Essays on the Problem of Guilt

J. T. SHEPPARD

The Innocence of Oedipus†

My assertion that Oedipus is innocent demands, as I am aware, defence and explanation. It must be admitted that the hero, when he stands revealed as the murderer of his father and the husband of his mother, feels himself utterly vile, polluted, and the polluter of all who have dealings with him. He has done, however unwittingly, things which have made him worse than the meanest of criminals. Are we not forced to admit that Sophocles here treats his Oedipus as a sinner duly punished? Has he not failed to realise that it is the motive and the knowledge of consequences that determine moral guilt?

Without doubt, there was a time when a Greek audience would have been unable to distinguish between the guilt of the deliberate parricide and the misfortune of a man like Oedipus. Some vague minds even to-day find it impossible to realise that, for example, Tess of the D'Urbervilles was a chaste woman. And in the audience of Sophocles, though Greek literature and Greek law entitle us to claim that the work of enlightenment had gone far, there must have been many simple people who, if they had been examined by a lawyer, could not have made the distinction clear. Our question, however, concerns Sophocles, and an audience which is swayed by the emotions suggested by this play. How would ordinarily intelligent Athenians of the time of Sophocles feel, not simply think, about Oedipus?

In the first place, very few of them—Euripides and some of his friends—would realise clearly that the supposed 'pollution' and the infectious nature of that pollution were the figments of old superstition. The *Hercules Furens* allows us to say so much. They would be able easily enough to imagine the state of mind of a person who believed in the definite, material, and infectious, pollution. But, for their own part, they would feel, as would an enlightened man of our own day, that the ignorance of Oedipus absolves him from all

† From J. T. Sheppard, *The Oedipus Tyrannus of Sophocles* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1920), pp. xxiv–xl. Reprinted by permission of the publisher.

blame. Anyone, however clear-headed, must, of course, feel that it is natural and right for Oedipus to experience a terrible emotion, with something of remorse and disgust, an instinctive sense of shame and intolerable pain. But we have no right to suppose that this is all. Most of the audience, perhaps Sophocles himself (though the *Oedipus at Colonus* makes this doubtful), felt and recognised as right the peculiar horror expressed by Creon when he bids the citizens put out of sight 'a thing polluted so that neither Earth nor Light nor Heaven's Rain may welcome it.'

That difference between the ancient and the modern view must in fairness be admitted. To the average spectator of our play the man who had shed human blood was, until absolved by ritual purification and also, in some cases, by a judicial verdict of justification, physically unclean, infectious, and likely to be a cause of disaster to all with whom he came in contact. How strongly this superstition worked, even in the days of the 'enlightenment,' we may gather from the commonplaces which occur in a series of speeches composed by the orator and statesman Antiphon as a model for pleaders in Athenian courts. This is the kind of argument to which a jury will respond:

> It is against your own advantage that this person, so blood-stained and so foul, should have access to the sacred precincts of your gods and should pollute their purity; should sit at the same table with yourselves, and should infect the guiltless by his presence. It is this that causes barrenness in the land. It is this that brings misfortune upon men's undertakings. You must consider that it is for yourselves you are acting when you take vengeance for this murder. . . .

The notion of the potent and disastrous blood-pollution is alive in Athenian society, no mere archaistic and imaginative revival of the poet. Though the clear vision of human love enables the Theseus of Euripides to see the essential innocence and harmlessness of his friend, even he does not deny the need for purification. His contempt for the danger of infection is for the audience a revelation of generosity, a triumph of reason and of friendship over the current superstition.

But we must make yet another admission. Though there are few traces here of the crude old superstition whose vitality is attested, for example, by the words of Plato's *Laws*. 'He that has been slain by violence is angry against the doer, and pursues his murderer with shocks and terrors,' there is certainly an appeal to the tragic notion that the dead man cries for vengeance. Though Sophocles has deliberately suppressed the Aeschylean and pre-Aeschylean notion of the ancestral curse and the inherited taint, we must not forget, in estimating the probable effect of his work, the ancient feeling, to

which sanction was still given even by the enlightened practice of Athenian justice, that a killing was a wrong inflicted primarily on the family, and that it imposed, upon the kinsman, in the first place the duty of requital. It is the family of a murdered man that demands the trial of his murderer. It is on a kinsman, who must claim first cousinship at least to the deceased, that the duty of prosecution falls. This fact, and the frame of mind which it induces, must be remembered when we try to realise the emotional effect of the parricide of Oedipus. It may help us if we recall another passage of the *Laws*, in which Plato, prescribing for the good government of a typical Greek city, will have the parricide slain and his body thrown out naked and unburied at a crossroad beyond the precincts of the city. All the officials shall bring stones and shall stone the corpse, thus throwing upon its head the pollution of the state. 'The Justice that stands on watch, the avenger of kindred bloodshed, follows a law . . . ordaining that if any man hath done any such deed he suffer what he has inflicted. Hath a man slain his father? He must some day die at the hands of his children. . . . When the common blood is polluted, there is no other purification. The polluted blood will not be washed out until the life that did the deed has paid a like death as penalty for the death, and so propitiated and laid to rest the wrath of the whole kinship. In our play, I know, there is nothing quite so savage as this. Yet the savage superstition is alive in Athens and we shall not appreciate the full tragedy of Oedipus unless we take that fact into account.

Of the incest I need say little. But here also we must remember that for a Greek audience there comes into play, not merely the natural feeling which we share, but also the superstitious sense of a taboo, which makes the tie of family not less but more binding, the pollution not less but more horrible, than it is for us. I will mention only the fact that an Athenian was held justified in killing an adulterer at sight if he were caught with the slayer's wife or mother or sister or daughter, or even with his concubine, if she were the mother of children whom he had acknowledged as his own. So much depended on the purity of citizen blood that a man was forbidden to take back an unfaithful wife under penalty of the loss of citizen rights.

These differences between the normal ancient view and the modern view must, in frankness, be admitted. But do they really imply the sweeping corollary, for example, of Professor Murray? Is it true, that Sophocles expects and allows his audience to adopt that further superstition of 'the terrible and romantic past' which makes incest and parricide 'not moral offences capable of being rationally judged or even excused as unintentional'? Is it true that he has allowed 'no breath of later enlightenment to disturb the pri-

macval gloom of his atmosphere'? That is the question we have to face.

For some of my readers, I hope, to put the question thus plainly is to answer it. Sophocles has, indeed, used all his constructive art in the invention of a plot whose minor incidents as well as its broad effects reveal the hero's piety, his respect for the natural bond of the family, and his instinctive detestation of impurity. But there are some critics who are somehow able to ignore the general impression, or to attribute it to a modern enlightenment which, they think, Sophocles did not share. Because Aristotle has remarked that the hero of a drama, if it is to produce in us the emotion proper to tragedy, must not be perfect, must have faults and make mistakes, such critics refuse to accept the broad presentation of the tragic figure of Oedipus, a hero not without faults, yet noble, involved, not because of his faults, but in spite of his virtue, in pollution. They must needs find some '*ἁμαρτία*,' besides the tragic mistake, to justify the hero's fall. For such critics it is necessary to dwell for a moment on the detail which was devised by Sophocles, not to justify the catastrophe, but to make us admire the hero and realise his essential nobility.

In Aeschylus, as we have remarked, a sufferer is generally himself responsible for his calamity. The tragedy comes from the fact that a tendency to evil is too strong for the sinner to resist. It is true, therefore, that the story of Oedipus might have been so presented as to suggest the guilt of the sufferer or some mysteriously inherited tendency to evil. Of that fact the Athenian audience was aware. But the Athenian spectators would not therefore, like some modern critics, weigh and ponder every little incident of his story as it unfolded itself to see whether, in fact, Sophocles had made his hero guilty. Happily we can be certain that even had they applied that method the result would have been an acquittal. An Athenian jury would have been amused by the plea of a prosecuting critic who argued, like some modern scholars, that the hero is revealed at lines 779 ff. as a person prone to criminality because he had been brought up as a spoilt young prince; that he must have been provocative in his behaviour since one of his companions was driven to insult him by the taunt of bastardy; that he was hasty and over-inquisitive in his appeal to Apollo, and was ungrateful in his neglect to inform his supposed parents of his departure; or finally—for this plea has been urged by a critic who saw the futility of all the rest—that his *ἁμαρτία* consisted in the criminal negligence with which, in spite of the oracle's evasive answer, he killed an old man and married a comparatively elderly woman. He ought, we are solemnly told, to have been put upon his guard. No jury, I venture to assert, and *a fortiori* no intelligent audience, would find him guilty on such grounds and assess such punishment for such offences.

And however well the prosecuting counsel argued, the advocate for the defence would have an easy task. As Wilamowitz showed, the poet has been careful to leave no loophole for misunderstanding. It would have been so easy to make Oedipus the aggressor, as does Euripides, for instance, in the *Phoenissae*. In Sophocles he is attacked in a lonely mountain pass and defends himself against an unprovoked assault. For killing thus committed as an act of self-defense Athenian justice would have pronounced him innocent. After a ceremonial purification he would have been no further troubled by the affair. Unfortunately, 'against his will'—for the whole tragedy assumes that he could not naturally have suspected the truth—the man whom he so justly slew was his own father, the woman whom he quite properly married was his mother. Thus, as an 'involuntary sinner,' he was plunged into calamities most terrible.

But indeed an Athenian of the time of Sophocles would hardly have considered the detail with such care. To him the name of Oedipus suggests, not guilt, but chiefly misfortune. The moral fervour of Aeschylus had given a new interpretation to old stories. But for most Athenians the stories must have continued to illustrate, not the profound reflections of Aeschylus, but the perfectly reasonable, though unreflective, view which most people normally do take of stories. 'Oedipus was at first a happy man, the king of Thebes, the saviour of the state, blest with children, loved by his subjects . . . but afterwards he became, when he made the great discovery, of all men the most wretched.'

As for those critics who look for the ἁμαρτία in the course of the drama, not in its antecedents, it should be sufficient to answer that the plague which sets in motion the tragic events is itself the result of the pollution already incurred, and that at the outset, before ever he has insulted Teiresias or suspected Creon of disloyalty, the hero is already an incestuous parricide. Here I must insist on the clearness of the distinction made at the crisis of the tragedy between the 'involuntary' acts which have brought on the catastrophe, and the 'voluntary evils' of excessive agony and self-mutilation which are its result. The messenger who brings from the palace the news of Jocasta's death insists upon the involuntary nature of the 'sin.' He sharply distinguishes 'those many secret evils that lurk hidden in the house—so foul, not all the waters of Phasis and of Ister could wash it clean'—from those 'other evils' which in a moment shall be displayed to the light, ills *voluntary, not unpurposed,*' ἑκόντα κοὐκ ἄκοντα.

The laws of nature have been violated, and the violator has incurred pollution. Yes, but the pollution was incurred without the willing consent of the sinner, in spite of a life whose governing purpose had been to avoid the sin (793 ff., 997 ff.). Oedipus himself

makes a like distinction: it was Apollo who brought these things to pass (1329 ff.), the ills which are the worst: but the blinding stroke upon the eyes was inflicted, not only by the hand, but with the full will and intent, of Oedipus.

This distinction between the voluntary and the involuntary is, of course, a commonplace of Greek tragedy. Its recognition marks an important stage in the history, not only of criminal law, but also of morality and religion. For this drama it has an importance which seems to have escaped the notice of many learned interpreters. To its significance for an Athenian audience the earlier literature will perhaps provide a key. Poets who died before the great 'enlightenment,' whose morality was the model for old-fashioned propriety, and who would certainly have felt that Oedipus was physically polluted and infectious, had yet a perfectly good conception of the difference between the intentional criminal and the unfortunate who had committed an unintentional crime. It was quite possible for a Greek to believe that certain conduct had made a man physically unfit for human society, and yet to acquit him of all blame. The thought is expressed in different language from our own. But essentially, we shall find, the normal Greek view of such a case was likely to be no less sympathetic and intelligent than our own.

For a statement of the fundamental notions we may go to Simonides, whose spirit, though he was a poet of Ceos, has been recognized as Attic. He was a favourite at Athens, and an acknowledged exponent of the higher elements of popular morality.

Scopas, a prince of Thessaly, asking, doubtless, for flattery, had suggested to Simonides as a theme for song the famous saying of a great statesman, Pittacus of Mytilene. Pittacus became sole ruler of his city at a time of civil discord, but laid down his office, not attempting to make himself a despot, because, as he said, 'It is difficult to be a man of virtue.' When Scopas, prince of Thessaly, asks his courtier poet for an opinion on that *dictum*, we have the right to think, in words like those of Herodotus concerning Croesus: 'This he asked, expecting to be told that it was indeed difficult, but that Scopas by peculiar excellence had conquered the difficulties. Had Pittacus been Scopas, he had not needed to lay aside his power.' But the poet took his harp and answered in far different fashion, courtly yet wise:

> Difficult, say you? Difficult to be a man of virtue, truly good, shaped and fashioned without flaw in the perfect figure of four-squared excellence, in body and mind, in act and thought?

That is the text. There is a gap in our tradition. Later comes this answer:

> Nor to my ears does the current phrase of Pittacus ring true—though wise was he who uttered it. He said 'twas difficult

> to be a man of virtue. I answer, only a god can have that boon. For a man—if he be overtaken by a calamity against which no device availeth, needs must he be evil; there is no escape. As any man is good if fortune grant it, so if his fortune bring him evil, evil is the man: and those of us are best whom the gods love. Therefore will I not waste the lot and portion of life that is granted me in an empty aspiration, a bootless quest, the search for a perfect man among all of us that reap the harvest of the earth's wide fields in Hellas—though, if I find one, I will bring you news. No! I have praise and love for every man who does no deed of shame of his own will. Necessity not even the gods resist. . . . Enough for me a man who gives not way to utter evil, utter lawlessness, a man who hath in him the sense of that fairness which profits his city, a man whose heart is sound. No reproach shall such a man have of me—because you cannot count the generation of the children of utter folly. All deeds are good if they be free from baseness.

There is scope here for misunderstanding, and indeed Simonides has been accused of flattering the prince by extolling 'the morality of the second-best.' The truth is that he is warning his patron against self-righteousness. Pittacus was wise, for he realized the temptations and dangers of power. He is to be criticized only because his maxim did not sufficiently insist on the dangers that beset a man, as man, even if he is not a king. Let Scopas remember, however well he rules his people, that, even so, he is but a man, and therefore imperfect. The best of men can, it is true, obey their sense of right, refusing to violate Aidôs; and, therefore, of the best it may be said that they are in a sense 'good' since there is nothing 'shameful' in their intentional and purposed deed and thought. But, even so, they are not secure. Perfection, if calamity comes, is not possible. In some circumstances the best that can be attained is the avoidance of the wilful violation of justice and moderation. If calamity 'unmanageable,' not to be put off by any wit of man, engulf us, we cannot be perfect men . . . yet we may, if we are as noble as Oedipus, be worthy of praise and love, even in our shame and actually in our moral catastrophe.

Is that not true? The Stoics denied it. Virtue, and therefore happiness, they said, were possible for all men, however sick in mind and body and estate. But, in order to make good that claim, they had to narrow their definition of virtue. The good will is always possible—save in insanity. And the good will is always, in itself, virtuous. True, and no man is to be blamed if he has well striven, 'doing of his own will nothing shameful.' But is it possible for the best life to be attained without good fortune, or, as Simonides and Sophocles would say, without the gift of the gods? Simonides answers by a distinction important for the understanding of the

Oedipus, as it is for much else in Greek literature and in our own experience. A *man may be guilty through no fault of his own*[1], and no man, however excellent in intention and in act, no man, even, however blest by fortune or the gods, achieves and keeps perfection.

That this idea, essentially true, is expressed in language which misleads many of us, and shocks some, is due to the inheritance of a tradition which used epithets, now exclusively moral, in a political sense. A 'good' man has sometimes meant a brave and cunning fighter, a wise counsellor, a just judge. Elsewhere and in a different society it means a successful, respectable, and therefore probably industrious labourer, or trader, or householder. Sometimes, again, it has meant a man born of 'good family' and maintaining the standards, whatever they happen to be, of his class. In all these cases the possibility of 'goodness' must obviously depend on good fortune—and it is true enough that there is something which deserves to be called 'goodness' in the happy warrior, the substantial householder, or the aristocratic 'noble.' Simonides, though he admits the obvious, adds—he is probably not the first to add it—that there *is* a sort of goodness, limited, yet valuable, which is not dependent on the turn of luck. Thus he gives us a new interpretation, entirely free from cynicism, of the Homeric observation that men's minds are good or bad according to the kind of weather Zeus allows them. The distinction between the will to goodness and the possession of it is implied, though not quite clearly stated. There remains a danger of relapse into a vague theory of irresponsibility. But we, if we emphasize too much the Will, run another danger. We may be tempted to flatter ourselves and our prince by saying that there is no need to trouble about the poverty and misery of our people, because, forsooth, all men can have, without money and without price, the Will to Virtue which is independent of the gifts of the gods.

It may help us to judge more fairly of Simonides—and also of Sophocles—if we notice other passages, not inconsistent with our text, but complementary to it. For example, see what the poetry of

1. That is one of the most important principles in Greek morality. An amusing application will be found in Herodotus III 43, the story of a ruler who tried in vain to be the 'most just of men.' An application whose importance and truth we must all at this time recognise is made by Thucydides (III 82) when he says that 'War, because it puts men into a situation in which they are not free agents (*ακουσιους αναγκας* [*akousious anankas*, "stress of circumstances"]), makes them like their circumstances'—worse than they are in time of peace. When Socrates enunciated his paradox that no one willingly does wrong, he was using old language for his new thought. The old proverbial moralities divided evils into 'voluntary and involuntary.' 'Ills sent by the gods, inevitable, destined, necessary,' must be borne without excessive grief and complaint. Such an evil was the pollution of Oedipus. But the self-blinding was an additional evil, self-imposed, voluntary, and therefore morally different. The comment of Socrates would have been that this act also was involuntary, since it was done with the intent of finding forgetfulness: had he known, as later he knows, that peace of mind comes only through Sophrosyne, Oedipus would not have mutilated himself.

Simonides has made of Hesiod's practical advice to the farmer who would be prosperous and respectable:

> 'Tis said [that is, we know, by Hesiod and many others] that Virtue dwells upon the inaccessible hills, attended by the chaste dancing company of Nymphs divine, not visible to the eyes of all mankind, but only to him whose heart has felt the pang of struggle and the sweat . . . to him who has won his way by manhood to the height.

There is no 'morality of the second-best' in that! But it is true, unfortunately, that a farmer, however well he works, may be foiled by weather and by soil. So, in the moral sphere, there are real limitations to man's freedom. Though he strive hard for excellence, a man needs the gift of the gods, success, if his virtue is to be the successful virtue, the perfect prize of excellence at which he aims.

> None winneth virtue without the gods, no city and no mortal man. 'Tis the god that deviseth all, and among men there is no life altogether free from calamity.

Moreover, it is from this very fact that a man, however good his intention, however brave his effort of thought and will, may always fail—falling, as the Greeks say, into involuntary evils, because the gods or his daimon or luck or circumstances will have it so—that a pious Greek refuses to call men happy till they are dead. This same Simonides may remind us:

> Since you are but a man, never presume to say what to-morrow brings—nor, when you see a man happy, how long a time he will be so.

Perhaps the noblest expression of the frame of mind suggested to a Greek by such reflections is the Spartan prayer:

> King Zeus, grant us the good for which we pray—aye, and the good we pray not for: and, though we pray for it, avert from us the evil.

Upon that lofty strain it would be pleasant to end my chapter. But I dare not stop here. Our attempt to prove the innocence of Oedipus has led us back to the problem which lies at the heart, not only of the tragedy of the Greek theatre, but also of the tragedy of human life. If the innocent suffer—and who, in these days, will deny it?—if the faults of men are visited upon their own heads and the heads of others in retribution more terrible than the faults deserve, what are we to think of the justice of the gods? That question, which remains with us, was faced and variously answered by the Greeks. The terms in which they answer it are not our own: but if we rightly understand their meaning, the answers are the answers with which the world must reckon to-day.

In the house of Zeus, said Homer, stand two jars from which he dispenses to mortals good and evil alike. That simple doctrine is not compatible with the perfect goodness of the gods. Still more incompatible is another ancient doctrine that the gods are jealous of a man's prosperity and deliberately tempt him to his own destruction. We need new explanations when philosophy or religion insists upon the goodness of the gods. We shall certainly deny the doctrine of the divine jealousy and the divine temptation. We may deny that evil comes from the gods. But we cannot escape the fact that some of our evils, at any rate, are certainly not due to man. We may say that evil is the punishment of sin, that a man must pay for his faults or for the faults of his ancestors, or we may tell ourselves that suffering is the only road to wisdom. Even so, we have not solved the problem. If we are mystics and assert that apparent evil is, in the sight of the gods or of the Absolute, good, we abandon in logic, though not, of course, in practice, our right to judge of good and evil.

Of the mystical confusion of good and evil we shall find no trace in our play. Of the truth that suffering is a school of wisdom greater use has been made, as we shall presently see, than is admitted by most interpreters. But there is no suggestion that the wisdom justifies the suffering. The theme of an inherited guilt is, we have already remarked, ignored. That the omission is deliberate becomes obvious when we remember that Sophocles was familiar with the work of Aeschylus, and when we recall how this *motif* is used in the *Antigone* (584 ff.). The tragedy ensues by normal human processes from the act of Oedipus himself. Yet the character and the life of the hero are such as to exclude, for a Greek as for a modern audience, the notion that he has deserved his fate, though his tragedy is heightened by the fact that his defects are precisely those which for a Greek are normally associated with the righteously afflicted sinner. Finally, the plague, the oracles, the prophecies of Teiresias, and the sense, in the background, of the mysterious potency of Zeus and Apollo, imply that, in some sense, the evil comes from the gods. It comes, however, not by miraculous intervention, but through the normal processes of human will and human act, of human ignorance and human failure. Sophocles justifies nothing. He accepts, for his tragic purpose, the story and the gods, simply treating them as if they were true. Whether he thought that in ancient times a real king Oedipus had actually suffered this agony is of no importance. Whether he believed in prophecies or not really matters little. His Oedipus stands for human suffering, and he neither attempts, like Aeschylus, to justify the evil, nor presumes, like Euripides, to deny its divine origin. That is because his gods—whether he believed in them, or exactly

in what sense, does not matter—stand for the universe of circumstance as it is. Aeschylus and Euripides both demand for their worship a God who is good and just. Both therefore must attempt to solve the 'problem of evil.' The pagan gods of Homer and Sophocles require no such reconciliation. They are great and good, and great and bad—like things, and men, and nature. They square with the tragic facts of life, and therefore, we, who do not think that the lightning is the flash of the bolt of Zeus, who do not believe that Apollo was born of Leto in the island of Delos, can yet believe in the essential truth of the Sophoclean Apollo. There are in human life great tragedies, moving and wonderful because they flow from human action and are in some measure due to human blunders, yet tragedies for which in no full moral sense can responsibility be ascribed to man. Man is often the victim of circumstance—yes, often his own nobility demands that he shall sacrifice his own most noble qualities. Well, the 'circumstance,' which alone we can call responsible, is poetically represented by Apollo. And the tragedy, which admits this non-moral power, can appeal to all the listeners, whether like Aeschylus, they say at the end of the play: 'Ah yes, it is terrible. Yet my religion tells me that at the heart of it there is the working of a righteous God,' or whether, with the pessimist, we cry out in condemnation of such a universe, or whether we simply admit the tragic facts—and, as to their explanation, are fain to confess our ignorance.

That the language, and sometimes the thought, has an admixture of superstition I have no wish to deny. We recognise a belief which probably none of us shares, when, for example, after Oedipus has told Jocasta of the terrible pronouncement of Apollo, he cries:

> If any judge my life and find therein
> A savage Daimon's work, he hath the truth.

In my version I have ventured to translate the words ὠμοῦ δαίμονος by 'malignant stars,' a phrase which recalls to us a kindred, but more familiar, notion. We hear again, from the chorus, of the *Daimon* of Oedipus, immediately after the revelation of the truth. Finally, at the sight of the blinded and humiliated king, the chorus cry:

> What Fury (δαίμων) came on thee?
> What evil spirit from afar
> Leapt on thee to destroy?

And Oedipus himself asserts that his calamity is the work of an evil δαίμων:

> Alas! Curse of my life (δαῖμον), how far
> Thy leap hath carried thee!

Of the various meanings and applications of the word Δαίμων we need not speak, but something must be said of the popular sense of which Sophocles has here made so tragic a use. Probably none of us believes that with every man there is born and lives and dies a supernatural being, 'an individualised Fortune,' a being upon whom his prosperity and his misfortune somehow depend, his 'guardian angel' if his character and luck be good, a veritable 'demon' if he be born to wickedness or calamity. How far Sophocles himself believed in such a supernatural *Daimon* we do not know. He may, for all we know, have travelled far upon the road towards that 'rationalistic' interpretation of life which issued in the doctrine that a man's character is his fate (ἦθος ἀνθρώπῳ δαίμων). The important point for us is this: although the memory of the old superstition, and the fact that some of the audience are probably themselves superstitious, add emotional value to these allusions, yet, so far as the moral inference is concerned, no harm is done. The poet's presentation of the character of the hero, and the judgments which are implied both as to his moral responsibility and as to his innocence, are as clear and as just as if the poet had been a modern rationalist and had substituted for the vivid *Daimon* the vagueness of 'disastrous accident' or 'circumstances unforeseen and beyond control.' For moral judgment, though not for the dramatic value of the poem, it makes little difference whether you attribute the 'involuntary evils' to the gods or to the *Daimon* or to complications of circumstance.

I do not, of course, deny that there is a danger in these, as in all superstitions. My purpose is simply to suggest that the attribution of that part of human misfortune which is not due to man either to fate (Herodotus 1 19, Soph. *Phil.* 1466), or to Zeus ὁ πάντ' ἀνάσσων *O.T.* 894, οὐδὲν τούτων ὅτι μὴ Ζεύς Soph. *Trach.* 1278), or to a man's *Daimon*, does not *necessarily* and *always* imply a false estimate of human moral responsibility. For morality, all depends on the particular application which is made. Some men, for example, profess to believe that war is due to the anger of God, some that it is due to the malignant activity of the devil. The result may be, and sometimes is, a criminal negligence or a fanatical barbarity. But what matters for morality is simply that such persons, whether or not they are superstitious, should be sufficiently clear-sighted to help one another in the task of abolishing all natural, human, and avoidable causes of such crime. No Athenian could possibly have inferred from the fact that the calamity of Oedipus is ascribed to his *Daimon* or to Apollo the notion that it is useless for a man to attempt to live decently and to honour his parents. Most doctrines are capable both of a higher and of a lower moral application. There were many in the audience who would have accepted without question the immoral theory,

had it been suggested by the poet's treatment, that the gods tempt men to their ruin. They would have felt, like the grumbling old moralist of Megara:

> In nothing be over-zealous! The due measure in all the works of man is best. Often a man who zealously pushes towards some excellence, though he be pursuing a gain, is really being led astray by the will of some divine power which makes those things that are evil lightly seem to him good, and makes those things seem to him evil which are for his advantage.

Sophocles, as we shall see, has made his story a reminder of the fallibility of human endeavour and of the importance of moderation: But he has not treated Apollo or the *Daimon* of the hero as a devilish tempter luring him into sin. His moral is more nearly, though not quite exactly, expressed in another pronouncement of Theognis:

> No man, O Kyrnus, is the cause of his own ruin or his own advantage. The gods are the givers of both; nor hath any man, as he works, the knowledge in his heart whether the end of his labour be good or evil. Often he thinks to make the issue evil, and lo! he hath made it good, or thinking to make it good, he hath made it evil. To no man also cometh all that he desires. The limits of a cruel helplessness restrict us. We are but men, and so our thoughts are vain; no certain knowledge have we; and it is the gods that bring all ends to pass according to their mind.

No one, I suppose, has insisted more strongly than the poet Pindar on the need for personal effort if success or virtue is to be won: but no one, also, has insisted more strongly on the doctrine that both good and evil come from 'the gods' or from a man's *Daimon*. Pindar's athletes and princes stand at the height of human fortune. They need to be reminded, first, that success has come, not only by their own effort, but also as the gift of the gods, and, secondly, that no mortal is exempt from those reverses of fortune which come also from the gods. Just as a man must strive if he is to succeed, yet may fail in spite of noblest endeavour, so, if he fail, he may or may not be guiltless, yet his failure will be due to causes greater than himself. 'It is according to the *Daimon* of their lives that men are born wise and good' (*Ol.* IX 29), and 'the flower of wisdom grows in a man as the gift of a god' (*Ol.* XI 10): 'it is the fate which is born with a man that decides the issue of all his doing' (*Nem.* V 40), and 'we are not all born for a like fortune, but are set on different roads by the different apportionment of fate which is given to each' (*Nem.* VII 5). 'It is the goddess Theia who gives the athlete his glory,' though 'men's valour differs according to their Daimones . . . and Zeus himself, who is master of all things, give us our good and our evil' (*Isth.* V 7, 11, 52). Pindar, it is true, lays more stress on the aristocrat's inheritance of virtue and

good fortune than would a democratic Athenian. But the essential notions persist. On the one hand, no virtue comes without the virtuous endeavour. On the other hand, in spite of all endeavour, 'in a little while the pleasantness of the life of mortals grows, and in a little while it falls to earth, shaken down by the turn of the purpose of the gods. Creatures of a day, what is to be? What is it to be nothing? A man is a dream of a shadow. Yet when there comes to a man the gleam of happiness that is given by Zeus, bright is the light that is upon him, though it be but the light of mortality, and all his life is blest' (*Pyth.* VIII 92 ff.).

Such is the spirit which the tragedy of Oedipus is intended to inspire. The name of the spirit is *Sophrosyne*. The *motifs* which the poet has used might have been so treated as to produce a very different impression. Had Sophocles chosen he might have treated Oedipus as a willing sinner justly punished. But that method would have made the tragedy less tragic. The poet and his audience would not have faced the deepest and the greatest tragedy of human life. Or, had he chosen, he could have used the theme of Apollo's oracular guidance in a spirit which insisted on the devilish relentlessness of the god. The audience would have responded, though the more enlightened of them would have been shocked. The mind of the spectators is attuned to the influences both of a higher and of a lower appeal. The reader will judge whether I am justified in suggesting that it is to the higher morality that the poet has addressed himself. He neither justifies the gods by making Oedipus a criminal nor condemns the gods because the agony of Oedipus is undeserved. He bids his audience face the facts.

To the question whether beyond the grave there is reconciliation and peace, poets, philosophers, and divines have their various answers. Tragedy, which concerns this life and the undoubted sufferings of this life, is noble still, even if the poets, philosophers, and divines can find a happy answer. Sometimes Sophocles writes as if he has the intuition of a happy solution. But his work as a tragedian is to face the facts of life. Whatever be our own interpretation of those facts, we shall be moved by their presentment in this drama.

LASZLO VERSÉNYI

[The Flaw of Oedipus]†

What motivates Oedipus' action is his own nature. 'Such being my nature, I cannot become something else, I cannot give up the search into my origin, I will know who I am.' (1084–1085). What

† From Laszlo Versényi, "Oedipus: Tragedy of Self-Knowledge," *Arion*, 1:3 (Autumn 1962), 25–27. Reprinted by permission of the publisher.