligence, insofar as intelligence specifies, via practical insights and practical judgments of facts and values, a range of choices for the will to select. It follows that ignorance, bias and moral impotence, in blocking or shrinking this range of choices, limit our effective freedom to the point at which we are incapable of fully actualizing our essential freedom. Of course, for Lonergan, this is more like an empirical fact than a dogma and it stands at the heart of his. Thus he writes,

Now the same laws hold for the occurrence of practical insights as for insights generally, and so it is that the greater the development of one's practical intelligence, the greater the range of possible courses of action one can grasp and consider. Inversely, the less the development of one's practical intelligence, the less the range of possible courses of action that here and now will occur to one.³⁵⁵

And so, while I am sympathetic to the danger of claiming that the tragedians have a "point to make," Sophocles' rich exploitation of the equation between the expanding and contracting range of human freedom and intelligence seems undeniable. Equally undeniable is that in contrast to some of the other dialectical tensions he exposes in his plays; in this particular case, Sophocles may be taking a

³⁵⁴ Knox, *Oedipus at Thebes*, 42.

³⁵⁵ Lonergan, *Insight*, 646.

side. We now ask whether, for Sophocles, freedom and intelligence are directly proportional and freedom and ignorance are inversely proportional?

The controversy of accepting such an equation seems to be the corollary that follows from it: Sophocles is far more consistent with the philosophers of his day.³⁵⁶ As Socrates says near the end of *The Republic*, “ephemeral souls...Virtue knows no master; each will possess it to a greater or less degree, depending on whether he values or disdains it. The responsibility lies with the one who makes the choice; the god has none.”³⁵⁷ Might Sophocles, in spite of his apparent reverence for and belief in the gods, be recommending a viewpoint, shared by Lonergan and Plato, that far from an “epistemological reversal,” the unrestricted desire to know or “the examined life” opens new vistas of choice while a failure to question leads to a darkness and a blindness that only *feels* like or *seems* like inexorable fate?

I would contend that Sophocles, like all provocative writers, preys upon the *a priori* metaphysical assumptions of his audience which, even if diametrically opposed as “dogma,” can be equally accommodated. For example, if a reader is a card-carrying materialist-reductionist he will see Oedipus as determined by forces beyond his control. If the reader is sympathetic to a worldview, more akin to Lonergan’s, in which human agency has the power to control not only the psycho-neural substrate but the environment in which that substrate subsists – barring, of course, psychic abnormalities – then he will be critical of Oedipus’ choices and look for the various

³⁵⁶ Particularly, as I will mention in the “Epilogue,” undergraduate philosophy courses still tend to situate Sophocles as somehow “opposed” to Socrates, Plato and Aristotle.

³⁵⁷ Plato, *Republic*, 617d.

flaws (of intellect and character) in the chain of events that ultimately lead to the miasma. In this way, the real power of the drama is the way in which Sophocles accommodates “position and counterposition.”

McCoy rightly notes, *Oedipus Tyrannus*’ “supreme dramatic tension arises from a figure who somehow both acts freely and yet, in such ignorance that he seems incapable of genuine freedom.”³⁵⁸ And yet, by the time we arrive at *Colonus*, we cannot help but detect a development in Sophocles’ thought. In *Colonus*, Oedipus seems to wield far more control over the trajectory of his life, presumably because he is older, wiser and, symbolized by his blindness, he understands now that genuine knowledge is more than just “taking a look.” Paul Woodruff notes, *Colonus* is not about death but about life, showcasing the way a life may be controlled in its final moments.

At the outset of the play he [Oedipus] may seem resigned to his fate, as would become a homeless old man who is blind and crippled and apparently reduced to depending entirely on the good will of strangers. But as the action moves forward, we see him gathering his strength from where he sits and employing it more and more effectively. He will not be passive. He takes his seat and refuses to move until given good reasons; and when he does move, he does so by choice. When he is in danger, he displays a magnificent eloquence; he knows how to appeal to the pride that Athenians take in their reputation for virtue. Later we will see that he has the power to deliver fatal curses and lifesaving blessings. He knows his power, and he uses it to deadly effect. In all this he knows he is fulfilling oracles, but he is still conscious of his own active power to persuade and ultimately to lead.³⁵⁹

³⁵⁸ McCoy, *Wounded Heroes*, 57.

³⁵⁹ Sophocles, *Oedipus at Colonus*, lv.

Indeed, Woodruff is correct that the Oedipus of “*Colonus*” has *developed*, and is therefore a different man from the Oedipus of “*Tyrannus*.” It would seem to follow from this newfound development and control, that Oedipus would become a perfect candidate for the sort of intellectual conversion Creon experiences. But, as Woodruff neglects to consider, Oedipus’ development is not sustained. He is unable at the end of the play to liberate himself, at least in the way Lonergan uses that term. For the “problem of liberation,” as Lonergan calls it, is rooted in “an incapacity for sustained development,”³⁶⁰ where the operative word is “sustained.” It is not enough, in other words, for an agent to enjoy fresh insights and correct judgments and act on them. He must also sustain this development over time to reach a degree of willingness that requires no need of external persuasion (as Creon receives from the Chorus and acts upon). Oedipus indeed develops, and his development indeed demonstrates potential, but the development ultimately stalls in the end, as he is unable to conquer his own biases vis-à-vis the recognition of his own moral culpability. This failure only further concretizes what I have argued (specifically in Chapter 2) is the most important tension of the play: the way in which Oedipus’ “detached, disinterested, unrestricted desire to know” collides with his “attached, interested and narrow sensitivity and intersubjectivity”³⁶¹ and the way in which the former fails to conquer the latter.

We must reiterate here the premise that Oedipus *has* control. He is no puppet. He is, as Dodds notes, a “free agent.” In fact, significant in both McCoy and Woodruff’s

³⁶⁰ Lonergan, *Insight*, 653.

³⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 654.

analyses is the way in which the freedom to control one's life (and death) does not necessarily contradict the concept of prophecy or fate (*moira*). Prophecy and freely chosen, "willed" decisions are, in other words, not mutually exclusive. Instead, Sophocles describes the human experience as Lonergan does: a curious admixture of irrationality and rationality and thus, as a result, a mixture of human agents who are both bound by bias and liberated by insights, fated and free. In *Insight*, Lonergan writes, "The challenge of history is for man progressively to restrict the realm of chance or fate or destiny and progressively to enlarge the realm of conscious grasp and deliberate choice."³⁶²

Obviously, there are events over which human agents have no control and against which no amount of intelligence could contend. Obviously, there are events over which human agents have very little control and for which intelligence tries its level best against insurmountable odds. Obviously, there are events over which human agents have a good deal of control and wherein intelligence saves the day. There are also events over which we have control but for which, often as a function of ignorance, bias or moral impotence, we claim we lack the control we actually had. Further, we must ask whether in those events in which he had no control, how do our choices afterward regain control or mitigate damage in an intelligent way?

We may come to understand this erroneous judgment in retrospect provided we are willing to ask further questions. But often we neglect to. The play therefore reminds us that one of the most pernicious human tendencies is our uncanny ability to let ourselves off the hook, blaming abstractions like "fate," a faceless bogeyman

³⁶² Ibid., 253.

who is merely the incarnation of our previous unintelligent schemes. This analysis leads to the key question. It seems like Oedipus would be a worthy candidate for intellectual conversion and yet his speech at the end of "*Colonus*" tell us that he would prefer to let himself off the hook. Why? What is Sophocles up to?

In this final chapter I apply to the play Lonergan's rich and highly technical discussion of human freedom to validate the direct proportion (cited above) Lonergan adduces between freedom and intelligence. This reading construes "fate-bound" actions as actions for which prior unintelligent schemes have set conditions that make choosing alternatives low probability events or, at the very least, beyond what a biased person has become "effectively free" to achieve.

Contrary to viewpoints which juxtapose Sophocles as somehow in tension with rationality, I will argue that he provides us with a very commonsense viewpoint. The man who unintelligently chooses to continue to smoke cigarettes every day, for example, might ultimately see his lung cancer as "fate bound." In retrospect, every cigarette will appear to him as "freely chosen" and yet, the end result (cancer) will seem to him inevitable, as if each freely chosen cigarette set more and more mounting conditions which made it nearly impossible to quit and which therefore necessitated an inevitable outcome. As Dodds notes, this commonsense viewpoint, "may not satisfy the analytical philosopher, but it seems to have satisfied the ordinary man at all periods. Bernard Knox aptly quotes the prophecy of Jesus to St. Peter, 'Before the cock crow, thou shalt deny me thrice.' The Evangelists clearly did not intend to imply

that Peter's subsequent action was 'fate-bound' in the sense that he could not have chosen otherwise."³⁶³

Sophocles too exploits this phenomenon: the way past decisions (either by family members or members of the community) seem be interconnected with the present trajectory of a life vis-à-vis an agent's antecedent willingness to choose either intelligent or unintelligent action. Recall Charles Segal's claim that Oedipus invokes the "older paradigm" which suggests, "life is still surrounded by the mysterious forces of the archaic worldview, forces less amenable to human understanding and control" and that "Imbalance or violation in one area will produce some kind of disturbance in another."³⁶⁴ At this point in my analysis it should seem somewhat ironic that Segal describes as an "older paradigm" the viewpoint of nature as "an organically connected network of animate beings that stand in delicately balanced, mutually responsive relations to one another." Is not this view of nature a widely accepted one? Don't many of the lessons of recent scientific inquiry show, sometimes painfully, that human decisions and subsequent actions often have unintended consequences in different, unexpected quadrants? Or, that human decisions and actions often set conditions which make certain trajectories for future generations (almost) impossible to choose, something akin to fate-bound?

The danger in this kind of analysis is, apparently, that one risks being indicted as a "moralist" or "traditionalist" critic, seeking a flaw in Oedipus' character when

³⁶³ Dodds, "On Misunderstanding the 'Oedipus Rex'," 47.

³⁶⁴ Segal, *Tragic Heroism*, 11.

Sophocles provides no real evidence that there is one, at least insofar as no one on the stage ever points one out. Consider Dodds:

'Ah,' says the traditionalist critic, 'but Oedipus' behaviour on the stage reveals the man he always was: he was punished for his basically unsound character.' In that case, however, someone on the stage ought to tell us so: Oedipus should repent, as Creon repents in the *Antigone*; or else another speaker should draw the moral. To ask about a character in fiction 'Was he a good man?' is to ask a strictly meaningless question: since Oedipus never lived we can answer neither 'Yes' nor 'No'. The legitimate question is 'Did Sophocles intend us to think of Oedipus as a good man?' This can be answered-not by applying some ethical yardstick of our own, but by looking at what the characters in the play say about him. And by that test the answer is 'Yes.'³⁶⁵

First, with respect to Dodds' "meaningless question," I would argue that asking questions about Oedipus' character is legitimate enterprise here, within in a philosophy of classics. Unlike the classicist, we are merely exploring a philosophical problem using Oedipus as a case study, not assessing the text vis-à-vis its time-period or social context. Second, it also seems that we may respect Dodds' basic point, and concede with him that Oedipus is generally a "a good man in a bad way" (Line 76), as the "Local" from *Colonus* initially describes him, while also pointing out the opportunities he misses to enlarge his consciousness, the pinnacle of which is his failure to take any ownership or reach any kind of self-appropriation or liberation at the end of the *Theban Plays*. In other words, it seems quite fair, and far from illegitimate, to ask why Oedipus does not repent as, say, Creon does? In this case, the question is not: is Oedipus free? The question is: why is Oedipus seemingly incapable of the essential freedom that is the condition of the possibility of liberation, especially when Creon is the *prima facie* evidence that Sophocles found such conversion to be

³⁶⁵ Dodds, "On Misunderstanding 'Oedipus Rex'," 47.

within our potential, at least ontologically, as human beings? As I will show, Oedipus' character exposes the "problem of liberation," insofar as the contraction of his effective freedom reveals the need for something transcendent, beyond his native resources, to free himself from the shackles of moral impotence.

Lonergan introduces eight key terms that we may recruit to shed light on the action of the play vis-à-vis these key questions: **will, willingness, willing, essential freedom, effective freedom, decision, moral impotence** and **liberation**. I will focus on the last five. In Lonergan's lexicon, our essential freedom is a function of our radical capacity for choice the cause of which is nothing but itself. Our effective freedom, in contrast, is the extent to which we are actually capable of exploiting that over which we are, ontologically, capable. A decision, for Lonergan, is an "enlarging transformation of consciousness" which, like a judgment's "yes" or "no," selects in action from a "pair of contradictories," consent or refuse. Lonergan then uses the phrase "moral impotence" to describe the gulf between one's essential freedom and one's effective freedom in making decisions. Lonergan soon builds to the definition that, "Freedom, then, is a special kind of contingency. It is contingency that arises, not from the empirical residue that grounds materiality and the nonsystematic, but in the order of spirit, of intelligent grasp, rational reflection, and morally guided will."³⁶⁶ By "order of spirit" Lonergan simply means that contrary to modern psychoneural reductionism, the act of willing is not caused by anything material or by intelligence or rational reflection. It is caused by nothing other than itself.

³⁶⁶ Lonergan, *Insight*, 642.

Liberation, for Lonergan, is liberation from moral impotence; it is liberation that makes it really possible to move toward the goal line toward which the intelligent, reasonable and willing person strives. As I mentioned above, “liberation” is a “problem” because of the tension between the disinterested, unrestricted desire to know and bias plus moral impotence.³⁶⁷ The problem vanishes, as Lonergan notes, “if one supposes man’s intelligence, reasonableness, and willingness not to be potentialities in process of development but already in possession of the insights that make learning superfluous, of the reasonableness that makes judgments correct, of the willingness that makes persuasion unnecessary.”³⁶⁸

Clearly, the way in which Lonergan arrives at his definition of freedom and his correlative use of these specific terms will require further elucidation. In the next section I discuss the metaphysical background of Lonergan’s claims about human freedom while recognizing that a complete discussion will lead us too far afield. The reason for this sort of extended analysis is that the very possibility of liberation, our eighth and most important term, is contingent upon the premise that agents can indeed freely decide. We therefore need to show why we have good reason to believe that human beings are indeed ontologically free to decide and act even though, at times, they are effectively not.

Finally, I will argue that Sophocles gives us good reason to believe that agents can and do experience not only intellectual conversions, but liberations of the will (Theseus and Creon) while others (Oedipus) falter.³⁶⁹ In fact, one of the strategies I

³⁶⁸ Lonergan, *Insight*, 654.

will employ in this section is a comparison of Oedipus' final speech in *Oedipus Tyrannus*, in which he (unconvincingly, to us, and to himself) asserts his moral blamelessness and Creon's final speech in *The Antigone*, which marks that ruler's *development* into a man moved (finally) by persuasion. By comparing the two men I attempt to push against the assertion that we must not look for flaws in Oedipus' character, with all due respect to critics like Dodds. After all, a breakdown in intelligence and moral responsibility *is* a character flaw, as Aristotle also thought. In the person of Creon we see that within Sophocles' dramatic world, intellectual conversion is possible, and often in the teeth of prohibitive biases that die hard. Witnessing Oedipus' correlative failure to take any ownership should therefore allow us to offer some indictment, albeit small, of his character. Oedipus is no monster. But he could have been more intelligent (and therefore more effectively free) with himself and others. After all, who among us couldn't be?

Lonergan on Freedom and its Metaphysical Assumptions

In Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, Murellus chastises the commoners waiting to "rejoice" in Caesar's "triumph." An indignant Murellus shouts at them, famously, "you blocks, you stones, you worse than senseless things."³⁷⁰ The import of Murellus' remark is that the common folk, in their blind and uncritical allegiance to Caesar, have degraded what is essentially human about them – namely, their senses and intelligence (empirical and intelligent consciousness) – to a level "below" even "blocks and stones." Blocks and stones, presumably, do not sense anything and are

³⁷⁰ Shakespeare, William. *Julius Caesar. The Norton Shakespeare*. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1997). I.i.35.

certainly not intelligent.³⁷¹ Human beings, on the other hand, are different kinds of “things.”

That human beings are different kinds of “things” is intimately connected to two premises central to Lonergan’s thought from which he deduces his analysis of human freedom: emergent probability and proportionate being. While a robust discussion of these two concepts would go well beyond the scope of this essay, we may summarize them briefly.

On the ontological side, our world consists of “events” and “things” which emerge according to schedules of probabilities and in degrees of higher and higher complexity.³⁷² We see all around us, in other words, sequences of events of various kinds as well as blocks, stones, and, to change the line, sensitive things, like us. The spectrum of being runs then from subatomic particles, atoms, molecules, proteins, prokaryotes, eukaryotes, amoebae, tse-tse flies, spiders, mice, rats, bats, chimpanzees, dolphins and human beings, just to name a few.

On the side of the thinking subject, therefore, “higher viewpoints” are required to “explain” these various strata of being. Were they not, the “schemes of recurrence” or, in this case “recurrent events,” another important Lonergan phrase, on the “lower levels” would be merely coincidental with the higher. Again, although a full

³⁷¹ Of course, proponents of the viewpoint known as “panpsychism” may object here. But do we really need to give you a hearing here?

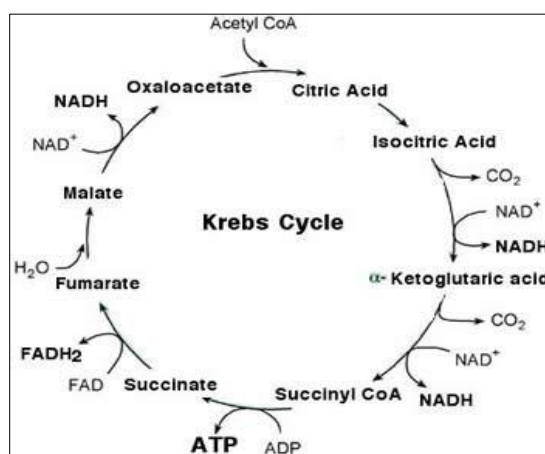
³⁷² Not surprisingly, the word “thing” in Lonergan’s lexicon is particularly complex. For now, let us merely say that a “thing” for Lonergan is an intelligible “unity-identity-whole” as opposed to a body which is “already-out-there-now-real.” For more on this distinction consult *Insight*, Chapter 9. By “event” Lonergan means what is to be known in a true affirmative judgment have the form, “X occurred.” See *Insight*, 97 and especially 106 [Ch. 4, §4.2].

discussion of precisely what Lonergan means here would take us too far afield, we may briefly elucidate his viewpoint by referring to a scheme of recurrence, the Krebs Cycle, in biochemistry.

The image below depicts the intricacies of the familiar citric acid cycle, or Krebs Cycle, whereby aerobic organisms oxidize acetate from proteins, fats and carbohydrates into water and CO_2 in order to generate energy. This is a classic example of what Lonergan calls a “scheme of recurrence,” in which each chemical reaction event of the cycle is contingent upon the previous reaction event as fulfilling conditions such that the last event in the cycle constitutes the fulfilling conditions of the first and the cycle begins again. The nitrogen cycle could be used to illustrate the same point. Once any recurrent scheme is operative, as Lonergan says, “the probability of [its] survival is the probability of the nonoccurrence of any of the events that would disrupt the scheme.”³⁷³

But there is a far subtler point in Lonergan’s overall discussion of schemes of recurrence: the way in which, in general, a “downward causation” occurs when the biological level appropriates the chemical level to its advantage. In other words, there is nothing necessary about the Krebs Cycle. There could have been – and, in fact, still are – rival alternatives to the Krebs Cycle, but biological organisms quickly appropriated the chemical scheme of the Krebs Cycle as an efficient scheme, just as human beings not only appropriate various schemes to their advantage but also become the source of efficient schemes themselves – a function of precisely what distinguishes them from lesser things: intelligent consciousness.

³⁷³ Lonergan, *Insight*, 144.



Most importantly, schemes of recurrence demonstrate that while the initial conditions of the scheme's emergence are set and bound by the laws of physics – insofar as no physical laws are violated in the scheme – its recurrence is not *explained* by merely appealing to the laws and the relations of conjugates of the lower level alone.³⁷⁴ In fact, its systematic recurrence can only be viewed as merely coincidental from the viewpoint of the lower level, as the physicist cannot answer the question, “yes, but why did the cycle restart again?” without appealing to chemistry. If he did not appeal to chemistry, then the restarting of the cycle would be merely “coincidental.” Lonergan writes, “Proportionate being, then, involves a number of explanatory genera, so that there is a series of levels of operation with each higher

³⁷⁴ It is worth noting here that this discussion is the foundation for Lonergan's later discussion of moral impotence and liberation in a surprising way. There he argues that the solution to the problem of bias (i.e. liberation) is a “higher integration of human living.” Consistent with the model above, he points out that the problem of liberation is “radical and permanent; it is independent of the underlying physical, chemical, organic, and psychic manifolds” (655)

level making systematic what otherwise would have been merely coincidental on the previous level.”³⁷⁵

Lonergan’s general aim here is to demonstrate that when the known laws or, as he calls them, “conditioned correlations,” of things and their conjugates on the lower level – say, the laws of subatomic physics, *provided they are the correct laws* – fail to explain the emergence of new data, we are justified in affirming the existence of new unity-identity-wholes (things) with new explanatory conjugates (properties) and new conditioned correlations (laws). Consider the full explanation below:

Consider...a genus of things T_i , with explanatory conjugates C_i , and consider a consequent list of possible schemes of recurrence S_i . Suppose there occurs an aggregate of events E_{ij} , that is merely coincidental when considered in the light of the laws of things T_i and all of their possible schemes of recurrence S_i . Then, if the aggregate of events E_{ij} occur regularly, it is necessary to advance to the higher viewpoint of some genus of things T_j , with conjugates C_i and C_j , and with schemes of recurrence S_j . The lower viewpoint is insufficient, for it has to regard as merely coincidental what in fact is regular. The higher viewpoint is justified, for the conjugates C_j , and the schemes S_j constitute a higher system that makes regular what otherwise would be merely coincidental.³⁷⁶

We may apply the description above to the Krebs Cycle. Fumarate, for example, must be considered a thing itself – a unity, identity, whole – and not a mere aggregate of aggregates ($C_4H_4O_4$) if one is to explain why, at a certain juncture in the Krebs Cycle, fumarate converts to malate on the condition of the presence of the enzyme fumarase. The laws of subatomic physics, as conditioned correlations, offer no explanation of the cause of this physical event because the laws of subatomic

³⁷⁵ Lonergan, *Insight*, 640.

³⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 281.

physics alone cannot anticipate fumerate as a thing itself, only an aggregate of smaller things. Only by moving to a “higher viewpoint” and by postulating a correlative “higher genera of things” with their own explanatory conjugates is the data explained which, in this instance, is not merely the individual events of the scheme as events with causes, but the very regularity of the scheme itself.

Specifically, a complete explanation of the Krebs Cycle pictured above (as a heuristic aid) must appeal to the explanatory conjugates of each of the chemical compounds involved in each chemical reaction event. A chemist, for example, cannot reduce a molecule of pentacene to an aggregate of aggregates ($C_{22}H_{14}$) if he desires to preserve the explanatory conjugates to which he must advert in order to offer explanations of pentacene’s “behavior” – its role as an organic semiconductor, for example. Likewise, the recurrent scheme of the Krebs Cycle and higher genera of things involved are irreducible vis-à-vis the explanatory power of subatomic physics.

What does this analysis have to do with a discussion of human freedom? The short answer is that to offer a causal explanation of human behavior one must likewise advert to human beings as higher things possessed of different conjugates, such as “intelligence” and “will” since the laws of physics, chemistry and biology will be insufficient in anticipating them as such.

In one of the most challenging sections of *Insight*, Lonergan discusses what he calls “higher viewpoints” and their correlative “higher level of genera” implicit in his earlier account of emergent probability, Lonergan’s basic metaphysical commitment. Here we are offered a clue that, on Lonergan’s view, and as we mentioned briefly in our discussion of dramatic bias, the psychic system (or “higher integration”)

downwardly “organizes and controls” neural (physical) systems akin to the way biological organisms organize and control chemical schemes to their advantage. In other words, if human beings are different and “higher” things than “blocks and stones and worse than senseless things,” explanatory practice will be motivated to appeal to the higher viewpoint (the psychic, the intellectual and the volitional) in order to explain some human action, just as it is motivated to appeal to the higher viewpoint of chemistry in order to explain a physical scheme of recurrence, like the Krebs Cycle for example, and why, in the negative, it is justifiably unmotivated to appeal to the psychic (or intellectual or volitional) in explaining the movements of “blocks and stones and worse than senseless things.” It follows from these premises that any discussion of human freedom will need to advert to human properties, specifically intellect and will, lest the spiritual aspect of human behavior escape analysis.

In his forthcoming essay on the philosopher Edith Stein, Patrick H. Byrne offers an excellent illustration of the way in which the explanatory laws of the “lower level” are impotent in explaining the meaning of a basic but uniquely human transaction: the act of getting change at a cash register.

think of a cashier who returns correct change to a customer during a commercial transaction. Why did the cashier perform this action in response to the action of receiving payment? Stein (and Lonergan) would argue this procession of one human act from another cannot be properly understood by laws of physics, chemistry, biology, or the psyche alone. Stein goes on to say that even if one also adds “empathic comprehension of psychic contexts,” something about the spiritual act still escapes analysis.³⁷⁷

³⁷⁷ P.H. Byrne. “Edith Stein & Bernard Lonergan: Empathy, Phenomenology and Self-Appropriation” (forthcoming). Used with permission.

Likewise, for Lonergan, intelligent consciousness, as opposed to mere biological extroversion, is precisely what makes human beings at once, explanatory genus and explanatory species. The intelligent systems we create for ourselves and our communities are *prima facie* data of the psychogenic as immanent and operative and why, therefore, an appeal to the psychic level is required for their explanation. The intelligent construction of hydroelectric dam to provide power for a remote region, for example, represents the triumph of the psychic, intellectual and volitional over the physical. For as Lonergan indicates, human beings “represent a higher system beyond sensibility. But that genus is coincident with species, for it is not just a higher system but a source of higher systems. In [humans] there occurs the transition from intelligible to the intelligent.”³⁷⁸

Treating human beings as different kinds of “things” than blocks and stones is what allows Lonergan to build to the definition of freedom cited above. He wants to show that human beings, because they are ontologically capable of potential acts of intelligence and will, are radically different than, say, molecules and, say, spiders, albeit less radically. He writes,

It follows that there is a radical difference between the contingency of the act of willing and the general contingency of existence and occurrence in the rest of the domain of proportionate being. The latter contingency falls short of strict intelligible necessity, not because it is free, but because it is involved in the nonsystematic character of material multiplicity, continuity, and frequency. But the contingency of the act of will, so far from resulting from the nonsystematic, arises in the imposition of further intelligible order upon otherwise merely coincidental manifolds.³⁷⁹

³⁷⁸ Lonergan, *Insight*, 292.

³⁷⁹ Lonergan, *Insight*, 642.

Note in this passage the way in which Lonergan not only frees human action from the shackles of a determinism; he also strips determinism from the activity of blocks and stones, albeit for other reasons.³⁸⁰ Accordingly, Lonergan advises that any account of human freedom must turn away from mere psycho-neural reductionism to a study of intellect and will, two “conjugates” of human “things.” Just as the physicist cannot explain the behavior of fumerate by a mere analysis of its constituent elements, we cannot explain or elucidate human behavior without treating human beings as different ontological entities. Thus, Lonergan writes, “In the coincidental manifolds of sensible presentations, practical insights grasp possible courses of action that are examined by reflection, decided by acts of willing, and thereby either are or are not realized in the underlying sensitive flow. In this process there is to be discerned the emergence of elements of higher integration.”³⁸¹ This schema will later underpin Lonergan’s discussion of “liberation” and the “higher integration” of human living such liberation requires.

Decision as an “Enlarging Transformation of Consciousness”

Having briefly elucidated the metaphysical preliminaries, Lonergan’s claim should now be clearer that, “Freedom, then, is a special kind of contingency. It is contingency that arises, not from the empirical residue that grounds materiality and the nonsystematic, but in the order of spirit, of intelligent grasp, rational reflection,

³⁸⁰ In *Insight*, Lonergan offers a robust explanation for why, in addition to the freedom human beings enjoy, the material universe itself is also a radically contingent place. An extended discussion of “emergent probability” would be too much of a digression here.

³⁸¹ Lonergan, *Insight*, 640.

and morally guided will.”³⁸² Further, we are now in a position to appreciate the analogy operative in his definition. The material world is radically contingent but for different reasons than the human world of human actors is. Whereas the material world is contingent because of schemes of recurrence, the human world is contingent because humans are intelligibilities who are also intelligent and capable of autonomous choice. Human agents, in other words, are contingent in the material sense, since they are partly material, but also contingent in the spiritual sense, since they are possessed of intellect and will. Thus, Lonergan writes, “It has the twofold basis that its object is merely a possibility and that its agent is contingent not only in his existence but also in the extension of his rational consciousness into rational self-consciousness.”³⁸³

Note the way Lonergan concludes the previous passage with a comment on the distinctly human “extension” or, to use a more familiar word, “enlargement,” of consciousness from rational consciousness to rational self-consciousness (as I elucidated in Chapter 1). This human potential to enlarge one’s consciousness leads Lonergan to his analysis of human decisions which, on his view, are special junctures in which the conscious operations move from one level to a higher one.

What, then, is a decision, and how does decision align with human freedom? Lonergan explains the concept of “decision” first by drawing an analogy between the similarity between decision and judgment. He writes, “Decision, then, resembles judgment inasmuch as both select one member of a pair of contradictories; as

³⁸² Ibid., 642.

³⁸³ Ibid.

judgment either affirms or denies, so decision either consents or refuses.”³⁸⁴ He then establishes a key difference between the two vis-à-vis levels of consciousness: a judgment is an act of rational consciousness and a decision is an act of rational self-consciousness. “Both judgment and decision,” says Lonergan, “are concerned with actuality; but judgment merely acknowledges an actuality that already exists; while decision confers actuality upon a course of action that otherwise is merely possible.”³⁸⁵

As such, judgment and decisions occur in different patterns of knowing – judgments grasp what is (already); decisions bestow actuality on potential courses of action which, presumably and hopefully, will be consistent with what one knows. Thus, Lonergan adds, “The rationality of judgment emerges in the unfolding of the detached and disinterested desire to know in the process towards knowledge of the universe of being. But the rationality of decision emerges in the demand of the rationally conscious subject for consistency between his knowing and his deciding and doing.”³⁸⁶

Lonergan then moves to an analysis of the concept of “obligation” in terms of the human person’s understanding of either a consistency or inconsistency between

³⁸⁴ Ibid., 636.

³⁸⁵ Ibid., 638.

³⁸⁶ Ibid., 636. As Patrick Byrne has pointed out, at this time in Lonergan’s career, during the composition of *Insight*, Lonergan had not yet fully worked out judgments of ethical value, what was called in Chapter 1 an “ethics of discernment,” following the title of Byrne’s book.

his judgments (rational consciousness) and his doing (rational self-consciousness).

The full passage is below:

The rational subject as imposing an obligation upon himself is just a knower, and his rationality consists radically in not allowing other desire to interfere with the unfolding of the detached and disinterested desire to know. But the rational subject as carrying out an obligation is not just a knower but also a doer, and his rationality consists not merely in excluding interference with cognitional process but also in extending the rationality of his knowing into the field of doing. But that extension does not occur simply by knowing one's obligations. It occurs just inasmuch as one wills to meet one's obligations.³⁸⁷

By adverting to the human property of "will," a function of a higher viewpoint, Lonergan is building here toward a rejection of the Socratic position that to know the good is to will the good which, on Lonergan's view, contains a logical fallacy insofar as it "begs the question."³⁸⁸ Lonergan exposes this fallacy by noting the discrepancy between "necessity" as a matter of logic and "necessity" as a matter of action, denying the latter. He explains that it is possible for a person to judge a "proposed course of action is obligatory, that either I decide in favor of the proposal or else I surrender consistency between my knowing and my doing... that I cannot both be reasonable and act otherwise, then my reasonableness is bound to the act by a link of necessity. Such is the meaning of obligation."³⁸⁹

³⁸⁷ Lonergan, *Insight*, 638.

³⁸⁸ Lonergan is also incidentally refuting, in broad strokes, a major premise found in Kant. After all, human history is replete with unintelligent and disastrous schemes wrought by men and women of "good will." We may then ask, what good is a good will without correct insights?

³⁸⁹ Lonergan, *Insight*, 637.

What, exactly, does Lonergan mean by this? Consider the following example. Imagine that a particularly zealous steak-lover, through his persistent questions, has the insight (intelligent consciousness) that to use animals for food is to use them as means to an end only, an unethical action. He might soon come to the virtually unconditioned judgment (rational consciousness), therefore, that continuing to eat porterhouses at the Capital Grille is wrong. He might also grasp in an insight (intelligent consciousness) that if he is to continue eating meat while simultaneously affirming the judgment that such an action is wrong, he will “surrender consistency” between his knowing and his doing and, as such, become a lived contradiction. Obligation, for him, is the understanding of the necessity between reasonableness and acting against it.

The problem, of course, is that it is quite possible to grasp this necessity (as a matter of logic and contradiction) and yet still *decide* to act in contradiction with one’s knowing. And thus, the steak-lover continues to eat his porterhouse (rational self-consciousness) while understanding (rational consciousness) he ought not to. Lonergan therefore notes that,

One should note the fallacy in every argument from determinate knowing to determinate willing. For every argument of that type must postulate a conformity between knowing and willing. But such conformity exists only when in fact willing actually is reasonable. Hence, to deduce the determinate act of will one must postulate the conformity; and to verify the postulate one must already have the determinate willing that one is out demonstrate.³⁹⁰

Lonergan’s point here is that all claims the form of which are ultimately the Socratic, “to know the good is to do the good,” ultimately makes the logical fallacy of

³⁹⁰ Ibid., 639.

“begging the question.”³⁹¹ The claim begs the question because it verifies a fitness between knowing and willing which, if verified, would already have that fitness. Instead, as Lonergan points out, one can fail to fulfill one’s obligation since, as he so eloquently puts it, and as our steak-lover indicates, “the iron link of necessity can prove to be a wisp of straw.”³⁹²

We may now ask, along with Lonergan (and anticipating Oedipus’ failure to act in fidelity to what he understands) “how can this be?” The short answer is, again, the will. As we noted above, it is will (and intellect) that are the conjugates of the human “thing” that separates us from blocks and stones. But it is the human will that, according to Lonergan, “(1) marks the shift from rational consciousness to rational self-consciousness, and (2) changes what is rational necessity in the field of knowing into rational exigence in the larger field of both knowing and doing.”³⁹³ As a result, as Lonergan writes, “one can be a rational knower without an act of willing, and one cannot be a rational doer without an act of willing.”

Lonergan’s treatment of “decision” illuminates a number of the key junctures in the *Theban plays*. Although I argued earlier a general viewpoint that Sophocles depicts a series of questions asked and unasked, it is also possible to present an alternative and complimentary general perspective, namely that the Oedipus cycle is a dramatic depiction of decisions – and decisions, we should note, that stand in contradiction to the chooser’s understanding – and their consequences. We

³⁹² Ibid., 637.

³⁹³ Ibid., 638.

sometimes lose sight of this focus on cumulative decisions because of the non-linear narrative. But if the Oedipus cycle began with Laius and Jocasta's initial choice to kill their child, in spite of their understanding that it was wrong, followed by Oedipus' encounter with Polybus and Merope, in which they conceal the truth (and assuming they feel some compunction about doing so), followed by the Sphinx, the plague, Oedipus' insight, "*Colonus*" and *Antigone*, we would see with more clarity the tension between being a "rational knower" without correlative acts of willing the good.

Freedom and its Forms

The metaphysical foundation for Lonergan's definition of freedom, described in detail above, allows Lonergan to subdivide freedom ("a special form of contingency") into two types: essential freedom and effective freedom. Effective freedom is contingent upon essential freedom and, as Lonergan points out, "a consideration of effective freedom is meaningless, unless essential freedom exists."³⁹⁴

So, what is the difference between the two types? Our discussion above, which included a taxonomy of different types of "things" in the world, offers a clue. First, consider two different things: humans and spiders. Next, consider the difference between a man deciding upon whether to quit smoking and a spider "deciding" on whether to "quit" spinning webs. Clearly, the latter instance is impossible (note the air quotes on the action verbs) given what we may now call the spider's lack of essential freedom. Because a spider lacks intelligence and will it is not essentially free in the strict sense. And because it is not essentially free, it is not effectively free to

³⁹⁴ Ibid., 643.

quit spinning webs. A claim, therefore, that a spider is “free” to quit spinning webs would be a failure of explanatory genera. It would be an oversight on the side of the knower of extending to a “lower” level what is only operative in an instance of higher integration – namely, creatures with intellect and will. Thus, Lonergan writes,

The difference between essential and effective freedom is the difference between a dynamic structure and its operational range. Man is free essentially inasmuch as possible courses of action are grasped by practical insight, motivated by reflection, and executed by decision. But man is free effectively to a greater or less extent inasmuch as this dynamic structure is open to grasping, motivating, and executing a broad or a narrow range of otherwise possible courses of action. Thus, one may be essentially but not effectively free to give up smoking.³⁹⁵

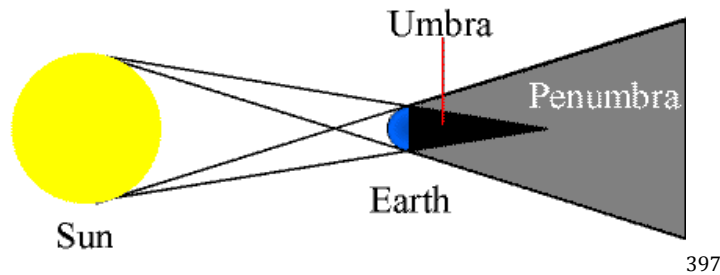
Now consider a frustrated man attempting to quit smoking. He may claim that he is not free to give up smoking. He may claim that he is determined by various external forces to continue (or that it was Apollo’s fault he’s an incestuous parricide!). He may even claim that to quit smoking, for him, would be like a spider quitting web-spinning. But this would be inaccurate. The smoker’s inability to quit is really a commentary on the “difference between a dynamic structure and its operational range,” or effective freedom. Other human beings who have quit smoking are sobering reminders to the poor man who desires to quit that it is quite within the operational range of a human being to quit but, for whatever specific reason, the man is unable to effectively actualize a possible course of action (quitting). The inability to broaden the range of one’s effective freedom so that it more closely and perfectly approximates one’s essential freedom is what Lonergan calls “moral impotence.”

³⁹⁵ Lonergan, *Insight*, 643.

To elucidate this “range,” Lonergan offers what I take to be one of the most provocative images in all of *Insight*: the penumbra. For laypersons, *The Oxford English Dictionary* defines “penumbra” as, “The partially shaded region around the shadow of an opaque body, when the light source is larger than a point source and only part of its light is cut off (contrasted with the full shadow or umbra); (*esp. in Astron.*) The term that of the shadow cast by the moon on the earth in a solar eclipse, or by the earth on the moon in a lunar eclipse, resulting in an area that experiences only a partial eclipse.” For Lonergan, the image of the penumbra symbolizes the tension between effective freedom and essential freedom and, by extension, resignation and self-transcendence, enslavement to bias and liberation from it. I include the full passage in its entirety to stress its importance and elegance. I also include beneath it a visual diagram of the metaphor as a heuristic aid:

Further, these areas are not fixed; as he develops, the penumbra penetrates into the shadow and the luminous area into the penumbra while, inversely, moral decline is a contraction of the luminous area and of the penumbra. Finally, this consciousness of moral impotence not only heightens the tension between limitation and transcendence but also can provide ambivalent materials for reflection; correctly interpreted, it brings home to man the fact that his living is a developing, that he is not to be discouraged by his failures, that rather he is to profit by them both as lessons on his personal weaknesses and as a stimulus to greater efforts; but the same data can also be regarded as evidence that there is no use trying, that moral codes ask the impossible, that one has to be content with oneself as one is.³⁹⁶

³⁹⁶ Ibid., 650.



The image of the penumbra above is a particularly apt metaphor for moral impotence because, more so than other images, the image captures the dynamic expansion and the contraction of willingness, effective freedom. As Lonergan says, the areas are “not fixed.”

The Problem of Liberation

We may now apply the image of the penumbra above and Lonergan’s complex discussion of freedom to the *Theban Plays*. We may ask, is liberation from bias and subsequent intellectual conversion possible when intellectual conversion is contingent first upon liberation of the will? Or, are we determined by forces beyond our control to remain in our narrow routines? Does the self-correcting cycle of inquiry aspire to heights beyond the forces of indoctrination? Or is it fated to stall out in the face of those forces?

We may begin by considering two speeches, the first delivered by Oedipus at the end of *Colonus* and the second delivered by Creon at the end of *The Antigone*. The goal of this juxtaposition will be to showcase the way in which consciousness of moral

³⁹⁷<http://www.astronomy.ohiostate.edu/~pogge/Ast161/Unit2/eclipses.html> <accessed 1/8/2018>

impotence offers “ambivalent materials for reflection” which, as I argue, Oedipus incorrectly interprets that “one has to be content with oneself as one is” while Creon profits from personal weakness as a “stimulus to greater efforts.” The juxtaposition of the two men demonstrates Lonergan’s basic picture of human freedom as a function of intelligence and the enslavement of bias a function of ignorance. Further, it demonstrates that Sophocles affirms the viewpoint that liberation is a condition of the possibility of insight conquering bias. But, if Sophocles saw liberation as within the range of human potential, it would follow that Oedipus’ failure to achieve liberation at the end of the play gives us a flaw in his character.

I argue that the *Theban Plays* provide striking instances of both enslavement to bias and liberation from it, both radical self-denial and radical self-ownership. These stances toward intellectual liberation are well-articulated by the final speeches of Oedipus and Creon, respectively.

Further, that the former, Oedipus, remains obstinate about his own mistakes and his own moral culpability affirms that view that, contrary to Dodds, we can and do find a character flaw in Oedipus. That flaw is a lack of questioning; a lack of fidelity to the self-correcting cycle.³⁹⁸ This lack of fidelity to the self-correcting cycle is no surprise. We’ve seen it before. It is, in fact, the same flaw I discussed in Chapter 2, when Oedipus departs the Oracle at Delphi with his basic questions unanswered (“I

³⁹⁸ I am reminded here of Job’s claim, “For he crushes me with a tempest, and multiplies my wounds without cause” (Job 9:17). The standard view of Job is that Job is indeed blameless and righteous and that the story only confirms a notion of divine justice that may be beyond our capacity to grasp. And yet, the more I have reflected on the line, and discussed Job’s stance toward the world with students, the more I wonder if Job’s real sin is his bold willingness to affirm his own righteousness: who could be that sure of himself?

went to Delphi. But there, Apollo shunned me,/Denied my questions and sent me away” (Lines 788-789)) and yet he decides, unintelligently, to act under the assumption that those questions have been answered. His questioning spirit then takes a long hiatus. As I pointed out in that chapter, Oedipus’ failure to ask additional questions only heightens the irony of the play, given that he is reputed to be a man of inquiry and insight.

In contrast, in *The Antigone*, Sophocles presents Creon as initially questionless. He is obstinate and cocksure. As Woodruff notes, “Creon’s name means ‘ruler.’ His devotion to rational order and even-handed justice grows darker as his suspicions of conspiracy grow: We see him looking more and more like a tyrant as the play progresses.”³⁹⁹ And yet, by the end of the play, Creon is no longer convinced of his own ethical superiority and he experiences a radical turnaround. He is possessed of an antecedent willingness that newly attunes him to the wise persuasion of others (in this case, the Chorus) and he races to Antigone’s cave in a tragic and futile attempt to “undo the mischief” his bias has caused.

First, let us listen to Oedipus. In *Oedipus Tyrannus*, he speaks words that betoken insights and judgments about his blamelessness. Here, Oedipus’ wounds (both physical and emotional) are still fresh and there has been little time for what Byrne calls an “ethics of discernment.” We may even be tempted to give Oedipus a pass in this speech and attribute the judgments below as a function of the exigencies of his dire situation. He has not yet had time for the sort of self-appropriation

³⁹⁹ Sophocles, *Theban Plays*, xxviii.

liberation requires and his knee-jerk scapegoating is therefore, perhaps, psychologically intelligible:

But the gods made it so,
Exorcising some ancient grudge
Through my bloodline.
I cannot be blamed for the crimes
I inflicted on myself and my family. (967-971)

But now, let us compare this speech to the one Oedipus delivers later in his life, in *Oedipus Colonus*, a pivotal moment in which Creon and Theseus confront each other over the rights to Oedipus' body. Recall that Oedipus offers these words in an effort to rebuke Creon's indictment of him as an incestuous parricide. Before we hear them, let us frame the words with this question: if Oedipus has truly developed, in the way Woodruff, for example, suggests, shouldn't we expect a bit more circumspection in these words vis-à-vis his moral culpability? In other words, given all that Oedipus has learned about the dangers of making judgments with incomplete information, and the way in which all we claim to know can crumble beneath our feet in an instant, one wonders why, if he had truly developed, he would not be more philosophically parsimonious in his pronouncements of blamelessness. Instead, he shouts this:

You rant on about taboo killings,
Foul marriages, and vile incest.
It was I who suffered these things
But the gods made it so,
Exorcising some ancient grudge
Through my bloodline.
I cannot be blamed for the crimes
I inflicted on myself and my family,
You won't find a single reason
Why I deserved any of it.
How was it my fault
That my father received

A prediction that he would
 Be killed by his very own son?
 That happened before I was born -
 I had not even been conceived!
 But I was born, unluckily,
 And yes, I did fight and kill my father,
 But I had no idea who he was -
 I didn't know what I was doing.
 How can you call me guilty
 When I knew nothing...nothing! (Lines 963 – 977.

It is no coincidence that in the last two lines of this second speech, Oedipus unites in one sentiment the concepts of guilt (“How can you call me guilty?”) and knowledge (“I knew nothing”). Oedipus, in other words, correctly understands that blame (for which one would feel guilt) and knowledge are co-principles vis-à-vis assigning moral culpability and, conversely, innocence and ignorance are co-principles vis-à-vis moral blamelessness. This is a point Aristotle stresses in the *Nicomachean Ethics* and it is at the heart of all debates regarding the dubious phrase, “tragic flaw.”

Recall that in *Poetics*, Aristotle uses the term *hamartia* (the word attributed to the phrase “tragic flaw”) in reference to a “mistake made in ignorance of some material fact.” As Greek students know well, the word comes from the verb *hamartano* which means “to aim and miss” or “to miss the mark,” as in archery. For Aristotle, *hamartia* is a kind of “missing the mark,” and he uses the word in the same way in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. In that text, Aristotle’s distinction between *hamartêmata*¹ proper, which he then subdivides into *atuchêmata* (accidents) and *hamartêmata*² (acts of negligence) before juxtaposing both against *adikêmata* (wrongs/injustices). Notice that for Aristotle, “mistakes” are a function of ignorance; accidents involve harm that results contrary to what might be reasonably supposed; negligence involves harm not contrary to what might be reasonably supposed but is

without malice. Wrongs or injustices are further distinguished by whether they spring from “spiritedness” or from “deliberation.”⁴⁰⁰ Only if the latter, is a man vicious in the truly Aristotelian sense.

Oedipus, therefore, correctly diagnoses the connection between knowledge and blame and ignorance and innocence. Yet the mere recognition of this correlation fails to fully absolve Oedipus of moral culpability, a fact which he would have discerned had he been, well, more discerning. In other words, the higher-level question for Oedipus to ask, within an ethics of discernment, would be whether he is morally culpable for his lack of understanding. As we have shown, there are plenty of junctures in which Oedipus fails to actualize potential decisions which would have enlarged his consciousness in order to achieve a new horizon or higher integration. From this new horizon Oedipus should and would recognize various biases that, heretofore, have precluded him from affirming at least a modicum of culpability. Instead, Oedipus reduces, in that hyperbolic way that has become typical of modern scientific reductionism, his behavior to antecedent factors beyond his control: “It was Apollo...” and “But the gods made it so,/Exorcising some ancient grudge/Through my

⁴⁰⁰ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1135b. There, Aristotle writes, “Whenever, then, the harm results contrary to what might reasonably be supposed, it is an *accident*, but when it is not contrary to what might reasonably be supposed, but is without malice, it is an act of *negligence* (for whenever the source of responsibility is in oneself, one commits an act of *negligence*, but when it is external, one causes an *accident*.) But whenever one acts knowingly but not deliberately, it is a *wrong*, as are all those acts of *injustice* that are done out of spiritedness or all the passions that are necessary or natural attributes of human beings, for in doing *harm* and being in the wrong in these ways people do *injustice*, and the deeds are acts of *injustice*, but they are not on that account unjust or vicious people, for the harm does not come from vice. But when it is from choice, the person is *unjust* and vicious” (my italics).

bloodline" (965-967) and "But I was born, unluckily..." (972) and "It was all decided by the gods" (997).

Further, one wonders if Oedipus really *believes* what he is saying about himself. Or, are his claims above a function of a waning bravado, posturing? Is it really possible that an otherwise intelligent man – a "good man in a bad way" – could shout so confidently, "I cannot be blamed for the crimes/I inflicted on myself and my family,/You won't find a single reason/Why I deserved any of it." I have always read these lines with the suspicion that Oedipus does not wholly believe them himself. His words seem too emphatic and too certain. If ever I were to direct "Oedipus" on the stage, I would advise the actor playing Oedipus to deliver the lines not unlike a man who neither grasps his moral impotence with total clarity nor is it totally unconscious. Good luck to that actor!

Does Oedipus think he is guilty? No. But does he think he is totally blameless? No. In this speech we find Oedipus in the undesirable state of a man who knows he has, as Elizabeth Proctor says, "sins of his own to count," and yet will not consciously acknowledge them. This dichotomous stance is not a surprise. As Lonergan writes, "moral impotence" in a subject is neither "grasped with perfect clarity nor totally unconscious."⁴⁰¹ Further, as I have attempted to show above, the tendency to reduce human action to a casual determinism by appealing to antecedent causes, aside from the non-trivial problem of infinite regress, is also to make a grave category mistake about the kinds of things human beings are. We may add to the list, then, that not

⁴⁰¹ Lonergan, *Insight*, 650.

only does Oedipus make various errors in judgment, he makes a basic metaphysical error in his judgment about the kind of thing he is.⁴⁰² A tragic flaw indeed.

Now, let us listen to Creon. In contrast to Oedipus, at the end of *The Antigone*, Creon has the insight that he may have made a prior error in judgment – sadly, it is the image of his dead son, Haemon, that triggers the insight – and Creon experiences, quite dramatically, the rush of intellectual conversion and liberation, as he makes the decision (an enlargement of his consciousness) to act. In this case, the action that follows on the heels of his insight, judgment and decision is rushing to the cave in which he has imprisoned Antigone to die. He shouts,

Creon: Oh, howl for the sins of a stubborn mind,
Evil-minded, death-dealing!
O you who are witnesses,
You saw those who killed and those who died,
all in one family,
Cry out against the sacrilege that I called strategy!
Oh, howl, my son, my young son,
for your young death.
Ah! Ah! You were expelled from life
By my bad judgment, never yours.

Chorus: Yes, it is late, but you have seen where justice lies.⁴⁰³ (Lines 1261-1270)

⁴⁰² I am reminded here of the climax of the excellent film “A Few Good Men,” in which the younger defendant, Private Downey, is perplexed by the military court’s findings that he and his codefendant are guilty. To his repeated claims, “we did nothing wrong,” the other defendant, the wiser Private Dawson, recognizing the part he has played in the death of a fellow Marine, replies, “Yeah we did. *We were supposed* to fight for people who couldn’t fight for themselves.”

⁴⁰³ Sophocles, *Antigone*, 1261-1270.

Note Creon's use of the phrase "bad judgment" (δυσβουλίας).⁴⁰⁴ Note, also, the chorus' reply to an admission of bad judgment with the verb "seen" (ἰδεῖν) to describe Creon's newfound understanding. As we have done in earlier sections, we may, in the tradition of Lonergan, replace the verb "seen" with "understand." The chorus is saying, "Yes, it is late, but you have [understood] where justice lies." Creon, in other words, understands that his behavior has been obstinate and unyielding. Both he and the Chorus recognize that the refusal to bend, the refusal to adopt an antecedent willingness to pursue questions to which one has been heretofore closed off, has been a tragic decision rooted in entrenched bias that has led to a personal tragedy for which he is ethically culpable. Further, it is the selfsame conquering of bias that now allows Creon to see/understand that he *is* ethically culpable.

Unlike Oedipus, Creon will now decide to actualize the potential avenue that leads toward healing. Tragically, as in *Oedipus Tyannus*, Creon's insight comes too late but, at least, he recognizes that it is still within his power and within the domain of his will (and intellect) to try to expand upon his effective freedom. He is *willing*, in other words, to run to the cave in an attempt, albeit futile, to realize the possibility of healing. Now, it is true that Creon's change of mind (and will) are still the byproduct of persuasion.⁴⁰⁵ There is nothing wrong with persuasion, especially when others have good and valuable things to tell us. Yet total liberation would imply an antecedent willingness that would make persuasion to do a good and valuable thing

⁴⁰⁴ ἔθανες, ἀπελύθης / ἐμαῖς οὐδὲ σαῖς δυσβουλίας. (Note: δυσβουλίας is translated as "foolishness" or "ill counsel" to be literal.)

redundant. Nevertheless, in the case of my analysis here, *there is* a “medal for trying,” which Creon deserves, and which Oedipus does not.

In stark contrast, Oedipus’ speech is merely a recapitulation of his own assessment years earlier in Thebes: “Apollo! It was Apollo, my friends./Agony after agony, he brought them on” (1330-1331). Unlike Creon, it seems as if Oedipus’ confident self-assessment of his own moral culpability has remained unabashedly static in spite of considerable time and, as a blind man alone with his own consciousness, considerable opportunity for discernment and self-appropriation.

Most importantly, though, juxtaposing Oedipus’ speech with Creon’s speech underscores the important point that Sophocles in no way rules out (at least within the world of his dramas) *the possibility* of intellectual conversion as an act within the range of human potential. In fact, the Chorus’ reply to Creon that “it is late” stresses the pragmatic importance of intellectual conversion vis-à-vis time. The implication here is that if conversion does not occur by a particular time, conditions may mount to the point where an event, while still a probability, is more likely to be such a high probability that it has become, to use the common parlance, a *fait accompli*. In short, Creon’s speech makes Oedipus’ lament harder to take seriously and, as such, makes harder to take seriously the more general metaphysical objections of determinism.⁴⁰⁶

⁴⁰⁶ As McCoy notes: It is true that *Antigone* was written first and that, technically speaking, the plays are not a true trilogy for that reason. That the third play (“Colonus”) seems to reject the liberation and conversion that appears in the first may signal a change in Sophocles’ thought. It could be the case that the older the poet became, the less sanguine he was about the possibility of liberation. Leopards don’t change their spots.

Returning to Lonergan's passage about the "surrounding penumbra," Oedipus' lament at the end of "*Colonus*" indicates that he believes that the data of his experience suggests, as Lonergan says, "there is no use trying." Clearly, Oedipus has a legitimate gripe about the "bad hand" he was dealt from birth, perhaps more so than most. The question, though, is whether he is being fair and authentic in his own assessment of the prohibitive power of this "bad hand" (antecedent conditions) or whether he is unconvincingly (to us and to him) parlaying them to escape a portion of blame? Asking this question is not, as Dodds warns, to make the mistake of treating Oedipus as if he were a real man. We are assessing him on his own terms and on the authenticity of the choices he makes and then comparing those choices to the choices of other kings within Sophocles' dramatic world.

Further, we might add that, in fairness to him, Oedipus is not wrong in his instinct to survey his past and make judgments about various extenuating and potentially mitigating circumstances. After all, an authentic appraisal of antecedent conditions is the fruit of the unrestricted desire to know and such an appraisal clearly matters when asking questions about moral impotence. Lonergan takes them seriously too. As he notes, in order for a human agent to even exploit his effective freedom, a number of antecedent conditions (on the biological, chemical and physical level) must be fulfilled. Clearly, the fulfillment of those conditions may indeed be beyond the agent's control or, in some cases, impossible to fulfill.

Specifically, Lonergan addresses four conditions that must be fulfilled for moral impotence to even obtain. First, as Lonergan notes, the subject must be free of an "external circumstance" or psychic abnormality. An Eskimo may not be effectively

free to ride a camel and a person with damage to his pre-frontal cortex might not be free to solve a calculus equation. Second, the agent must be “sensitive,” but his sensitivity may lack “a perfect adjustment [between intellectual and psycho-neural development].” Lonergan adds, “scotosis can result in a conflict between the operators of intellectual and of psycho-neural development; and then the sensitive subject is invaded by anxiety, by obsessions, and by other neurotic phenomena that restrict is capacity for effective deliberation and choice.”⁴⁰⁷ Thirdly, the subject must be intelligent. Lonergan writes, “so it is that the greater the development of one’s practical intelligence, the greater the range of possible course of action one can grasp and consider. Inversely, the less development of one’s practical intelligence, the less the range of possible courses of action that here and now will occur to one.”⁴⁰⁸

Fourthly, and perhaps most importantly, the agent must be what Lonergan calls “antecedently willing.”⁴⁰⁹ The concept of “antecedent willingness” is best illustrated by Lonergan’s analogy that:

the capacity to learn: what is learned :: willingness: willing, the act of deciding

To underscore this analogy, Lonergan offers the following crucial point:

So it is that a person, caught as it were unawares, may be ready for any scheme or exploit but, on the second thoughts of rational self-consciousness, settles back into the narrow routine defined by his antecedent willingness. For unless one’s antecedent willingness has the height and breadth and depth of the unrestricted desire to know, the emergence of rational self-consciousness involves the addition of a restriction upon one’s effective freedom.⁴¹⁰

⁴⁰⁷ Lonergan, *Insight*, 645.

⁴⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 646.

⁴¹⁰ *Ibid.*

It seems that for Lonergan, the goal for a human being is to reach a universal willingness that “matches the unrestricted desire to know.” But this goal discloses a paradox: how is one to be persuaded to open oneself up to persuasion, when one is not open to persuasion? Consider again, for example, the monarchs of Corinth, Polybus and Merope, now in the light of Lonergan’s concept of antecedent willingness. At the moment of a crucial existential choice, they seem to act in that “narrow routine” defined by an antecedent willingness that lacks the “height and breadth” of the unrestricted desire to know. They are unwilling to disclose the truth to their son given, presumably, the headaches it will cause for them. Disclosing the truth will, in other words, force them beyond their narrow routine into unknown territory.

Likewise, Oedipus’ antecedent willingness also seems to lack, in those moments, the height and breadth and depth of his unrestricted desire to know. To recruit the image of the penumbra, instead of developing into the light, Oedipus’ world contracts into the darkness of ignorance. Lonergan offers a perfect metaphor to describe this enlarging and contracting. In a nice summation, he says,

The elements in the problem are basically simple. Man’s intelligence, reasonableness, and willingness (1) proceed from a detached, disinterested, unrestricted desire to know, (2) are potentialities in process of development towards a full effective freedom, (3) supply the higher integration for otherwise coincidental manifolds on successively underlying psychic, organic, chemical, and physical levels, (4) stand in opposition and tension with sensitive and intersubjective attachment, interest and exclusiveness, and (5) suffer from that tension a cumulative bias that increasingly distorts immanent development, its outward products, and the outer conditions under which the immanent development occurs.⁴¹¹

⁴¹¹ Ibid., 653.

Oedipus' two speeches above, delivered at two different times in his life, seem to demonstrate vividly the way in which Oedipus falls into the taxonomy above. His consciousness is not enlarging or developing, as Woodruff suggests, but shrinking and contracting. He asks questions, yes, but, before long, he seems unwilling to pursue them any further. The evolution of his questioning is one of punctuated equilibrium. While he hits peaks of unrestricted questioning, they are followed by troughs of bias. The end of "*Colonus*" finds him in a trough. Yes, his unrestricted desire to know conditions his departure from Corinth. But, ultimately, his bias precludes him from asking additional questions, restricting the unrestricted desire to know which, as a result, fails to disclose potentialities that would allow him to develop toward full effective freedom which, if achieved, would supply the higher integration.

Thus, while Creon understands himself in a new way (as truculent, obstinate, unyielding, unintelligent, irresponsible and unreasonable) Oedipus fails to recognize himself and his culpability. Is this a surprise? It should not be. After all, his failure to understand himself is consistent with the initial irony of the riddle of the Sphinx – the answer to the riddle is you! For all the lip service paid then to Oedipus solving the riddle of his own identity, by the end of *Colonus*, he still knows nothing.⁴¹²

Final Thoughts: The Specter of Reductionism

⁴¹² One might point out here that there is a sense in which Oedipus was *willing* to be received by Theseus and, through his death, become an instrument of Theseus' cooperative grace for Athens. And while this willingness might be evidence of an emerging moral conversion, Oedipus' unwillingness to bury the hatchet with his sons seems to offset it.

Oedipus' "argument" above – if we may call his speech an "argument" – attributes his catastrophic fate to natural and genetic forces far beyond his control. Many critics take his speech as an articulation of one of Sophocles' main themes or, at the very least, an attempt by Sophocles to "enlarge our sensibility" vis-à-vis the idea of the impotence of rationality against archaic forces of darkness beyond the understanding. Yet, despite Segal's suggestion that Sophocles is invoking an "older paradigm," Oedipus' argument anticipates a position (and a metaphysic) we see today: modern scientific reductionism and its many deterministic corollaries.

Recent studies in cognitive science and experimental philosophy, for example, have explored the connection between the brain and morality and, by extension, whether praise and blame are categories that may need to be eliminated.⁴¹³ Further, the research program known as "eliminative reductionism," championed by Paul and Patricia Churchland, suggests that even certain concepts, such as "the will," for example, ought to be jettisoned from our thinking. It would be more accurate, says the eliminativist, to use the term "frontal" to describe those who, heretofore, would have been described as weak-willed, since decisions and judgments are not a matter of will but, as (f)MRI's indicate, are tokened in the pre-frontal cortex. Eliminative reductionists, in other words, have "looked" for "the will" in the brain and since they

⁴¹³ See, for example, <https://uwaterloo.ca/news/news/people-attribute-moral-obligation-and-blame-regardless>. In fact, the neuroscientist David Eagleman and Boston College's own Liane Young have become leading voices exploring this position. In this sense, the determinism Sophocles was exploring then, not as dogma but as subject of our questioning, is still being explored now.

cannot find it (for theirs is an empirical verification criterion of meaning) they eliminate it.

Nevertheless, despite this reductionism, in spite of Oedipus' attempt to invoke it, and in spite of the viewpoint that suggests that Sophocles takes Oedipus' reductionist claims as legitimate mitigating factors in his moral culpability, I have made the case, thus far, that Oedipus' still makes a number of different errors in judgment which at least make him partially blameworthy. Given these errors, I have asked the basic question: might *Oedipus Tyrannus*, at its heart, suggest the Socratic point that prudence, for the most part, leads to happiness and imprudence misery? That the only legitimate limit to our freedom is our questioning and insights?

The viewpoint may seem uncontroversial enough; and yet it runs contrary to one of the play's most influential commentaries. My analysis, therefore, would be incomplete without engaging that commentary: E.R. Dodd's "On Misunderstanding Oedipus Rex." In that essay, renowned classicist E.R. Dodds rejects my basic premise, claiming that it would fall into one of three interpretive heresies. It makes sense to see if my analysis has fallen into those heresies. For Dodds, the first heresy is the claim that Oedipus is somehow guilty and deserves what he got. The second heresy is that Oedipus is a puppet and has zero control over his actions. The third heresy is the belief that Sophocles has no religious or moral axe to grind. For Dodds, the three heresies are connected to a general misunderstanding of the play and the Greek worldview in general.

It was quite possible, according to Dodds, for a typical ancient Greek watching one of the Theban plays at the City Dionysia to understand that Oedipus is not a

puppet and yet does not deserve what he got. Why? Because in the Greek world, the gods are not necessarily just, the third heresy. As Dodds notes, it is only the Judeo-Christian premise of an omnipotent and omnibenevolent God (which so many Christianized commentators smuggle into their analysis) that makes the first two claims difficult to reconcile. In fact, Dodds says that our own prudence allows us to assert two things only about Sophocles 1.) he did not believe that the gods are, in the human sense, just. 2.) he did believe that the gods exist and that man should revere them. These views are compatible, on Dodds' view, because we should not view the play through a Christian lens. As Dodds says, "to the Christian it is a necessary part of piety to believe that God is just...but the older world saw no such necessity."⁴¹⁴ He then adds, pointedly,

If you doubt this, take down the *Iliad* and read Achilles' opinion of what divine justice amounts to (xxiv. 525-33); or take down the Bible and read the *Book of Job*. Disbelief in divine justice as measured by human yardsticks can perfectly well be associated with deep religious feeling. 'Men,' said Heraclitus, 'find some things unjust, other things just; but in the eyes of God all things are beautiful and good and just.' I think that Sophocles would have agreed. For him, as for Heraclitus, there is an objective world-order which man must respect but which he cannot hope fully to understand.⁴¹⁵

The question remains, though, as to whether accepting this position on Sophocles' religiosity requires us to simply ignore the laundry list of moments in which Oedipus is dizzyingly imprudent even to a Greek sensibility. Would taking Oedipus to task for imprudence constitute a Christian bias? Or would it be to measure Oedipus by the yardsticks offered by his own viewing audience, the Greeks? In other words, if we

⁴¹⁴ Dodds, "On Misunderstanding the "Oedipus Rex'," 47.

⁴¹⁵ Ibid.

claim that Oedipus is morally impotent by being intellectually impotent, have we made some sort of anachronistic error? I think not.

As I alluded to above, the answer to this question leads, as many roads do, to Aristotle. The bulk of Dodds' claims are rooted in his parsing of the Greek term *hamartia* from which we get "flaw" and from which we have received from literary history the concept of the "tragic flaw." In the *Poetics*, Aristotle uses the term *hamartia* in reference to a "mistake made in ignorance of some material fact." As I mentioned earlier, the word comes from the verb *hamartano* which means "to miss the mark," as in archery. For Aristotle, *hamartia* is a kind of "missing the mark," and the word is used in the same way as in the *Nichomachean Ethics*. Dodds' assertion is that the idea that a "tragic law" (a phrase Aristotle does not use) ought to be a moral one, or a flaw in character, is a decidedly Christian invention, proffered primarily by the Victorians. In other words, it's fine to indict Macbeth for moral impotence but not Oedipus.

As I have also mentioned, for Lonergan, determining "moral impotence" first requires our previous discussion of freedom and then, ultimately, determining whether a subject is effectively free by eliminating from the equation: 1.) external circumstance. 2.) psychic abnormality. In this sense we can agree that the proverbial man with the gun to his head or the man with the brain tumor pressing on his pre-frontal cortex may not have a choice to do X, Y and Z. The legal system recognizes this fact and offers punitive and rehabilitative punishments accordingly.

But moral impotence, for Lonergan, is at least partially intellectual. In *Insight*, Lonergan writes, "To assert moral impotence is to assert that man's effective freedom

is restricted, not in the superficial fashion that results from external circumstance or psychic abnormality, but in the profound fashion that follows from incomplete intellectual and volitional development.”⁴¹⁶ In other words, Lonergan is merely affirming what Dodds notes about the ancient Greeks, that when it comes to a distinction between intellectual and moral flaws, the average Greek made no such distinction.

Dodds agrees with the viewpoint that Sophocles is comparing Oedipus’ life to our own. For the most part, this interpretation holds that the play teaches us that the “last riddle” is that life is not happy. This is the viewpoint offered by Nietzsche and his connecting of the play to the “Silence of Silenus.” Yet we must be cautious, says Dodds, not to take this viewpoint as some didactic “message” but an “enlargement of sensibility.” For Dodds, it follows from this “enlargement of sensibility,” that we are not allowed to question whether Oedipus could have or should have acted more prudently in an effort to avoid his fate. This approach is off limits to readers since, on Dodds’ view, Sophocles offers no evidence that Oedipus should have compiled what Waldock once called “a handlist of all the things he must not do.” This is a legalistic reading of the play and, as Dodds mentions in his footnote, either Sophocles has given us a “botched compromise” or “the common sense of the law-courts is not after all the best yardstick by which to measure myth.”⁴¹⁷

⁴¹⁶ Lonergan, *Insight*, 650.

⁴¹⁷ Dodds, “On Misunderstanding the ‘Oedipus Rex’,” 41.

The premise on which Dodds' attack of a "law-court" reading of the play is that we cannot attribute to Oedipus a lack of prudence primarily because the predictions of the oracle are unconditional. There is, to borrow from Dodds, "no saving clause."⁴¹⁸ (41). It is important to note here that, as Dodds points out, Aeschylus' trilogy depicting the House of Laius, of which only the *Septem* survives, the "oracle given to Laius was conditional: 'Do not beget a child; for if you do, that child will kill you.'"⁴¹⁹ Dodds suggests that because there is no mention of this hereditary curse in Sophocles, "the critic must not assume what the poet has abstained from suggesting."⁴²⁰ That said, Oedipus' audience would have been well-aware of the hereditary curse which is mentioned in both *The Antigone* (583 ff) and *Colonus* (964 ff). Further, they would have been well aware of Sophocles' authorial choice to omit the heightened elements of inevitability in Aeschylus, a deliberate shift away from Aeschylus conception of the tragic. This deliberate shift away from the inevitability of the curse constitutes an additional challenge to Dodds.

And yet, if we affirm that Oedipus is neither bound by external circumstance nor suffering from a psychic abnormality, we should be free to indict his character. Dodds, in other words, fails to recognize that one can agree with "the great majority of contemporary scholars" on the "essential moral innocence of Oedipus" and still suggest a lack of prudence. One can be, in other words, imprudent and, for the most part, morally innocent. My analysis, in other words, has attempted to thread a needle.

⁴¹⁸ Ibid.

⁴¹⁹ Ibid.

⁴²⁰ Ibid.

We may grant, along with Dodds, that Oedipus' calamity is not the result of a character flaw *per se*, in the sense of viciousness, but we may also add that it *is* a character flaw to eschew responsibility in the way the speeches indicate. We can find this viewpoint in Aristotle as much as it appears in Lonergan.

In fact, statements such as these would amount to little more than "cop-outs" when we accept a metaphysical worldview like emergent probability and proportionate being. Instead, when Lonergan's metaphysics is accepted as a premise, one cannot avoid deducing the conclusion, as Lonergan does, that "the will's decision is not determined by its antecedents. For the remote antecedents lie on the levels of physics, chemistry, biology, and sensitive psychology; and the events on such lower levels determine merely the materials that admit a manifold of alternative higher systematizations."⁴²¹ In this sense, in a point to which I will now turn in the "Epilogue," Oedipus' claim that "It was Apollo, my friends" becomes analogous to modern legal defenses which attempt to pin blame on reductionist forces beyond the agent's control. Far from an "older paradigm," the play articulates the real enemy to rationalism; an enemy that is not a religious sensibility but the poison of reductionism.

⁴²¹ Lonergan, *Insight*, 644.

Epilogue:

Why Should I Dance in an Unfriendly Universe?

In Act One of Shakespeare's *The Tragedy of Macbeth*, three witches make three statements to the ill-fated titular character. The witches are aptly named the Wyrd sisters; their name is derived from the Old English "wyrd," meaning "fate," from which we get our modern English word, "weird." These Wyrd sisters seem to have supernatural powers. Macbeth and Banquo are immediately enraptured by the prospect that these "supernatural solicitors" may have the power to "look into the seeds of time/And say which grain will grow and which will not" (I.i.58-59). The Wyrd sisters tell Macbeth that he is "Thane of Glamis," second that he is "Thane of Cawdor," third that he will be "king hereafter" (I.i.49-51).

Although they are often called predictions, technically speaking, the first two statements are not predictions at all. They are statements of facts of which Macbeth is unaware. He is Thane of Glamis and, prior to the scene, unbeknownst to him, has been promoted to Thane of Cawdor. Only the third statement, that he shall be "king hereafter," predicts a future event. This statement plants a seed in Macbeth's consciousness and, with the help of the infamous Lady Macbeth, he grows it, to inevitable, tragic consequences.

Like Oedipus, Macbeth commits regicide on the heels of an "oracular" prediction. In the case of Oedipus, this regicide is also parricide. For Macbeth, the regicide is a figurative parricide and a figurative deicide, as Duncan has been a father figure to Macbeth and a symbol of an almost divine, even-handed justice. Macbeth acquires the throne only to understand its ephemerality, just as Oedipus comes to

understand the ephemerality of his own identity. As both plays hasten to their end, it is hard not to become awash in a viewpoint that all human striving is ultimately futile and meaningless. The only certainty in human life is suffering and that “All our yesterdays have lighted fools the way to dusty death,” as Macbeth will later say (V.v.22-23).

It is no coincidence that this bleak existential perspective emerges against a metaphysical canvas of a deterministic fatalism – the viewpoint that holds that human will is impotent in the face of external forces. We are but cogs in a machine. In both plays, a fated offence against nature is magnified when the offence proves to be so irrevocable that not even nature can wash it clean. In *Oedipus*, the chorus exclaims, “I tell you neither the waters of the Danube nor the Nile can wash this palace clean. Such things it hides...” (lines 1227-31). Likewise, in a line that I have always suspected is an homage to Sophocles, Macbeth asks, “Will all great Neptune’s ocean wash this blood from my hand? No, this my hand will rather the multitudinous seas incarnadine, making the green one red” (II.2 Lines 64-67).

Despite this shared backdrop of deterministic fatalism, the intervening Christian tradition that separates the plays by 2,000 years may explain the differences between the audience’s response to the two titular characters vis-à-vis moral impotence. In other words, the relative pity we feel for Oedipus and Macbeth may be contingent upon our own philosophical or religious commitments. The Socratic intellectualist, for example, may have no trouble pitying Oedipus given the extenuating circumstances; but he may struggle to pity Macbeth, who acts with malice aforethought, even comparing his deed to drinking from a “poisoned chalice.” And

while the Christian may pity Oedipus for his horrible fate, he may, ironically, pity Macbeth more, because he sees in Macbeth man's fallen nature and his susceptibility to sin. As the theologian James Kugel has argued, Macbeth's mind is symbolic of the fallen human mind. Kugel uses the helpful phrase "semipermeable," to describe the human consciousness' susceptibility to outside powers, to receive God's instructions, yes, but also, presumably, to powers of dark persuasion.⁴²²

Nevertheless, despite these differences vis-à-vis pity, both *Oedipus Tyrannus* and *Macbeth* may, in an important way, have far more in common than difference. Both Sophocles and Shakespeare seem to recognize that from a metaphysical worldview like determinism there follows, seemingly of necessity, an existential stance toward the universe: nihilism. In fact, it is this specter of nihilism, more so than fatalism, that becomes the principle antagonist in both plays. In Strophe A of the 5th Chorus of *Oedipus Tyrannus*, the chorus laments,

Oh, what a wretched breed we mortals are:
our lives add up to nothing.
Does anyone, anyone at all
harvest more of happiness than a vacant image,
And from that image fall away?
You are my pattern, your fortune is mine,
You, Oedipus, your misery teaches me to call no mortal blessed. (1186 – 1196)

Likewise, upon hearing his wife is dead in Act V, Scene v, Macbeth famously laments,

She should have died hereafter;
There would have been time for such a word.
Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day

⁴²² Sigal Samuel. "Reading the Bible Through Neuroscience." *The Atlantic*. (online) <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/09/reading-the-bible-through-neuroscience/539871/> <Accessed 2/20/18>

To the last syllable of recorded time,
 And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
 The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!
 Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
 That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
 And then is heard no more. It is a tale
 told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
 signifying nothing. (V.v.17-28)

Of note in these two eerily parallel speeches is the word “nothing.” In *Oedipus Tyrannus*, the chorus reminds us that “our lives add up to nothing.” Macbeth likewise tells us that life is the tale of an incompetent storyteller which, in the end, signifies “nothing.”

In the 20th century, one is also reminded of the Hemingway short story, “A Clean, Well Lighted Place,” in which an older waiter, suffering from insomnia, also realizes the meaninglessness of human striving. To symbolize the impotence of religion in answering the nihilist objection, Hemingway subversively takes the “Our Father” and interpolates into it the Spanish word *nada*, meaning “nothing.”

"Good night," the other said. Turning off the electric light he continued the conversation with himself. It is the light of course but it is necessary that the place be clean and pleasant. You do not want music. Certainly you do not want music. Nor can you stand before a bar with dignity although that is all that is provided for these hours. What did he fear? It was not fear or dread. It was a nothing that he knew too well. It was all nothing and a man was nothing too. It was only that and light was all it needed and certain cleanness and order. Some lived in it and never felt it but he knew it all was *nada y pues nada y nada y pues nada*. Our *nada* who art in *nada*, *nada* be thy name thy kingdom *nada* thy will be *nada* in *nada* as it is in *nada*. Give us this *nada* our daily *nada* and *nada* us our *nada* as we *nada* our *nadas* and *nada* us not into *nada* but deliver us from *nada*; *pues nada*. Hail nothing full of nothing, nothing is with thee.⁴²³

⁴²³ Ernest Hemingway. “A Clean, Well Lighted Place.” *Winner Take Nothing*. (New York: Scribners, 1961).

The association of nihilism with *Oedipus Tyrannus* is most famously connected to Nietzsche. In *The Birth of Tragedy*, he writes, “Wisdom, the [Oedipus] myth seems to whisper to us, is an unnatural abomination: whoever plunges nature into the abyss of destruction by what he knows must in turn experience the dissolution of nature in his own person. The sharp point of wisdom turns against the wise man; wisdom is an offence against nature.”⁴²⁴ Nietzsche’s position is that Sophocles has merely disclosed the brutal irony of our condition as knowers: our questions, in our dogged pursuit to remain in fidelity to the self-correcting cycle of learning, will only ultimately reveal life’s meaninglessness. Nietzsche offers his interpretation through the image and voice of Silenus, the Satyr who raised Dionysius. When King Midas asks Silenus what the answer is to the ultimate question, the Satyr cackles a chilling reply: “Oh, wretched ephemeral race ... why do you compel me to tell you what it would be most expedient for you not to hear? What is best of all is utterly beyond your reach: not to be born, not to *be*, to be *nothing*. But the second best for you is....to die soon.”

Clearly, Nietzsche is on to something. For in *Colonus* we read precisely the same sentiment, as Sophocles makes his Chorus say, “The best is never to have been born/Or, once alive, die young/And return to oblivion” (1225-1228).

A False Dichotomy?

We often describe modernity as the byproduct of two great traditions: the Judeo-Christian and the Greco-Roman. We set up corresponding tensions between Athens and Jerusalem, Reason and Faith. And yet given the specter of nihilism

⁴²⁴ Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 48.

described above, an elongated shadow which runs from antiquity (Sophocles) to the Elizabethan age (Shakespeare) to the modern era (Hemingway), one wonders if we would be better served by uniting Athens and Jerusalem together against this common foe: nihilism.

This would not be a radical exhortation. As Yoram Hazony has pointed out in his fascinating book *The Philosophy of Hebrew Scripture*, “nothing in the principal Hebrew texts suggests that the prophets and scholars of ancient Israel were familiar with such an opposition between God’s word and the pronouncements of human reason when it is working as it should.”⁴²⁵ Recognizing the origin of this Athens-Jerusalem dichotomy in Tertullian and others, Hazony defines the assumptions:

- i.) “Faith” and “reason” name distinct and opposed aspects of mankind’s mental endowment; and that
- ii.) The tradition of thought found in the Bible represents and encourages the first of these, whereas Greek philosophy embraces the second.⁴²⁶

Hazony then adds, “I do not believe the dichotomy between faith and reason is very helpful in understanding the diversity of human intellectual orientations.”⁴²⁷

I concur. I would point out that the typical Athens-Jerusalem dichotomy, while perhaps a helpful pedagogical or organizational tool in the classroom, clouds this diversity of intellectual orientations and tends to obfuscate the facts. For example, to the Biblical authors, as Hazony adds, “it is obvious that the wisdom presented by the

⁴²⁵ Yoram Hazony. *The Philosophy of Hebrew Scripture*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), p. 2.

⁴²⁶ Ibid.

⁴²⁷ Ibid.

prophets as the word of God is precisely the wisdom that is sought by human beings for the present, human world.”⁴²⁸

Clearly, there are other arrangements. We might, if we were so inclined, choose to describe not two but three intellectual orientations, a trichotomy. Let’s give them three names: Philosopher, Saint, Messenger.

The philosopher is Plato. In the end of his *Republic*, in section 617d, Socrates, Plato’s mouthpiece, says, “Ephemeral souls...Virtue knows no master; each will possess it to a greater or less degree, depending on whether he values or disdains it. The responsibility lies with the one who makes the choice; the god has none” (617d).

The saint is Augustine. In Book 8 of his *Confessions*, he asks us, as Lady Continence asks him, in a terrific chiasmatic line, “Why are you relying on yourself, only to find yourself unreliable? Cast yourself upon [Christ], do not be afraid. He will not withdraw himself so that you fall. Make the leap without anxiety; he will catch you and heal you” (8.XII.26). The messenger is from Sophocles’ *Antigone*. He says, “The course of our lives never stops; it runs past good or ill. I’ll never declare success or failure for anyone. It’s only chance that keeps your boat upright, And chance that sinks you – good luck or bad is all you have” (1155-1171).⁴²⁹

We can understand each worldview in terms of fluid hydrostatics. Socrates’ position is simple: be less dense than the environment in which you find yourself and

⁴²⁸ Ibid., 236.

⁴²⁹ Compare to *Ecclesiastes* 9:11: “the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the wise, nor yet riches to men of understanding, nor yet favour to men of skill; but time and chance happeneth to them all.”

you won't sink. Augustine disagrees. You are sunken from the start; and thus *always* more dense than your surroundings. If you find yourself floating; it is only insofar as God has buoyed you up. Against these two, Sophocles' messenger says you can't control your destiny because...well...you don't control your density. In the seething flux of a totally indifferent universe, you may suddenly weigh more than you displace, through no fault of your own. You control *nada*.

Lonergan's Dichotomy

Given this "diversity of human intellectual positions," to borrow Hazony's helpful phrase, it is unclear to me as to whether couching Athens as somehow opposed to Jerusalem is good pedagogical practice. In a similar mode, equally unclear to me is whether couching Sophocles as somehow opposed to Socrates, Plato and Aristotle is good practice. Yes, contradistinction has its pedagogical merits, but it can also wash away nuance.

I would therefore suggest, by way of a conclusion to this book, that if we must have a dichotomy, a better alternative, even pedagogically speaking, may be to use Lonergan's dichotomy of the friendly or unfriendly universe. For ultimately, we are faced with one existential question: is our universe a friendly one?

In *Method in Theology*, Lonergan asks, poignantly:

Is moral enterprise consonant with this world?...is the universe on our side, or are we just gamblers and, if we are gamblers, are we not perhaps fools, individually struggling for authenticity and collectively endeavoring to snatch progress from the ever mounting welter of decline? The questions arise and, clearly, our attitudes and our resoluteness may be profoundly affected by the answers. Does there or does there not necessarily exist a transcendent, intelligent ground of the universe? Is that ground or are we the primary instance of moral consciousness? Are cosmogenesis, biological evolution, historical

process basically cognate to us as moral beings or are they different and so alien to us?⁴³⁰

The phrase “friendly universe” comes a bit later in the text, when Lonergan adds, “Faith places human efforts in *a friendly universe*; it reveals an ultimate significance in human achievement; it strengthens new undertakings with confidence” (117, my italics). Notice the connection Lonergan adduces between religious conversion, or the unrestricted being in love with God, as the ground of the friendly universe. And yet, as I mentioned in an earlier section on Theseus, this unrestricted being in love is, as Lonergan points out, “interpreted differently in the context of different religious traditions.” After all, Socrates was no Christian; but he did believe the universe was friendly.

Given the parameters of this paper, I could not do justice in these final concluding thoughts to the arguments Lonergan mounts in *Insight* and other texts to challenge our present culture’s extra-scientific assumptions which, typically, lead (erroneously) to the conclusion that our universe is an unfriendly one.⁴³¹ It will be sufficient here to simply cite Byrne’s excellent summation that “Lonergan’s radical reinterpretation of the methods of science and the meaningfulness of the natural universe known by their means rebut the pervasive and corrosive extra-scientific climate of opinion that the universe is itself meaningless and that human ethical endeavor is a quaint but ultimately futile exercise.”⁴³² In fact, Byrne goes so far as to

⁴³⁰ Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 102.

⁴³¹ See Byrne’s essay, “Intelligibility and Natural Science: Alienation or Friendship with the Universe?” In that paper, Byrne offers a nice inventory of scientists like Bertrand Russell, Jacques Monod, Richard Dawkins, et al.

say that *Insight*, from one perspective, is an extended response to the assumption that modern science has somehow confirmed our universe is hostile to human striving. To the contrary, Byrne explains that Lonergan shows “it is not the scientific methods or scientific results in or of themselves that lead to despair about the worth of ethical authenticity. Rather, in Lonergan’s view it is their fellow travelers, the unexamined opinions about what the sciences reveal, which lead to conclusions that undermine confidence about moral endeavor.”

Nowadays, the metaphysical doctrine of reductionism or eliminative reductionism has led to a determinism remarkably like the one Sophocles explores in *Oedipus Tyrannus*. Recently, the neuroscientist David Eagleman has made the case that our moral flaws are really determined by neurophysiological factors beyond our control. Our moral failings, while still perhaps punishable legally, are not our fault.

But if praise and blame are null categories in a deterministic universe, what really is the point of human endeavors? How can such a metaphysic ultimately *not* lead to a kind of nihilism? I am reminded of one of my favorite passages from the late American philosopher and cognitive scientist, Jerry Fodor. When considering the psycho-neural identity theory, a viewpoint which holds that our consciousness states are identical with physical states, the brute firing of neurons, Fodor exclaimed,

I’m not really convinced that it matters very much whether the mental is physical; still less that it matters very much whether we can prove that it is. Whereas if it isn’t literally true that my wanting is causally responsible for my reaching, and my itching is causally responsible for my scratching, and my believing is causally responsible for my saying...,

⁴³² Byrne, “Intelligibility and Natural Science,” 34.

if none of that is literally true, then practically everything I believe about anything is false and it's the end of the world.⁴³³

Here Fodor humorously acknowledges the very point I have been trying to stress. Our metaphysical commitments cannot help but ground our existential stance toward the world. We want to know that our actions matter. We want a ground beneath our striving. As Nietzsche once said, one of the “most vital questions for philosophy appears to be to what extent the character of the world is unalterable: so as, once this question has been answered, to set about improving that part of it recognized as alterable with the most ruthless courage.”⁴³⁴ What is there but despair when we find, to paraphrase Shakespeare, a universe that does not alter when it alteration finds and does not bend with the remover to remove?

Why Should I Dance?

Ironically, in my analysis of the many questions asked and answered in *Oedipus Tyrannus*, I have delayed, until now, what might be the single most important one. It is not Oedipus who asks it, but the Chorus. And, unlike many of the questions that lead to insights and judgments of facts, this question goes unanswered. Sophocles' audience no doubt left the theater of Dionysius with the question still on their minds and on their lips and in their hearts.

⁴³³ Kim, Jaegwon. *Philosophy of Mind*. 3rd Edition. (Boulder: Westview Press, 2011,) p. 202.

⁴³⁴ Nietzsche, Friedrich, *Richard Wagner in Bayreuth*. (*Untimely Meditations*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 1997. p 208.

As Oedipus sends for the exiled Theban herdsman, in whom his fleeting hope rests, the Chorus asks, at line 896, "*Why should I dance in prayer and praise?*" The entire Strophe B of this 3rd chorus is structured as a *modus ponens*: **if** the hubristic and unjust man prospers in his wickedness with no consequence or punishment, **then** there is no point in reverence for the gods and "everything divine departs." As Bernard Knox puts it, "If irreverent action is to be respected and profitable, why should I dance?"⁴³⁵

[Strophe B]

If a man moves in lofty pride
 His hands or tongue
 Fearless of injustice –
 No reverence for holy places –
 I pray he meet an evil fate
 To pay for his miserable excesses.
 If he piles wealth on wealth, without justice,
 If he does not shrink from fighting reverence
 And puts his hand to what may not be touched,
 Then may his effort be wasted,
 And may there be no shield
 To save his mind from blows.
 But if gods give honor to a life like his,
Why should I dance in prayer and praise?

[Antistrophe B]

No longer will I go in reverence
 To the sacred navel of the world –
 Not to Delphi, not to Abai,
 Or the temple at Olympia,
 If the oracles do not come true
 For all humanity to see.
 Ruler of all, O Zeus our lord,
 If that be your name, do not let this escape
 Your notice or your undying power:
 Apollo's word to Laius long ago

⁴³⁵ Knox, *Oedipus at Thebes*, 47.

Is fading, it is already lost.
 Now Apollo's fame and honor die away,
 And everything divine departs. (Lines 883 – 910, my italics)

The existential question, “Why should I dance?” becomes the Chorus’ potential indictment of the ground of meaning in their universe and, no trivial corollary, the veracity and legitimacy of prophecy, or those who seek to understand the divine order and, presumably, those who might call that order amenable to human striving.⁴³⁶ Historically speaking, the chorus is voicing here the terms of a percolating debate in late Periclean Athens involving a position (prophecy is a legitimate enterprise) and counter-position (prophecy is the work of degenerate charlatans). Not surprisingly, it is a dialectic that plays out today, as modern science continues to undercut or even shout down religious voices.

In one sense, this question is the culmination of a strand of inquiry that runs throughout the play. Here and there are pointed references to the quackery of soothsaying and prophecy and divination. For example, when Jocasta learns that Oedipus’ quarrel with Creon is the result of Tiresias’ claims, she says,

A soothsayer? Then you should dismiss all charges.
 Listen. I’ll tell you why you can’t rely
 On any merely human soothsayers.
 Here, in brief, is my evidence:
 An oracle came to Laius once – I won’t say
 “From Apollo”; it came from priests –
 That “Laius would die at the hands of a son
 That would be born to him and me.”

⁴³⁶ Bernard Knox famously claimed that the Chorus’ words here are further indication that Sophocles did not intend for us to speculate about any moral faults in Oedipus’ character that may “cloud the waters.” He says “the divine demonstration needs a protagonist whose character does not obscure the meaning of his fall: affirmation of the existence of divine prescience and the ignorance of man must not be confused by any crosscurrent of feeling that Oedipus’ catastrophe can be attributed to a moral fault” (Knox, *Oedipus at Thebes*, 49).

But Laius was killed by strangers
 At a place where three roads meet.
 That's the story.
 And our son? He did not last three days.
 Laius yoked his feet and had him thrown away –
 By other people – into a wilderness of mountains.
 So Apollo did not make the tale come true:
 The boy never came to murder his father;
 The father had nothing to fear from his son.
 That's the way a soothsayer charts the truth!
 Don't trust them. The god knows what's needed:
 The god himself will speak when he sees fit. (707-725)

Oedipus later says: "Why? Why, dear wife, should we observe the oracle/At Delphi, or strain to see signs from birds screeching/In the sky? They led me to believe that I would kill/My father, yet he's dead and buried deep in the earth./And here I am, who never raised a hand against him,/Unless my absence made him die brokenhearted./Then, I suppose, I could be called his killer,/But not the kind contained within those worthless oracles/Polybus has taken those with him to Hades" (Lines 964-972). Jocasta replies to this, "Exactly what I said in the beginning" (973).

We must not forget, however, that prophecy and soothsaying are, in the end, vindicated in Sophocles' universe. We find even Jocasta, the character who has been most vociferous in her denial of prophecy, supplicating the gods with gifts at the altar: "Apollo, nearest god, to you I pray:/I have come with offerings,/I entreat you for relief, light out of darkness./The captain of our ship has lost his wits/And we are all so very afraid" (Lines 919-923). Clearly the jury on soothsaying is still out. So what are we to make of this?

Final (Final) Thoughts

It is here that we should pause and recall Charles Segal's words that Sophocles raises these issues "as problems, *not* as dogma."⁴³⁷ And so, while there are indeed many moments that hint at the unfriendliness of the universe, there are also junctures that hint at friendship, both with each other and with the universe at large. Sophocles offers much more nuance than a simple nihilistic rejection of the world, especially, as I have endeavored to show, when *Colonus* is factored into the equation. As McCoy has argued, *Colonus* may in many respects be the antidote to *Tyrannus*. She writes, "While Thebes had suffered because of Oedipus' pollution, Athens will prosper because of its reception of Oedipus in his pollution and in his misery. Whole Oedipus' family will suffer greatly because of his fate, and because of his reaction to that Fate, the families in the audience of the plays, in Athens, are assured of the benevolent protection of the city because of Theseus' care for the exiled and polluted one."⁴³⁸

I close by citing below Matthew Arnold's beautiful poem, "Dover Beach," penned in 1867.

The sea is calm to-night
 The tide is full, the moon lies fair
 Upon the straits;--on the French coast the light
 Gleams and is gone; the cliffs of England stand,
 Glimmering and vast, out in the tranquil bay.
 Come to the window, sweet is the night-air!
 Only, from the long line of spray
 Where the sea meets the moon-blanch'd land,
 Listen! you hear the grating roar
 Of pebbles which the waves draw back, and fling,
 At their return, up the high strand,

⁴³⁷ Ibid., 54.

⁴³⁸ McCoy, *Wounded Heroes*, 61.

Begin, and cease, and then again begin,
 With tremulous cadence slow, and bring
 The eternal note of sadness in.

Sophocles long ago
 Heard it on the Ægean, and it brought
 Into his mind the turbid ebb and flow
 Of human misery; we
 Find also in the sound a thought,
 Hearing it by this distant northern sea.

The Sea of Faith
 Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore
 Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furl'd.
 But now I only hear
 Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,
 Retreating, to the breath
 Of the night-wind, down the vast edges drear
 And naked shingles of the world.
 Ah, love, let us be true
 To one another! for the world, which seems
 To lie before us like a land of dreams,
 So various, so beautiful, so new,
 Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,
 Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;
 And we are here as on a darkling plain
 Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight
 Where ignorant armies clash by night.

As Arnold's persona gazes out upon the austere cliffs of Dover, the English Channel and the flickering lights of the French coastline beyond, he hears in the perpetual roar "of pebbles which the waves draw back, and fling," an "eternal note of sadness." The persona then tells us that despite a separation of 2,000 years, "Sophocles long ago/ Heard it on the Ægean, and it brought/Into his mind the turbid ebb and flow/Of human misery." Arnold's speaker believes that Sophocles also recognized that our universe, which once seemed friendly, and lying "before us like a land of dreams,/So various, so beautiful, so new" is, in actuality, an unfriendly one. Contrary to human striving, our universe has "really neither joy, nor love, nor

light,/Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain.” Arnold then closes with one of the more haunting images in English poetry: “And we are here as on a darkling plain.” The image evokes loneliness, alienation, despair. Arnold’s universe is about as unfriendly as it gets.

But, while it is certainly true that Sophocles certainly heard that “eternal note of sadness on the Aegean” in *Oedipus*, he seems to have heard in *Colonus* a note of compassion and wisdom and love and the hope for a construction of a community in which human striving is not in vain. As Oedipus tells his daughters,

But there is one small word that can soothe –
And that is ‘love.’ I loved you more than
Anyone else could ever love, but now
Your lives must go on without me. (1610-1619)⁴³⁹

⁴³⁹ The Greek is below:

τὰ πάντα λυεῖ ταῦτ’ ἔπος μοχθήματα.
τὸ γὰρ φιλεῖν οὐκ ἔστιν ἐξ ὅτου πλεον
ἢ τοῦδε τάνδρὸς ἔσχεθ’, οὗ τητώμεναι
τὸ λοιπὸν ἤδη τὸν βίον διάζετον.

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