

Moral and Epistemic Ambiguity in *Oedipus Rex*

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This paper challenges the accepted interpretation of Oedipus Rex, which takes Oedipus' ignorance of the relevant facts to be an established matter. I argue that Oedipus' epistemic state is ambiguous, and that this in turn generates a moral ambiguity with respect to his actions. Because ignorance serves as a moral excuse, my demonstration that Oedipus was not ignorant bears significantly on the moral meaning of the play. I next propose to anchor this ambiguity in the Freudian notion of the unconscious, by presenting an interpretation that treats Oedipus' knowledge as unconscious. I discuss the moral status of an agent acting from unconscious knowledge and find it to be genuinely indeterminate, thus supporting my claim that the play is epistemically and morally ambiguous.

Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* contains the following tension: if Oedipus was ignorant of his true origins when he killed Laius and married Jocasta, then he is morally blameless. But if he is blameless, why do we still have the sense that, upon discovering the true identity of Laius and Jocasta, Oedipus rightly feels guilty and is somehow justly punished for acts that contaminate him over and above his moral blamelessness? Attempts to determine Oedipus' moral standing have not addressed this tension, but most interpreters have nonetheless judged Oedipus to be innocent, on the grounds that he was completely ignorant of the relevant facts. This paper rejects the interpretations that see Oedipus as ignorant and argues that there is an ambiguity in *Oedipus Rex* concerning the extent and nature of Oedipus' knowledge of his true origins. This vagueness about Oedipus' epistemic state generates ambiguity about Oedipus' guilt and responsibility for his actions, rendering attempts to give a moral reading of the play unsuccessful.

This ambiguity about Oedipus' knowledge has been largely overlooked by most interpretations but is nonetheless crucial to understanding the play. I propose to use ambiguity as an interpretative tool and to theoretically ground this ambiguity in Freud's notion of the unconscious. Treating Oedipus' knowledge as unconscious resolves the tension between his supposed ignorance and his treatment as guilty in the play. In order to make a moral judgement about Oedipus, one must first determine his epistemic position. In what follows I expound Sophocles' unique psychological focus in his treatment of the myth, show why the moral interpretations of the play have been unsuccessful, explain why Oedipus cannot have been ignorant of the relevant facts and suggest that his knowledge be seen as unconscious.

I then examine the moral consequences of viewing Oedipus' knowledge as unconscious and discuss the question whether such unconscious knowledge could be viewed as morally culpable.

Sophocles' psychological focus

The myth of Oedipus has been continuously interpreted and re-told since the first written version appeared in *The Odyssey*.¹ The most famous version is undoubtedly Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*,² which together with *Oedipus at Colonus* and *Antigone* constitute the Theban Plays.³ The three plays do not form a trilogy; they were performed separately at the *Dionysia*, the annual celebration in honour of Dionysus, at which prizes were awarded to the three best tragedians. One fundamental limitation of the plays was that dramatists could only use mythic material that was familiar to the audience, so originality and innovation, rather than finding expression in the plot, were found in the staging, dialogue and other theatrical elements. Dramatic suspense had to be created by alternative means since the story was known to all before entering the theatre.

Sophocles made unique use of the audience's knowledge of the plot by choosing to tell the story of Oedipus in reverse. The play opens seventeen years after Oedipus has killed his father and married his mother.⁴ A plague has struck Thebes and the oracle announces that there will be no relief until the murderer of Laius is expelled from the city. Oedipus opens an investigation, and the rest of the play reveals the identity of the killer "with cunning delays and ever-mounting excitement" (Freud SE 2:295). And this makes it "the first detective story of Western literature" (Segal 1993, 12). But the murder mystery is gradually replaced by a search for Oedipus' identity. The question 'who did it?' becomes the question 'who am I?'

This way of telling the story shifts the emphasis from the events themselves to the psychological process of discovery, as Oedipus gradually unravels their true significance. This recasts the myth as a story of a man in search of himself, an enigma whose circular trajectory leads back to the questioner. Ricoeur sees the play as the collapse of the distinction between Oedipus and the killer. "At the beginning of the play Oedipus calls down curses upon the unknown person responsible for the plague, but he excludes the possibility that that person might in fact be himself. The entire drama consists in the resistance and ultimate collapse of this presumption" (Ricoeur 1970, 516). Thus the play is constituted by a hermeneutic circle, ironically hinted at by

Oedipus' own decree at the opening of the play:

“Now my curse on the murderer. Whoever he is,
 a lone man unknown in his crime
 or one among many, let that man drag out
 his life in agony, step by painful step...”
 (*Oedipus the King*, ll. 280-3)

In order to focus on the question of Oedipus' identity, Sophocles omits the reason for the curse on the house of Labdacus, which explains why Laius was concerned about his son's existence in the first place. As we know, Laius receives a prophecy that his son will kill him and marry Jocasta. To avoid the curse, Laius sends the infant Oedipus with his feet bound together and a nail driven through his ankles to be exposed on mount Cithaeron.⁵ But why is there a curse on Laius? Sophocles mentions neither the curse nor its reason, but according to the myth Laius was staying with King Pelops when he abducted and raped Pelops' son, Chryssipus. Chryssipus kills himself in shame. As punishment for the rape of a child Laius is cursed—his own child will murder him.⁶ Dodds argues that Sophocles deliberately suppresses the curse because he does not want to introduce an explanatory principle into his play.⁷ By excluding the theme of inherited curse, Sophocles tells the story from the point of view of a son looking for his origins, and his discovery becomes “the tragedy of self-knowledge,” as Rudnytsky calls it (1987, 256). Following Dodds, Rudnytsky also notes that while the prophecy given to Laius in Aeschylus' *Seven Against Thebes* takes a conditional form, “Sophocles transforms the fatal collision of father and son at the crossroads into an ineluctable necessity, and thereby endows the theme of patricide with genuine universality” (Rudnytsky 1987, 256; Dodds 1983, 181).

Sophocles' conversion of the myth into a human-centred tale sits well with Oedipus' position as a rational agent. As such, he is a representative figure of Fifth Century Enlightenment, highlighting the shift from “the mythical and symbolic thinking of Homer and Pindar to more conceptual and abstract modes of thought” (Segal 1993, 6). His rational secular humanism is expressed in his victory over the Sphinx by solving her riddle, a feat of intelligence, not brute force. Moreover he succeeds in his task without any help from the gods.⁸ He makes a point of this when arguing with Tiresias, the blind prophet:

“When the Sphinx, that chanting Fury kept her deathwatch here...
 Did you rise to the crisis? Not a word,
 You and your birds, your gods—nothing.
 No, but I came by, Oedipus the ignorant,
 I stopped the Sphinx! With no help from the birds,
 The flight of my intelligence hit the mark”
 (*Oedipus the King*, ll. 445-53).

But this humanist position is radically questioned in the later developments of the play. “The man who rejected prophecy is the living demonstration of its truth: the rationalist at his most intelligent and courageous the unconscious proof of divine prescience” (Knox 1957, 48). From an honest and respected leader determined to find the cause of the plague, Oedipus is transformed into a criminal, an incestuous murderer, blind to the identity of his own mother and father. The opposition between his success in solving the Sphinx’s riddle and his failure to understand his identity, a failure leading to his total destruction, is a fierce criticism of the rational point of view. As Knox writes, “[t]he play then is a tremendous reassertion of the traditional religious view that man is ignorant, that knowledge belongs only to the gods” (1984, 152).

I believe that this interpretation stops short of bringing out the full significance of the play by over-determining Oedipus’ position. Oedipus inhabits a world that is no longer solely governed by the gods; but neither is this world a purely rational world in which solving the riddle guarantees happiness.⁹ The Socratic link between knowledge and the good that seems to be upheld by Oedipus’ early success and happiness is completely severed as the play progresses.¹⁰ But this is not simply a reassertion of a religious view, as Knox and others argue. The story cannot be a straightforward demonstration of the power of reason, as its first half seems to imply, but nor can it be interpreted as the victory of the gods over man.¹¹ Sophocles is not merely trying to teach us a lesson about the power of the gods, as the Sophoclean worldview is also radically humanist. So how should we understand the story? What kind of a man is Oedipus?

Problems with the moral interpretations

Interpreters have argued extensively about the moral significance of the story. Was Oedipus guilty? If so, guilty of what? Did he know what he was doing? Did ‘fate’ determine his actions? Was he punished by Apollo? Could

he have prevented his tragic end? The question of Oedipus' guilt is clearly a central issue. But attempts to understand the story in terms of what may be called the 'crime and punishment' thesis have made little sense, resulting in the abandonment of this 'moralising interpretation' by most contemporary scholars (Dodds 1983, 181).¹² The moralising reading fails on several counts. For one, the transgression usually attributed to Oedipus is pride, thinking a mere mortal can escape Apollo's decree. But there is no clear evidence of pride in his behaviour; if anything, cowardice rather than pride is his moral shortcoming, as for instance when he runs from Corinth.

So perhaps we should look for a different type of *hamartia*, the term used by Aristotle to designate the protagonist's error or character flaw.¹³ But on close scrutiny, it is unclear whether Oedipus *has* committed an error, least of all an error that calls for spectacular retribution. Throughout the play we see an honest leader struggling to free Thebes of the plague. Moreover, when he realises the truth he punishes himself with blinding and exile. There is no clear deed—as we find in the case of Creon, Agamemnon and Orsetes—that triggers the sequence of events leading to his downfall. Oedipus' attempt to find Laius' murderer and the wish to discover his true origin are far from erroneous. So it does not make sense to say that Oedipus is punished for a transgression. Against the use of *hamartia* as an explanatory principle underlying the plot, Segal writes: "Oedipus does not have a tragic flaw. This view rests on a misreading of Aristotle and is a moralising way out of the disturbing questions that the play means to ask. Sophocles refuses to give an easy answer to the problem of suffering" (Segal 1983, 76).¹⁴

Moreover, unlike Creon and Agamemnon, Oedipus' character elicits respect in the viewer. His character is complex and realistic; he responds humanly and courageously to events and does not behave in a way that seems substantively flawed. As Knox (1957) writes, "the actions of Oedipus that produce the catastrophe stem from all sides of his character; no one particular action is more essential than any other; they are all essential and they involve not any one trait of character which might be designated a *hamartia* but the character of Oedipus as a whole" (31). This view is supported by Aristotle's requirement in the *Poetics*: for a character to arouse the emotional response leading to *katharsis*, it should be more good than bad, although not perfect (58a16-20). Oedipus need not be morally immaculate for the spectators to feel sorry for his downfall. If a character is too perfect, the audience reacts to its downfall with shock, rather than pity and terror, which elicit *katharsis* (52b32).¹⁵

Even if we did grant that Oedipus has some sort of character flaw, the relationship between the *hamartia* and the punishment would be at best indirect. As Dodds (1983) points out, what happens to Oedipus is the result of a curse placed on his father, so his behaviour could not, in principle, explain the plot (179). So even if he behaves arrogantly or unkindly in the play, there is no causal link between this behaviour and his horrific predicament.

Another point against the ‘crime and punishment’ thesis is that the play’s main events are not part of the prophecy at all. Most of what we see on stage lies outside the prophecy, so to speak, so ‘fate’ plays no role in determining the actions of Oedipus depicted in the play (Knox 1984, 6). As Jones (1988) writes: “[assuming Oedipus had *hubris*] is patently unacceptable—not because the fault is incommensurable with the punishment, but because it bears no relation to the actions from which guilt and suffering flow” (32). The crucial events of the story took place many years before the play begins. Even if Oedipus had committed no morally dubious acts, such as insulting Creon and attacking Tiresias, the plague would still strike Thebes. “This play contains no crucial act having the same significance in the tragic pattern as [Creon’s behaviour in *Antigone* and Eteocles’ in *Seven Against Thebes*], only the discovery of crucial acts committed long before” (Vellacott 1971, 111). Oedipus is guilty of patricide and incest before the play opens; none of his actions in the play could exonerate him.

The incommensurability of the protagonist’s offence and the penalty meted out by the gods is the mark of the tragic plot. The tragic fate that awaits the protagonist is always an undue exaggeration, far exceeding the worst possible outcome of a flawed but comprehensible action. An example of such disproportion between *hamartia* and punishment is the *Antigone*. Creon realises that his decree to not bury Polynices was unreasonable and his punishment of Antigone harsh. Running wildly to save Antigone, he arrives only to find she has already hung herself. His grieving son, Haemon, attempts to kill Creon, then falls on his own sword. Returning to the palace, Creon finds that his wife, Eurydice, upon hearing what happened, has killed herself. Creon’s punishment far exceeds his *hamartia* but the *hamartia* is both clear and causally efficacious. His decision to prohibit Polynices’ burial triggers a series of events of unforeseen tragic magnitude. In the case of Oedipus there does not seem to be such a decision or behaviour.

Rejection of 'Fate' interpretations

The incommensurability of the error and its tragic effect points to another central theme in *Oedipus*, the disparity between responsibility for an action and its unforeseen consequences. But understanding the play as being about 'fate' is both misleading and mistaken. It is true that the play expresses the tension between Oedipus' will, which is free, so he is fully responsible for his actions, and "a terrifying affirmation of the truth of prophecy" (Knox 1984, 43). But even prophecies are not 'fate' pure and simple. They are, as Knox argues, a *partial* causal element rather than a sufficient cause of Oedipus' actions. In order to understand the events we must take into account both the prophecies, which are an indication of the relevant god's will, and the character and choices of the protagonist (1984, 43). Additionally, we need not understand the gods or prophecy in a religious sense. As Kitto (1958) notes, "'the gods' [are] simply those aspects and conditions of life which we have to accept because we cannot change them" (1, grammar modified).

Moreover, the application of the notion of fate to the play is unjustified. The juxtaposed categories—free will and fate—are absent from the language and culture of 5th Century BC Athens. These concepts were not explicitly formulated in Greek culture until much later. Segal (1983) writes: "This is not a play about free will versus determinism. The Greeks did not develop a notion of a universal, all-determining fate before the third century BC" (75). While Dodds, Knox and Segal see these concepts as synchronically applied to the play by a modern audience and interpretation, Vernant reads the play as an expression of the first discussions of the question of free will (Dodds 1983, 182; Knox 1984, 144; Segal 1983, 75; Vernant 1981, 66). Gould agrees with this view, adding: "the Greeks before the Stoics had not yet conceived of the will as we do and so did not see fate and free will as exclusive alternatives" (Gould 1988, 51).

These leading interpreters agree that although the concepts of free will and fate have not yet been explicitly articulated in *philosophical* form at the time Sophocles was writing *Oedipus Rex*, nonetheless the question of Oedipus' culpability is the core question of the play.¹⁶ But the question must be carefully formulated. Since we reject the 'fate' interpretations and agree that Sophocles had no clear notion of free will, the question is not whether Oedipus was *free* to act as he did, but whether he is *responsible* for his actions. This led many interpreters to formulate the moral question of the play as

the following: can Oedipus be held culpable for his actions? The majority of interpreters answer this question with a firm no. Oedipus was ignorant of the true nature of his actions and is therefore morally blameless.¹⁷ His is an extreme case of bad moral luck: although he was doing his best to avoid killing his father and marrying his mother, the man he encounters and kills at the crossroads is, unbeknownst to him, his father, and the woman he is persuaded to marry is, unbeknownst to him, his mother. But, the argument continues, Oedipus cannot be held responsible for what was beyond his control: the true identity of those two individuals was tragically different than his knowledge at the time indicated. Oedipus is excused because of the gap between the *objective* facts (he killed his father and married his mother) and his *subjective* knowledge (these people were complete strangers to him). Ignorance serves as Oedipus' defence and moral excuse.

But is Oedipus' ignorance an established fact? I believe that nearly all interpreters have been too quick to assume that Oedipus acted out of ignorance. Against this I argue that the nature of Oedipus' knowledge has been largely overlooked in discussions of the play's moral significance. Clarifying Oedipus' epistemic position is crucial to determining his moral position, as I demonstrate below.

Moral ambiguity

As was shown, the play is not merely a traditionalist attack on reason, reinstating the omnipotence of the gods over man's ignorance, nor is it an assertion of the power of reason. It does not condemn Oedipus unambiguously but rather elicits *moral ambiguity* in the viewer: how are we to judge Oedipus? Is he an incestuous murderer or an innocent victim of tragic circumstances? What is the moral status of his actions, done in ignorance? And why are we reluctant to exonerate him completely? These remain unresolved questions even after the end of the play.¹⁸ This ambiguity explains the failure of the moralistic readings, which regard the question of Oedipus' moral standing as settled. In my view, the moral ambiguity generated by the play is not a temporary incapacitation of moral judgment, the result of missing facts, unclear language, etc. Rather, it is an enduring and profoundly meaningful position. Instead of trying to resolve the ambiguity, as many interpretations have attempted, it should be used as an interpretative tool. Let us apply it.

How could an intelligent man, acutely aware of his doubtful lineage, fail to understand the meaning of his actions? Is it possible that Oedipus forgot the ominous oracle when he married a woman twice his age, when he killed a man old enough to be his father? Is it possible that he was genuinely ignorant, genuinely innocent? I think that the moral ambiguity rests on an epistemic ambiguity that has been disregarded. The nature of Oedipus' knowledge is the vaguest element in the plot. But instead of treating it as a starting point for inquiry, this vagueness has been interpreted as an indication of Oedipus' complete ignorance, and therefore as making his actions morally blameless. Thus Vernant writes, "Oedipus neither knows nor speaks the truth" and he "can be accused of no moral fault and no deliberate failing where justice is concerned"; Dodds points out the "essential moral innocence of Oedipus"; and Lacan writes: "[Oedipus] punished himself for a sin he did not commit."¹⁹

This view is unfounded. We do not know what Oedipus knew, but this does not mean that we know that he did not know. There is an ambiguity about the extent of his knowledge that remains unresolved in the play, and this ambiguity makes the interpretation of Oedipus as entirely ignorant unjustified. The ambiguity is strengthened by two further elements. Firstly, the intimate family ties between Oedipus and the subjects of his actions make it difficult to believe Oedipus had no idea who they were, or at least that his mother would recognise him. Could Jocasta sleep with a man the age of her son for seventeen years without once inquiring about his scarred ankles? Could Oedipus have never mentioned to her his violent encounter with a king on his way to Thebes? A second point is the horrific nature of incest and patricide, eliciting moral disgust that psychologically pollutes our belief in Oedipus' alleged ignorance.²⁰ The ignorance of the perpetrator pales in comparison with the severity of his crimes. Although he did not know this, Oedipus *did* indeed kill his father and marry his mother. John Kekes expresses this idea with the notion of *objective morality*. On this view, the dreadful character of incest and patricide and the damage inflicted on others through it, are enough to make Oedipus culpable. His subjective ignorance is irrelevant to objective morality and therefore cannot serve as defence (Kekes 1988, 162).

The attempts to make a moral judgment about Oedipus were futile, as was shown above, because of the epistemic ambiguity in the play. The inability to establish Oedipus' innocence rests on a more fundamental inability to determine the extent of his ignorance. And it is the latter that has been

largely taken for granted. But as Vellacott shows in detail in *Sophocles and Oedipus*, the reading that takes Oedipus to be completely ignorant of the real significance of his deeds creates gaps and incoherencies that render the play absurd. In what follows I present in broad outline Vellacott's argument that Oedipus indeed knew the real identity of those surrounding him, and later modify Vellacott's argument by seeing this knowledge as unconscious.

Vellacott's reading and the unconscious

Is it possible that Oedipus knew nothing about his origins and the true significance of his deeds? Vellacott (1971) claims that Sophocles intended the sophisticated viewer to see Oedipus "as having been aware of his true relationship to Laius and Jocasta ever since the time of his marriage" but choosing to enact the discovery in the events depicted in the play (104). Through a close analysis of the plot Vellacott shows clearly that given the events that took place, it would have been impossible for all parties to continue in their ignorance. So, for example, it would have been impossible for Oedipus and the others involved not to make the connection between the killer of Laius (who encountered him on the road from Delphi to Thebes) and the man appearing in Thebes two days later. Oedipus' escape from Cornith after he hears the oracle is incoherent, since Oedipus initially went to consult the oracle because of doubts about his origins (a drunk accused him of being a foundling). The oracle tells him nothing about his parents, but prophesies that he will kill his father and marry his mother. Why, after hearing the prophecy, should Oedipus take the risk of marrying a widowed queen, who bore a child his age, a child presumed dead? Further supporting evidence for Vellacott's thesis is Oedipus' reference to 'a robber' in the singular, right after Creon's emphatic relaying of the information given by the servant who witnessed the attack on Laius ("He said thieves attacked them—a whole band, not single handed, cut King Laius down" (*Oedipus the King*, ll.138-9)).²¹ And why doesn't Oedipus summon the witness as soon as he learns of his existence, at the opening of the play?

Oedipus' behaviour seems implausible, based on defences and lies, but these, argues Vellacott, should make sense to us, since we believed the story in first encounter. "Was it difficult to get away with this story? We know that it was not; for we too have accepted it uncritically" (1971, 119). On Vellacott's reading, Oedipus knew the truth all along and the play is simply a re-enactment of the discovery, for the sake of the Theban people trusting

the honesty and leadership of their king. Oedipus' feigned ignorance was meant to protect his subjects from the fact that his actions, or at least his marriage to Jocasta, were done in full knowledge of his true identity (*ibid.* 122-3).

This thesis, although convincing in its critical deconstruction of the plot, linguistic double-meanings and the coherence of Oedipus' actions, ultimately offers an implausible alternative interpretation.²² A king acting out a discovery of the most intimate and perverse details of his life in order to spare his subjects' feelings is not a particularly convincing reading of the play, which centres on the psychological turmoil of Oedipus in its every twist and turn, nor is it very likely against the background of Greek masculine ideals. Most scholars part ways with Vellacott's thesis at this point.²³ But, as Peter Rudnytsky (1987) suggests, with the introduction of the category of the unconscious, Vellacott's thesis could prove an important interpretative approach (269). As Rudnytsky points out, Vellacott's thesis can be made more plausible by replacing the idea of a deliberately self-incriminating, knowingly guilty, Oedipus with the notion of unconscious knowledge (*ibid.*). I would like both to develop Rudnytsky's suggestion and link it to my previous point about the epistemic ambiguity of the play. Thinking about Oedipus' knowledge as unconscious theoretically anchors the moral and epistemic ambiguity by internalising the ambiguity and locating it within a split subject. If Oedipus contains both conscious and unconscious agencies, he may alternate between acting as innocent and as guilty; his inconsistent behaviour would express his inner conflict. The internalised ambiguity would explain the slips of tongue and incoherent behaviour as expressing his unconscious knowledge and the conflict inherent to a subject structured by multiple agencies.

On Rudnytsky's reading, the play reflects the internal constituents of the conflict within Oedipus' mind (*ibid.*, 268). Oedipus represents the desire and aggression that become repressed; the oracle represents psychic compulsion; Tiresias represents the unconscious knowledge Oedipus is denying. Freud suggests that the external objectification of Oedipus' crime in the oracle is a way of "projecting the hero's unconscious motive into reality in the form of a compulsion by destiny which is alien to him" (Freud SE 21:188). Disguising unconscious desires in the form of an oracle lets the unconscious become visible and accounts for the guilt related to these desires.

Rudnytsky argues that the struggles that arise in Oedipus' discussions with the herdsman, Jocasta and Tiresias are "an externalised representation

of the division existing within his own mind" (ibid., 268). He sees Tiresias and Oedipus as embodying "two halves of a single psyche," so that Oedipus' unconscious knowledge is expressed by Tiresias. The blind prophet who charges at Oedipus, "you are the murderer you hunt," expresses Oedipus' unconscious knowledge and is met with angry denial and harsh treatment, in an attempt to repress the unconscious contents (ibid. p.269. *Oedipus the King*, l.413). The blind seer is the "uncanny twin" of the seeing Oedipus who is consciously blind to the truth; this reverse symmetry is emphasised at the end of the play, with Oedipus' self-blinding.

Introducing the category of the unconscious solves a further problem. Oedipus' crimes are treated in the play (and by Oedipus himself) as though performed consciously—this is apparent in the abhorrence with which Creon and the chorus treat Oedipus and in Oedipus' self-inflicted blinding and exile. But the entire play revolves around Oedipus' gradual unravelling of the truth. The two trends contradict each other. If Oedipus was ignorant, he is innocent and should not be punished and treated with revulsion. If he acted in knowledge of the facts, why does he feign such shock and inflict horrific injury on himself?

But if we take Oedipus to have an unconscious awareness of the true significance of his actions, "possessing the blindness of the seeing eye... the strange state of mind in which one knows and does not know a thing at the same time," the ambiguity of his knowledge becomes understandable (Freud, SE 2:117). In this sense his ignorance is "a representation of the unconscious state into which, for adults, the whole experience has fallen" (Freud SE 23:191). Oedipus' ignorance is the outcome of repression of facts he knew in the past, which are now confined to the unconscious. The shreds of recognition and angry denial are traces of this knowledge. His violent response is an expression of guilt stemming from unconscious desire and aggression that in Oedipus' case have been expressed in the actual acts.²⁴ Oedipus' lack of self-defence and his eagerness to punish himself are explained by unconscious guilt.²⁵

Understanding Oedipus' knowledge as unconscious is further supported by the parallel between Sophocles' treatment of the story as a discovery of the true meaning of past events and psychoanalytic work.²⁶ Segal notes: "both Sophocles and Freud are concerned with forcing into conscious speech and, in the case of *Oedipus Tyrannus*, into clear, theatrical vision, knowledge that has been repressed into the darkness of the unknowable and the unspeakable" (Ibid., 61). The play has a psychoanalytic structure: in order to

understand the present Oedipus must look to his past; the aim of the play, as the aim of psychoanalysis, is to recover a lost, repressed past. As Freud writes, “The action of the play consists in nothing other than the process of revealing..., a process that can be likened to the work of psychoanalysis” (Freud SE 2:295). The question motivating the play—who am I?—is, in a nutshell, the question of psychoanalysis. As Ricoeur (1970) points out: “... on the basis of the first drama, the drama of incest and parricide, Sophocles has created a second, the tragedy of self-consciousness, of self-recognition” (516). Seeing the play as the discovery of unconscious knowledge squares neatly with Sophocles’ creation of a psychological drama, focusing on the psychic response to the uncovering of this knowledge.

Moral implications of unconscious knowledge

The above discussion shows why this interpretation is compelling. But what are its moral implications? Introducing the unconscious makes the moral evaluation of Oedipus problematic, because it disrupts the neat distinction between knowledge and ignorance. The philosophical literature on moral responsibility has said little about unconscious knowledge and its effect on moral culpability; for the standard notion of responsibility presumes a rational, free agent with conscious access to her conative and cognitive states. The idea of a Freudian unconscious undermines this model, thus calling into question one of the presuppositions underlying the notion of moral responsibility.

How does the possibility of unconscious knowledge affect the relationship between ignorance and culpability?²⁷ If we wish to integrate the notion of unconscious knowledge with the general principle that ignorance is a moral excuse, three options present themselves. We could argue that unconscious knowledge, which is by definition inaccessible to the agent, is morally equivalent to ignorance, in which case Oedipus is blameless. Alternatively we could argue that this unconscious knowledge, although inaccessible to Oedipus, has tacitly influenced his actions. And since his unconscious is part of his psyche, Oedipus is culpable. A third possibility is to argue that moral evaluation becomes genuinely indeterminate once the possibility of unconscious knowledge is admitted. For the dichotomy between culpability and blamelessness derives from the ability to classify epistemic states clearly as either states of knowledge or of ignorance, and the notion of the Freudian unconscious undermines this classification.

In many ways this third option seems the most plausible. On an ordinary moral account we get two horns, neither of which is satisfactory: either Oedipus is ignorant and therefore blameless (making the story implausible), or else he acted in full knowledge and is therefore culpable (making Oedipus an incestuous murderer and the story not tragic at all). By introducing the notion of the unconscious we arrive at a complex view of a conflicted, not completely self-transparent individual, acting in an epistemic twilight zone. For unconscious knowledge, despite being inaccessible to consciousness, is causally efficacious—and this is morally significant. We are therefore entitled to say that in cases such as this, the agent has (unconscious) knowledge and yet is not culpable in the ordinary sense. Unconscious knowledge undermines the straightforwardness of the inference from knowledge to culpability, an inference which underpins the traditional concept of moral responsibility.

The explanatory force of this view lies in its ability to encompass complex human behaviour that is otherwise impossible to interpret. Introducing multiple agencies (conscious and unconscious parts of the same psyche) into the individual moral agent accounts for internal conflict. And this in turn accounts for Oedipus' seemingly incoherent behaviour. Moral theory allows, of course, for internal conflict as the clash between two antagonistic desires, but does not sort those desires into separate domains. This is precisely what the Freudian unconscious does. By separating Oedipus' knowledge into conscious and unconscious domains, we can interpret him as knowing (thus ensuring the story's coherence) but not culpable in any simple sense (thus ensuring it is still a tragedy).²⁸

The result is an (unconsciously) knowing agent who is nonetheless not culpable in the ordinary sense. We are left with a genuinely indeterminate case, because we do not know how to judge an agent acting from unconscious knowledge. This is because unconscious knowledge is epistemically problematic: it belongs to the agent, but is inaccessible to her. On this reading, the moral ambivalence experienced by the viewer is anchored in the ambiguous status of unconscious knowledge. The epistemic ambiguity and the moral ambiguity generated by it are both rooted in the unconscious elements of Oedipus' behaviour and character, which clash with the conscious elements and thus require a complex model of psyche and behaviour.

Conclusion

As I have shown, there is an epistemic vagueness in *Oedipus Rex* that makes the story ambiguous and hinders the attempts to answer the ques-

tion of Oedipus' guilt and responsibility. This vagueness has been largely overlooked by most interpretations of the story but is nonetheless crucial to understanding it. The epistemic ambiguity has led most interpreters to assert that Oedipus was ignorant and therefore morally blameless, but as Vellacott shows, this renders the story incoherent. On the other hand, Vellacott's thesis that Oedipus acted in full knowledge of the facts is no more plausible than the interpretations he is rejecting. I therefore adopted the critical dimension of Vellacott's interpretation, but rejected his reconstruction of the story. Instead I proposed, following Rudnytsky, to see Oedipus' knowledge as unconscious. By introducing the category of the unconscious the story can be made coherent, as the unconscious status of Oedipus' knowledge explains his incoherent behaviour, slips of tongue and excessive rage at Tiresias.

I next linked Rudnytsky's suggestion to my discussion of the moral and epistemic ambiguity in *Oedipus Rex*, in order to show that the category of the unconscious provides a theoretical anchor for an interpretation that emphasises both types of ambiguity. And finally, I showed that thinking of Oedipus' knowledge as unconscious solves the tension between his presumed innocence and the implausibility of assuming his complete ignorance. The ambiguity created by Sophocles in his treatment of Oedipus' epistemic state should not be glossed over, but rather taken as a key to interpreting the play.

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Endnotes

¹ The fullest early account of the Oedipus myth is found in *The Odyssey*, where Odysseus recounts his journey to the underworld, where he met Jocasta (here called Epicaste):

“And I saw the beautiful Epicaste, Oedipus’ mother,
 Who in the ignorance of her mind had done a monstrous
 Thing and married her own son. He killed his father
 And married her, but the gods soon made it all known to mortals.
 But he, for all his sorrows, in beloved Thebes continued
 To be lord over the Cadmeans, all through the bitter designing
 Of the gods; while she went down to Hades of the gates, the strong one,
 Knotting a noose and hanging sheer from the high ceiling,
 In the constrains of her sorrow, but left to him who survived her
 All the sorrows that are brought to pass by a mother’s Furies”.
 (Homer, *The Odyssey*, 11.271-80)

² Later called *Oedipus Rex* or *Oedipus Tyrannus*. For a discussion of the significance of the difference between ‘rex’ and ‘tyrannus’ see Segal (1993) Ch.8 and Goux, (1993) Ch.8.

³ The three plays do not form a trilogy and were written and performed in a different chronological order than that suggested by the story. *Antigone* was first presented to the Athenian public in 442-441 BC, followed by *Oedipus* in 429-425 BC, while *Oedipus at Colonus* was presented in 401 BC by Sophocles’ grandson (Sophocles died in 406 BC). (Segal 1993, xi-xv; Rudnytsky 1987, 275).

⁴ Vellacott (1971) estimates that Oedipus was 18 or 19 when he killed Laius and 36 at the time the plague broke out in Thebes (107).

⁵ A possible etymology of the name ‘Oedipus’ is ‘swollen foot’; *oidon* = swollen and *pous* = foot.

⁶ The rape is also mentioned in another version of the story, dating back to the 6th Century BC, in which Hera sends the Sphinx to Thebes as punishment for Laius’ rape of Chrysis (Segal 1993, 52; Rudnytsky 1987, 257).

⁷ Dodds compares Sophocles’ account with Aeschylus’ trilogy of 467 BC, comprising of *Laius*, *Oedipus*, and *Seven Against Thebes*, the only extant play of the three. Aeschylus traces the devastation the curse brought on three generations, whereas Sophocles does not mention the cause of the curse at all. See Dodds 1983, 181.

⁸ This event is only mentioned in passing in the play, but according to the myth, once Oedipus solves the riddle of the Sphinx, she hurls herself into the abyss. Oedipus’ intellectual victory is particularly remarkable when compared to other mythical heroes (Jason, Perseus and Bellerophon) who defeat a female monster in combat. See Goux 2003, 6.

⁹ Schmidt (2001) makes a similar point: “This shift – from the heroic Achilles to the pathetic Oedipus – is fundamental. It marks a displacement of the Homeric vision of *praxis* by a Sophoclean one, a move from one temperament to another... Plato sought to replace Achilles with Socrates as the image of the hero, but it was Aristotle who removed Achilles from the premiere place in tragic art and in that place inserted Oedipus” (68).

¹⁰ “Sophocles begins with action that is confident and consistent, but which in the course tragedy becomes unravelled, to reveal itself as impotent and empty” (Snell 1983, 404).

¹¹ Kitto (1958) says something similar: “here then are two of the major themes [of the

play]: that life can be cruel and inexplicable, and that the clearest human intellect can fail to be a safe guide through its perplexities" (59).

¹² Kitto (1958) concurs: "[The play] carefully avoids the suggestion that Oedipus is 'justly' punished for either his own or his parents' wrong-doing" (58).

¹³ The term *hamartia*, mentioned in Aristotle's *poetics* as one of the elements of tragic plot, is ambiguous and has several interpretations. Grube understands *hamartia* as 'flaw', moral or intellectual weakness. Else sees it as a 'mistake', an error about the identity of a close relative, the confusion that precedes the recognition. Gould (1988) argues that Aristotle requires only that there be an unavoidable mistake in the facts (50). Whitman translates *hamartia* as 'moral fault or failing', and Butcher claims that *hamartia* could have one of four meanings: 1. an error due to inadequate knowledge of particular circumstances; 2. an error due to unavoidable ignorance; 3. an act that is conscious and intentional but not deliberate, for example, an act committed in anger or passion; 4. a defect of character, distinct on the one hand from an isolated error or fault and on the other, from the vice which has its seat in a depraved will. Dodds (1983) emphasises the ambiguous meaning of the term as applying in certain cases to false moral judgements and in others to pure intellectual error, and that there was not, for the Greeks, a sharp distinction between the two. He criticises the Christian interpretation of the term that imbues it with moral tones that are foreign to Greek culture (178). Kaufmann (1968) supports Dodds' view that for the Greeks there is not such a huge difference between intellectual error and moral flaw (70-1).

¹⁴ Knox (1957) concurs by saying: "... there can be no question of *hamartia* in any sense of the word except mistake, and that, apart from the fact that it certainly is not Aristotle's meaning, is irrelevant here, because from the point of view of avoiding the catastrophe every single action of Oedipus is equally a mistake" (30).

¹⁵ For a discussion of pity (*eleos*) and terror (*phobos*) see Kaufmann 1968, 51-6.

¹⁶ As Knox (1984) writes: "even though what remains of early Greek literature shows no verbal consciousness of the ideas we associate with freedom of the will, there is abundant evidence... for a related concept that is in fact almost inseparable from it: individual responsibility" (144). See also Segal 1983, 75; Vernant 1981, 87-119; Dodds 1983, 182.

¹⁷ Generally speaking, ignorance is considered a genuine moral excuse. Thomas Nagel (1979) formulates this general view as follows: "clear absence of control, produced by involuntary movement, physical force, or *ignorance of the circumstances*, excuses what is done from moral judgment" (25, my emphasis).

¹⁸ These questions are even more pertinent if we take into account the conciliatory tone of *Oedipus at Colonus*.

¹⁹ Vernant 1981, 90; Dodds 1983, 183; Lacan 1992, 304. Ricoeur (1970) thinks Oedipus is guilty of pride, but not of incest and patricide: "Oedipus becomes guilty precisely because of his pretension to exonerate himself from a crime that, ethically speaking, he is not in fact guilty of" (516). For an in-depth analysis of question of Oedipus' innocence in relation to the category of the will in ancient Greece see Gould 1988, 49-63.

²⁰ Dodds (1983) points out, "Oedipus is no ordinary homicide: he has committed the two crimes which above all others fill us with instinctive horror" (184).

²¹ This is discussed briefly in Vellacott 1971, 143 and in Knox 1984, 13. For an in-depth analysis of this point see Goodhart 1978, 55-71.

²² For a detailed analysis of double meaning in the play's original Greek, see also Vernant 1981, 87-119.

²³ "Vellacott's thesis... has deservedly met with general condemnation" (Rudnytsky

1987, 269).

²⁴ See also Freud's discussion of guilt stemming from unconscious Oedipal phantasies in "A Child is Being Beaten", SE 17:195.

²⁵ "In vain do you deny that you are accountable, in vain do you proclaim how you have striven against these evil designs. You are guilty, nevertheless; for you could not stifle them; they still survive unconsciously in you". Freud's (1920) formulation of the play's message (291). An alternative explanation of Oedipus' ready acceptance of his guilt is given by Dodds. The Christian (and in particular Kantian) emphasis on intention as morally determining and as separate from action was lacking from Greek thought so Oedipus could not differentiate between his criminal actions and innocent intentions: "no human court could acquit [Oedipus] of pollution; for pollution inhered in the act itself, irrespective of the motive". Dodds in Segal, p.183.

²⁶ "The story is almost unique in telling its story in reverse. Almost all the crucial elements have already happened" (Segal 1983, 84).

²⁷ One tangential issue I will not be touching on here is the question whether ignorance itself is culpable. For recent discussion of culpable ignorance see Rosen 2003, 61-84; Smith 1983, 543-71; Zimmerman 1997, 410-26.

²⁸ This further satisfies the Aristotelian requirement that the tragic protagonist must be good; otherwise it is not a tragedy at all. The downfall of an evil man elicits satisfaction, not pity and terror, in the viewer. See the *Poetics*, 58a16-20.

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