

The vision of blindness: sight versus insight in sophocles' oedipus the king

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“ Anyone who has common sense will remember that the bewilderments of the eye are of two kinds, and arise from two causes, either from coming out of the light or from going into the light, which is true of the mind’s eye, quite as much as the bodily eye; and he who remembers this when he sees anyone whose vision is perplexed and weak, will not be too ready to laugh; he will ask whether that soul of man has come out of the brighter life, and is unable to see because unaccustomed to the dark, or having turned from darkness to the day is dazzled by excess light. And he will count the other one happy in his condition and state of being, and he will pity the other” (Plato, *The Republic*)

The paradoxical coexistence of blindness and insight is portrayed in Sophocles’ *Oedipus the King*, in which Oedipus experiences a devastating yet redeeming realization that the “ vision” he possesses is nothing but false pride and blindness. Suffering a complete reversal, Oedipus nevertheless maintains the fortitude to actively develop and endure intense suffering in order to attain extraordinary insight; deliberately grasping the *kairos*, Oedipus experiences a double bewilderment of the eye – both a physical blindness and, more significantly, a spiritual enlightenment, resulting from his “[h]aving turned from darkness to the day [to be] dazzled by excess light (Plato, *The Republic*).” The eye is the lamp of the body. If your eyes are good, your whole body will be full of light. But if your eyes are bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light within you is darkness, how great is that darkness!” (Matthew 6: 22-23).

Oedipus’ “ eyes are bad” and the daylight proves to be blinding – not because of its brightness, but because it diverts Oedipus’ eyes from all other light, particularly the potential light from within; Oedipus is satisfied with

what he perceives to be his vision, which is really nothing but incomplete logos facilitated by techne. Believing his knowledge and rationalism to be complete, he proclaims, “ I,/ Oedipus the ignorant,. . . stopped [the sphinx] -/ by using thought,” (401-402). All the while, Oedipus unconsciously represses the lingering shadow of the prophecy, because the heinous transgressions of patricide and incest are incongruent with his conception of his ideal self, and therefore uncomfortable and even frightening. With time and circumstances seeming to obscure the prophecy and confirm Oedipus’ “ vision,” Oedipus remains ignorant of his ignorance. In the eyes of his people and of himself, he is the paragon of virtue, a wise and noble king. Oedipus’ incomplete knowledge contributes to his hamartia, breeding hubris and leading him to declare, “ But I who count myself the child of Chance,/ the giver of good, shall never know dishonor” (1085-1086). Although Oedipus’ “ hubris [is] directed toward the good of his polis,” (Bull, 6) it also gives him the irrational forthrightness that lets him strike out against truth, mistakenly and ironically accusing Tiresias of being “ the child of endless night,” (379) “ blind in [his] ears, [his] reason, and [his] eyes (376). The accusations of Tiresias motivate Oedipus to seek the truth, and after “ his intensive interrogation of three witnesses” (Roochnik, 11), the truth of the prophecy becomes clear. Oedipus is determined to know the truth and himself, even if it means his downfall. With realization dawning, Oedipus sees his lack of vision and the irony of his condemnation: “ And it is I/ who pronounced these curses on myself!” (824-825). Having been a firm believer in his vision and rationality, Oedipus is now left with the devastating knowledge that the entire system of logic upon which he based all his beliefs and actions is flawed. He comes across a “

terrible enlightenment, . . . [anagnorisis,]" (Aristotle's Concept of Tragedy) that not only his knowledge, but also the means by which he acquires knowledge, is limited; Oedipus realizes how fallible reason is – knowledge is complete and infinite while logos, the human conception of knowledge, is incomplete and limited. Even Oedipus's new knowledge is merely a system of thought beyond his former one. With this revelation, Oedipus realizes that he can never be rationally confident about who he is or how the world works; he comes to realize that "[r]eal knowledge is to know the extent of one's ignorance" (Confucius) and thereby paradoxically understand everything while not understanding everything. Thus forced to confront his limited knowledge and completely revise his conception of himself, the world, and how he perceives the world, Oedipus suffers a complete reversal. Stripped of all he was and laden with the realization of his dreadful sins, Oedipus undergoes intense psychological as well as physical suffering. His downfall from such a noble stature makes his present state seem all the more calamitous. Oedipus exclaims in anguish, " For why was I to see/ when nothing I could see would bring me joy?" (1344-1345). Yet, this suffering results in a paradoxical triumph as Oedipus finally examines himself. He physically puts out his eyes as a symbolic act, showing that he is freed from his former blindness and the darkness of the outer world. Through Oedipus' perseverance and resilience, the " pain [of his suffering is] transmuted into exaltation" (Edith Hamilton)." Oedipus is not destroyed. He stands with the strength generated from having recognized his true place in the world" (Roochnik, 11). With the immense sacrifice of all that he identifies with, Oedipus acquires a new system of thought that illuminates the shadows

formerly accepted as truth. The extinguishment of the outside light is replaced by the creation of an inner light. “ The tragedy thus ends, not with the abandonment of knowledge, but with a new kind of knowledge: a knowledge of ignorance, of limits; knowledge that life is not simply a riddle to be solved; knowledge of what it means to be a human being” (Roochnik, 11). And Oedipus possesses the courage and free will to accept and understand this knowledge. With his new vision, Oedipus recognizes and affirms his free will: “ It was Apollo there, Apollo, friends,/ who brought my sorrows to their perfection,/ these evil that were done to me./ But the one who struck them with this hand, that one was none but I” (1339-1343). While free will and rational thought give man a sense of stability and let him achieve a measure of understanding, it is because of free will that life is insecure; it is the quality of having neither the guarantee nor the denial of true knowledge, but the potential for it – and the potential to realize this potential – that makes the world uncertain and therefore incomprehensible to man. Uncertainty is inherent in the condition of man, but with personal integrity, will, and courage to make and accept his own actions, man affirms the dignity of not only himself, but of all mankind.” Man is not equated to the gods, but man at his greatest, as in Oedipus, is capable of something which the gods, by definition, cannot experience; the proud tragic view of Sophocles sees in the fragility and inevitable defeat of human greatness the possibility of a purely human heroism to which the gods can never attain, for the condition of their existence is everlasting victory”.(Knox)