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Oedipus Rex and the Interpretation of Literature

A Response to Gaskin

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Richard Gaskin recently published a highly significant and deeply insightful philosophical study of tragic literature.[1] He begins the work with a discussion of the freedom and responsibility of Oedipus in Sophocles's *Oedipus Rex*, defending the related views that Oedipus's actions are free, that he is guilty of and blameworthy for his parricide and incest, and hence that he is not undeserving of the 'punishment' he inflicts on himself at the end of the play.

My aim is not to argue that Gaskin's interpretation is mistaken, but to point out that, on the basis of a position on free will no less credible than Gaskin's and of interpretations of crucial passages in the text no less plausible than his, a defence can be constructed of the old view that Sophocles' play is a "tragedy of destiny".[2] I shall conclude with an important lesson for any literary interpreter.

Gaskin presupposes *compatibilism*, the view that freedom and responsibility are consistent with *determinism*, according to which all actions are determined or caused by events beyond the agent's control.[3] Reasonably enough, he does not deviate from his main discussion to provide arguments for compatibilism. Its attractions are obvious: it avoids the 'miracles' of libertarian agent-causation, in which the *agent*, somehow mysteriously independent of the causal nexus, freely brings about their action; and it leaves in place within the causal order not only our actions but our common-sense attributions of freedom and responsibility.

1 Gaskin 2018.
2 See e.g. Freud 1938, 108; also Dodds 1968, 22-25; Gaskin 2018, 68-69.
3 Gaskin 2018, 51.

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Like many philosophers who have struggled with the problem of free will, Gaskin accepts the notion that, for an action to be free, it must be the case that the agent could have acted otherwise.[4] Again he needs no argument for this, since most of his readers will find the claim resonates with how things appear to them in their own experience of acting. Nevertheless, a puzzle might seem to arise. Compatibilism in itself is consistent with a denial of determinism, but the majority of compatibilists have been determinists and there is no evidence that Gaskin is not among them. But if an action is determined, how could it have been otherwise? It turns out that, again like many compatibilists, what Gaskin means is that the action could have been otherwise *had the agent so chosen*.[5] What he calls "real freedom" is freedom not from the causal nexus itself, but from coercion by or duress from another agent, whether animate or inanimate. Real freedom, he suggests, is "social or political", not metaphysical. If I am eating a chocolate dessert, for example, my action is free in that, had I chosen the lemon dessert instead, I would now be eating it. If you are physically forcing me to eat the chocolate, my action is unfree, in that had I chosen the lemon, I would still be eating the chocolate. (It is also the case that to be free my action must meet a "rationality constraint".[6] If I am choosing the chocolate because I have some very serious eating disorder, for example, or because I have the irrational belief that it will make me immortal, then it will not be 'really' free, even if uncoerced.)

Here, then, we might ask whether in the play the influence of Apollo on the actions of Oedipus could be said to undermine his "real freedom". Various passages in the play suggest that they could. One of the most important, as many critics have noted, is at 1329-1332:

> Ἀπόλλων τάδ' ἦν, Ἀπόλλων, φίλοι,
> ὁ κακὰ κακὰ τελῶν ἐμὰ τάδ' ἐμὰ πάθεα.
> ἔπαισε δ' αὐτόχειρ νιν οὔ-
> τις, ἀλλ' ἐγὼ τλάμων.[7]
>
> Apollo, friends, Apollo
> it was made my fate grow
> ill, so ill. But my own hand,
> no other, struck and made me blind.[8]

4 *Ibid.* 57-58.
5 *Ibid.*
6 *Ibid.* 51, 54-55, 57.
7 S. *OT* 1329-1332. The text is taken from Lloyd-Jones and Wilson 1990.
8 Trans. Taplin 2015.

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Gaskin does not read the passage as referring merely to Apollo's prediction, which might be understood non-causally.[9] Nor does he understand Oedipus to be drawing a distinction between certain events for which Apollo is responsible (i.e. the parricide and incest), and those for which he is himself responsible (i.e. his self-blinding).[10] Rather, according to Gaskin, he is taking responsibility for everything. Since Gaskin does not suggest that Oedipus is in any way attempting to 'share' the responsibility with Apollo, we should assume that Gaskin takes Oedipus himself to be a compatibilist: the proximate causes of his actions were his own choices, Oedipus thinks, and had he chosen differently then he would have acted differently.

But could it not be said that Apollo's interventions were sufficient either to provide an excuse for Oedipus's free actions, at least as far as the parricide and incest are concerned, in so far as they are committed involuntarily through ignorance,[11] or, through sheer coercion, to undermine any claim that in the parricide and incest he was acting freely at all?[12]

Gaskin has several responses to this suggestion. First, we should 'naturalize' or 'psychologize' Apollo: "The point of divine intervention in traditional literature is not to undermine the autonomy and sufficiency of human motivation but to represent it in a particular way—in fact to enlarge and dignify it".[13] Now it might be objected that the ancients, and particularly Sophocles, did not think of the gods in this way. But that would be to misunderstand Gaskin's aims. He is asking literary-philosophical questions about Oedipus, the character in the play, and not historical questions about Sophocles' intentions or

9 Gaskin 2018, 63.

10 See e.g. Jouanna 2018, 441.

11 Kovacs 2019 makes a good case for Apollo's having "set Oedipus up", through tricking him. But, as he notes (111-112), Apollo may well be interfering more directly with Oedipus's choices, for example in guiding him to Jocasta, and such interference is anyway standard in tragedy generally. Gaskin, 30-35 criticizes Oedipus for various cognitive failures. But it is hard to see how Oedipus himself could be blamed for any such failures, except in so far as he acts (e.g. by judging others arrogantly) or fails to act (e.g. by not noticing some rather obvious truths); and it could be that these acts and omissions are themselves part of Apollo's plan. On whether they are or are not, and the relevance of this question, see main text below.

12 See in addition to the numerous mentions of necessity in connection with the oracle e.g. 278-281 (the Chorus say Apollo should name the murderer of Laius, to which Oedipus responds that no man can force a god against his will); 711-722 (Jocasta mentions the prophecy and claims Apollo did not make it happen, when it appears he did); 828-829 (Oedipus speaks of the cruel treatment he might have received from the god). Edith Hall 2010, 303-304 asks: "Just what is the relationship between a man's fate and his character, and does he actually have any free will at all? Oedipus was doomed *before he was born*".

13 Gaskin 2018, 60.

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indeed the views of his audience.[14] What he is offering here is a 'genealogy' of the gods in ancient drama which makes sense of them and explains their underlying rationale, a genealogy presumably intended for us, rather than an ancient audience. It seems to me likely, at least in some cases, to be a fruitful methodology. But it would be going too far to suggest (as Gaskin does not) that this is the only reasonable way to read ancient literature.[15] Oedipus himself exists only fictionally, and so anyone prepared to consider whether he is guilty should be willing to entertain the question whether he is guilty given the behaviour of the equally fictional Apollo.

Gaskin's second suggestion is that, even were Oedipus metaphysically destined to realize the prophecy, the oracle could have been sufficiently indeterminate for Oedipus to realize it, and perhaps even seek to realize it, in some harmless way, perhaps by digging his sword into the earth of his homeland (his 'father') and then sleeping on (or 'with') that earth (his 'mother').[16] Again, this proposal seems to me worthy of consideration. But there is nothing to suggest this degree of indeterminacy in the text, and the question anyway arises why Apollo would not have had something much more straightforward and unpleasant in mind.

As we have seen, Gaskin's compatibilism relies on a distinction between coerced and uncoerced actions, and the notion that an action's being merely caused does not prevent its instantiating "real freedom". He appeals to "one of Hume's great insights …: causes do not enforce their effects; they merely precede them in a lawlike manner. Force, duress, compulsion, constraint, to the extent that these things deprive one of freedom, necessarily involve human or non-human agency; they are not, just as such, what causes do to effects".[17]

14 Dodds 1968, 22 claims that, as far as the issue of free will is concerned, "fifth-century Greeks did not think in these terms any more than Homer did: the debate about determinism is a creation of Hellenistic thought". This may be so, though verifying Dodds's claim would require some attention to Aristotle, and indeed Empedocles, Democritus, and others, and it might anyway be suggested that the Hellenistic debate must have emerged from somewhere. But the main point is that, though one appropriate way to interpret a work of literature may be in light of the author's intentions or the audience's preconceptions, there are other ways no less appropriate.

15 In elucidating his genealogy, Gaskin 2018, 59 also appeals to the principle "*operatur deus in unoquoque secundum eius proprietatem*: the god acts in each person according to that person's character". This can be taken independently of the naturalizing strategy. But, even if Oedipus were the kind of person disposed to parricide and incest (which he anyway appears not to be), the question to ask is whether he would have killed his father or married his mother without the god's intervention.

16 Gaskin 2018, 57.

17 *Ibid*. 58.

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The case we have been considering so far is one of non-human agency, that of Apollo. It is not entirely clear how that agency might be affecting Oedipus's behaviour, and what are its implications, if it is, for Oedipus's freedom and responsibility. Consider, then, the following highly simplified case:

> *Oedipus Percussus 1.* Apollo hates the house of Laius, and wishes to destroy it. He does this by sending out appropriately targeted bolts of lightning that affect the mental states, decisions, and behaviour of Oedipus, in such a way that he kills his father and marries his mother.

Here, the outright manipulation of Oedipus's choices clearly throw seriously into question the attribution to him of responsibility of any kind that would underpin guilt or his deserving punishment. As Gaskin would agree, Oedipus's actions cannot plausibly be said to be free, because they are caused not by his own agency, but by that of another.

But what matters for freedom, perhaps, is not so much the agency of *others* as that of the agent *themselves*. If my agency—that is, what I will or intend—is caused by *any* elements external to that agency itself, why is it important, as far as freedom is concerned, whether those external elements consist in the agency of others or in something else? In light of this, consider now:

> *Oedipus Percussus 2.* Oedipus is struck by lightning. This affects his mental states, decisions, and behaviour in such a way that he kills his father and marries his mother.

I take it that Gaskin will not allow lightning to count as an agent. If he does, then presumably any cause will count as an agent. And there is no reason to think that *Oedipus Percussus* 2 is acting irrationally. But it seems highly plausible that the actions of *Oedipus Percussus* 2 are *as unfree* as those of *Oedipus Percussus* 1. This suggests that the agency of others cannot be used to distinguish actions of real freedom from those of unfreedom. The implication of *Oedipus Percussus* 2, and other cases like it, according to a 'hard' incompatibilist who holds that causal determination rules out freedom, is that *all* our actions are unfree, in so far as they are all caused, ultimately, by factors beyond the agent's own control. (Some actions might be random, and hence uncaused, but again such randomness is not something within the agent's control.)

Such an incompatibilist may suggest that we read Sophocles's play as exposing not only Oedipus's lack of freedom (and consequent lack of responsibility or guilt), but our own. The interference of Apollo in the play is analogous to that in *Oedipus Percussus* 1. Now the text itself does not make clear the *degree*

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of that interference—whether, for example, Apollo merely sets the stage for the meeting of Oedipus and Laius, and then leaves it up to Oedipus's bad temper and his own 'choice' to lead to the killing of Laius, or whether he arranges every last detail. But as our two cases above show, this does not matter. Apollo seems to intervene, and it is plausible to think that this intervention at least *could* undermine Oedipus's own responsibility. Reflection on what freedom consists in, or would have to consist in for responsibility, then shows that *whatever* caused Oedipus to act undermines his responsibility. That can be grasped from thinking only about the play itself, but what *Oedipus Percussus* 2 brings out explicitly is that, even if Apollo merely sets the stage, the factors that lead Oedipus to 'make' his decision (his bad temper, along with the beliefs and desires he involuntarily has at the point of decision) are equally beyond his control.

On this incompatibilist account of free will, then, all tragedies will be tragedies of destiny, since all actions arise from a causal order over which we have no control and for which we cannot be held responsible or blameworthy. In the case of Oedipus, the actions he performs have the most appalling consequences for him. As Dodds notes:

> Morally innocent though he is and knows himself to be, the objective horror of his actions remains with him and he feels he has no longer any place in human society. Is that simply archaic superstition? I think it is something more. Suppose a motorist runs down a man and kills him, I think he *ought* to feel that he has done a terrible thing, even if the accident is no fault of his: he has destroyed a human life, which nothing can restore. In the objective order it is acts that count, not intentions. A man who has violated that order may well feel a sense of guilt, however blameless his driving.[18]

It is this "sense of guilt" that leads Oedipus to blind himself.[19] Even if we leave aside the question of whether it is reasonable or justified, as Dodds appears to believe, all of us, unless we are psychopaths, feel it on occasion and entirely understand why Oedipus is driven to such a degree of self-harm. And yet, from the incompatibilist perspective, it also seems horribly unfair: Oedipus is innocent, in so far as he does not deserve punishment for what he has done, just as no one deserves punishment for anything. As Dodds goes on to say, the last

18 Dodds 1968, 24.

19 Dodds has in mind what Williams 1981, 27-28 later called "agent-regret" and Smith 1982, I.iii.3.5 had described as the feeling of oneself as "piacular" (see also *ibid.* VII.iv.30).

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lines of the play "appear to suggest that in some sense Oedipus is every man and every man is potentially Oedipus".[20] On an incompatibilist reading, this is absolutely right: any of us, innocent as we are, can find that we have done, or indeed are doing, terrible things. Since we are all innocent, all punitive guilt is unjustified, and in this respect the unfairness of the world will often be greatest for those who commit, and then feel guilt for, the worst wrongs. But, unless we are moral saints, this kind of unfairness arises to some degree for any of us with a sense of guilt, and hence our own lives can themselves be seen, in this respect at least, as tragedies of destiny.

Philosophers and others have disagreed radically over the question of free will for millennia. I have been arguing that both compatibilist and incompatibilist readings of *Oedipus Rex* are available, and there will also be many versions of each category of view on offer other than that of Gaskin and the position I have myself sketched above. Further, of course, there has also been deep and lasting disagreement over many other issues central to the interpretation of works of literature: knowledge, reality, morality, personhood, love, the divine, and so on. It would be going too far to claim that any serious interpreter of a text must have a well-worked-out view on all these issues before they begin their interpretation. But it is perhaps worth reminding interpreters that their positions on texts will rest on and imply views on many of these issues, and that these positions might well benefit from some clarification and examination of the assumptions behind them. Further, they should recognize that literary interpretation is no place for dogmatism: we human beings are so far from understanding central aspects of the world and our place in it that any interpreter can reasonably offer their view only as the way the text in question appears to them, without insisting that the way things appear to them is the way things are.[21]

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20 Dodds 1968, 28.

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