

Retrieved from:

The European Journal of Psychoanalysis

Dec 5, 2023

<https://www.journal-psychoanalysis.eu/articles/oedipus-without-freud-a-conversation-1/>

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## Oedipus Without Freud: A Conversation (1)

**Sergio Benvenuto:** Greek tragic myths and concepts have been taken up by modern thinkers-starting with Nietzsche and Freud-to speak of mankind in general. Why do human beings still think in terms of Greek tragedy?

**Jean-Pierre Vernant:** We have become distant from ancient Greek culture. In my youth, all good students in sciences as well as in literature, studied Greek. Physicians, lawyers, politicians, all had to be reasonably versed in classical culture. This is no longer true.

And yet, since 1989, a considerable number of Greek tragedies have been staged in France. Ariane Mnouchkine's *Oresteia* and *Iphigenia in Aulis* played to full theatres, mostly made up of young audiences. However, because Hellenism is so far removed from us, the effect on those searching for an identity or roots in that remote past can be bewildering.

Nevertheless, Greek tragedy's expression of man would appear to be more valid than ever; enigmatic man swept up in an inevitably overwhelming tide, man caught between two paths, a calculating, deciding, judging, man, who, in conscientiously choosing, realizes only that he has chosen the opposite of what he believed to be the good. This "tragic perception" is even more acute today because what is now in question is the idea of man as master of his own fate. Today, the question is whether scientific thought and technological progress are not instead leading us towards catastrophe. The idea of a society through which-as Marx put it-we would leap from the realm of necessity to the realm of freedom has run up against a stone wall. Despite his desire to create an ideal world, man, like an ancient Greek tragic hero, may have succeeded in doing just the opposite. The result is today's return to tragic consciousness.

Tragedy was a monumental invention of the Greeks. Before tragedy, there had been the poets, who recounted things in the third person. The theatre, instead, reproduced the event on the stage. Theatre gives us a flesh-and-blood, speaking Agamenmon! And yet the characters are fictitious. The awareness of that fiction is both the condition and the effect of tragedy. In a way, it is the city playing itself.

The spectator kept a certain distance from the characters on stage, who were mainly kings of ancient Greece, and he considered them as ancient heroes of the mythical past, filtered through the experience of the citizen. However, that mythical past presented problems familiar to fifth century Greece: What is the human being? What is the meaning of action? What is responsibility? What is crime? However, as no answers were provided, man himself became interrogation.

The tragic characters presented familiar stories. The tragic poet utilized a series of actions so that, as Aristotle explained it, given the opening sequence, one would have expected certain dramatic events, most probably or necessarily, to follow. Heroes are men beset by catastrophe, the complete reversal of a situation, which is not the result of their malice or bad intentions (the heroes are not contemptible, *kakoi*, or "low", petty characters; on the contrary, they possess greatness). However, the tragic poet with his montage of action suddenly made events appear as though dictated by some kind of internal, inevitable necessity. Aristotle called this *mimesis*, imitation of an action. However, we should intend *mimesis* as simulation.

Tragedy is simulation as used in physics, an attempt to produce extremely focused, unmistakable conditions, to facilitate an understanding of the functioning of certain phenomena. Similarly, tragedy, using familiar characters, stages a human experience which develops in such a way—once more, citing Aristotle—that the catastrophe besetting a mortal who is neither contemptible nor evil appears perfectly likely, even necessary. Thus, every man is placed in question. In this special, controlled space, the inevitable catastrophe becomes intelligible: the “sound and fury” of the world, projected onto the stage by simulation, is suddenly revealed to the spectator.

By creating a performance which is from beginning to end a harmonic whole, tragedy also achieves that which man, in the midst of infinite confusion, passion, contradiction and enigmas, cannot: control of the future, of himself, and knowledge of what he is. Yet, in the space of tragic fiction, man does succeed in constructing an artistic and pleasant performance... Suddenly, that which made no sense acquires meaning; that which was terrifying becomes an expression of beauty.

**Benvenuto:** You say that tragedy is beautiful because it gives meaning to events which in reality are monstrous. But these plots are derived from old myths which already had meaning. Claude Lévi-Strauss, in his essay “The Structure of Myths” (in *Structural Anthropology*), illustrates his approach to myths by redescribing structurally the myth of Oedipus. He attempts to demonstrate that, as a whole, the various phases of the Theban cycle provide not so much a metaphoric meaning as an order, and that, in its cyclic form, the mythical episodes reveal contradictions, which the mythical development attempts to resolve. This attempt to overcome contradiction is the reconstructable sense of the mythic cycle. Are you saying that tragedy gives the myth a different meaning than it previously had?

**Vernant:** Yes, definitely. Myth and tragedy have different “senses”. In his essay, Lévi-Strauss showed clearly that behind the problem of Oedipus—if we trace far enough through the lineage of the Labacides (from Labdacus to Antigone)—the myth basically expresses the problems of a dearth or imperfection of communication and locomotion. I agree with him. Consider the pseudo-lame Oedipus, the deformity of Labdacus (whose name in fact signifies “the lame”), and the sexually crippled Laius (guilty of having fallen in love with and attempting to take by force a youth who was also the son of his host). Laius’ sexual “lameness” returns on stage once more when he marries. In some versions of the myth, his sexual intercourse with his wife is not sufficient to produce offspring. We are familiar with three generations—Labdacus, Laius and Oedipus—but logically, we would have to stop at Laius, as he would have had no children.

The legend poses the problem of a correct communication between generations, and here we find a fault. But to discover significant convergences and to give meaning to this myth, would involve searching the underlying sequences of the story for correspondences between various elements. Tragedy provides a different meaning than myth, and in the example of Oedipus, it is that man can be the victim of guilt.

In fact, the misfortune of Oedipus is that he is the son who should never have been born. Consequently, cursed from birth, he will always bear the guilt in whatever he does. Since man’s existence depends on those who have preceded him, there is always something which transcends or dominates him; his subsequent actions do not directly emanate from him, but are rooted beyond, or above, him. The tragic sense is that our actions—our very selves—escape our control. It is also an enigmatic sense, and Oedipus is a decipherer of enigmas.

Oedipus discovers that Thebes is under a curse, the victim of a wrongdoing, although not its own. The blood of the king has been spilled. The Sphinx, a female daimon, poses a riddle: “What creature is at the same time two-, three- and four-legged, has one voice [phoné], one nature, and changes constantly? A being which at once has one foot, two feet, three feet and...”

**Benvenuto:** Why not “four, two and three feet”?...

**Vernant:** Chronologically, four, two and three would in fact be more logical, however the order in existing texts is strangely “two, three, four.”

Oedipus’ response is: “It is man”, since man is the only creature in nature whose senses are modified during the course of his life, and who passes through three successive stages: as a child on all fours, as an adult on two feet, and as an old man leaning on a cane-as Laius was upon encountering Oedipus (although it was a whip he carried and not a cane). Man as a child is not the same as man as an adult, and for this reason an initiation ritual (the ephebia) is required during adolescence.

Thus, the enigma refers to Oedipus. He is truly a monster, because even when he stands on two feet, he is nevertheless similar to his sons on all fours and his father on three. He is at once son of his father, and like his father, husband to his mother; thus, the equal of his father, and at the same time father of his sons, as well as their brother. The text reads: “they have all come out of the same womb”-the three generations have intersected in the womb of Jocasta. Oedipus represents a chaotic being. Because of him, the order-sons taking the place of the father under certain conditions of time and space, and without conflicting with him-is threatened. The encounter between Oedipus and his father occurs at a triple crossroads; there is a confrontation, and when both refuse to give precedence to the other, Oedipus strikes down his father.

Oedipus solves the enigma. He utters: “I am he who has divined, I am the man who knows [oida, “I know”]”, and in fact he is addressed as a sage. But he is a man in search of the truth, and this desire to know, along with that capacity which renders him superior, makes him a monster who confuses the generations. Oedipus’ great transgressions are getting rid of the king and taking his place while he is still on the throne, and incest, having encountered his father’s seed in his mother’s womb. The response to the interrogation on man: “yes, indeed, a strange creature! But how is it that he is inhabited by this legitimate desire to know, whereas underlying that desire to know is a fundamental ignorance?” Oedipus did not know who he was. He who had been king becomes the lowest of the low, a defilement to be eliminated.

**Benvenuto:** But is this the sense of the myth or of Sophocles’ tragedy Oedipus Rex?

**Vernant:** This is how tragedy transforms those themes, already contained in myth, into an interrogation for man on the meaning of action and knowledge. The myth does not pose questions such as, “Did Oedipus know?”, “Was Oedipus responsible?”, “Was Oedipus guilty?”. The myth recounts the story wherein we recognize that the communication between generations is not easy. The tragedy, on the other hand, concentrates for the most part on Oedipus as a tragic persona, demonstrating that science is ignorance, that innocence is guilt, and that man is truly an enigma to himself.

**Benvenuto:** On another occasion, you said, as did Aristotle, that Oedipus is the paradigm of the tragic hero.

**Vernant:** One of the problems raised by the tragedy is that of the relationship of the human agent to his actions; in this sense, the tragedy represents a phase of passage. When the Homeric heroes act, it is the gods who act in them, infuse the warrior’s fervor, suggest certain ideas, projects, or lead them astray. For example, at one point Agamemnon says: “I was foolish, it is “ate”, to have deprived Achilles of his slave Briseis, who had been awarded to him as gheràs (a prize for his honor). Ate is a kind of madness, but not one’s own; it is a kind of personification of madness, a religious force of dementia. Thus, Homeric men were affected by powers which, entering them, led them either to perdition or salvation.

Tragedy, unlike the epic, places the hero at the crossroads of the action. The questions asked in these texts are: “What must I do?”, “What must I choose?”, “If I choose this, what do I risk?”. What begins to emerge in tragedy is the idea of man’s power, more or less autonomous, to act and decide according to what he believes to be best. It is *boulomai*, the verb “to want”: to deliberate, but also “to decide”-no longer a drive of divine origin, but reflection and decision.

It is what we call will, although tragedy demonstrates that will is never completely autonomous. In all human decisions, the subject himself must weigh the pros and cons, while underlying it all are the decisions and projects of the gods, who pull the strings in such a way that every human action appears as emanating

from the subject, conveying his character, his ethos, and his interior being, but at the same time representing the way in which the gods have guided him without the agent's knowledge. Heraclites said that "ethos (character) for man is daimon (a demon)", which can be interpreted in many ways: that "man believes that a demon guides him, but instead it is character", or-and this is the tragic sense-"that which men call character is actually a demoniac force".

Oedipus therefore is a paradigmatic personality, because he is a champion of reflection: he succeeded in divining and understanding. And in seeking truth, he realized that it was the gods who had guided him from the very start, so that knowledge about Laius' murderer is revealed as ignorance of himself. Because, as Laius' murderer, Oedipus fixes the center of the very nucleus of tragic reflection.

**Benvenuto:** Do you think that this ambiguity of the tragic hero-both free and controlled by the gods-is the same ambiguity Freud pointed out? Freud noted that there is something of Oedipus in neurotics. Could Freudian theory thus also be in some way tragic? In an article entitled "Oedipus without Complex", you refuted Freud's interpretation of Oedipus Rex. But didn't Freud intuit this tragic background of Oedipus-in the sense in which you have described it-claiming to have encountered it also in neurosis?

**Vernant:** In part, although tragedy is not psychoanalytic, it is the psychoanalyst who has read tragedy and drawn something from it. In other words, and in the context of another experience, the psychoanalyst maintains that there is something in us which is not us, but which can direct us and thus explain what we do. In this sense, I admit the relationship between Sophocles and Freud.

In "Oedipus without Complex", I criticized not so much Freud, but rather a certain way of applying him. I reproach certain psychoanalysts, as I reproach certain Marxists, for thinking that their technique or theory provides the key to understand everything. Psychoanalysts and Marxists have the solution even before they approach the texts.

It is impossible to project the Oedipus complex in the Freudian sense onto the text of the tragedy, as that would require demonstrating how Freud's statements could aid a better understanding of certain otherwise obscure passages. However, it is impossible to read tragedy convinced a priori of the existence of the Oedipus complex. On the contrary, it is only logical to think that Oedipus was free of any Oedipus complex, simply because he never knew either his parents, having been brought up by others whom he called "father" and "mother", he was unaware that it was his father he was killing, and when he went to bed with his mother, it was not out of desire, but because he had been constrained to do so.

**Benvenuto:** Freud would perfectly agree with you. He never said that Oedipus had a psychological complex, but that the audience had an Oedipus complex, which permitted them to relive and take pleasure in the tragedy.

**Vernant:** I disagree with Freud that Oedipus Rex has a strong appeal for the public because each of us is the bearer of this complex. There are other tragedies which have had, and still have, a strong effect, but which possess not the least trace of an Oedipus complex, i.e., in *The Persians*, it is tragedy, not the complexes, to produce an effect.

On the other hand, it is true that tragedy is constructed like the psychoanalytical treatment of an unresolved Oedipus complex. It unfolds from ignorance into a progressive elucidation of an Oedipus complex, which is neither Oedipus' nor the audience's, not has it to do with the complicated relationship between fathers and sons. This is revealed somewhat by the myth when it explains that the son can take the place of his father only when the situation is mature to do so. Thus, the context is more general and social than psychological.

**Benvenuto:** Before psychoanalysis, Freud applied a therapeutic method which he called "cathartic". Is your analogy between analytical treatment and tragedy connected with the catharsis of Aristotle? But first, what is catharsis?

**Vernant:** This concept has been extensively discussed. Catharsis is purification. We experience terror and compassion at these tragedies. So tragedy, in simulating and in giving an aesthetics to the “sound and fury” of the world, also rendered it comprehensible, because everything occurs according to an order of the probable and the necessary. There is an element of beauty in those raw emotions, for instead of submitting to them as imposed passions, we dominate and sublimate them.

**Benvenuto:** Do you use the term “sublimate” in the Freudian sense?

**Vernant:** Partially so, but in a different sense, due to the aesthetic effect. There is pacification in the return to order, transforming raw passion into something intelligible, thus producing an effect of beauty. However, the order at the end is not the same order we found at the beginning. For, in the meantime, we have seen how a decent man can be destroyed, or destroy himself, probably or necessarily, according to an order which we have witnessed, and thus, at any moment in the process, understood. On the other hand, terror and compassion necessarily imply a kind of opacity of the events and of ourselves as we experience them, but not to the point of catharsis. The terror and compassion we experience are purified passions because they are produced by means of the performance, which is not real.

**Benvenuto:** Some readers of Aristotle’s Poetics have commented that the term catharsis would have a medical sense. Aristotle was the son of a physician. They say that catharsis would not be so much a purification, in the religious sense, but something more or less therapeutic.

**Vernant:** That is true. In Greece, there is a very strong connection between medical literature and literature in general. A recent book by Mrs. Ruth Paven demonstrates that for the Greek the interiority of the subject is at once psychic and physical. Consequently, what were called *pràpides* (heart, mind), *splànchina* (intestines), *thumòs* (sentiment), *noòs* (mind), corresponded to what physicians described: they were organs, liquids, air currents. Our interior tissue is constituted in the same way as the tissue of the world. In fact, when I attend a performance, something is produced in my humours, and my organs react. When I am moved, my heart leaps, moves and liquifies. All these internal phenomena are at the same time physiological. Witnessing a frightful crime or a battle produces a disturbance, a passion in the raw state. But that crime or battle, represented theatrically, resorts to an aesthetics of this passion, renders it intelligible. This is translated into an internal equilibrium of humours, breath, organs. And just as in medicine, when there is an excess of bile or certain humours, a catharsis can be obtained, a purgation of that excess which re-establishes the organic equilibrium.

**Benvenuto:** Certain scholars find the theses of Aristotle somewhat paradoxical, claiming that whereas tragedy on the one hand gives rise to excesses of passions such as *eleos* and *phobos*, compassion and terror, it also treats the affective disturbances it creates. What would the benefit be for the spectator in a process in which he is first infected and then cured of the infection?

**Vernant:** Just that, catharsis.

**Benvenuto:** But is catharsis a pleasure?

**Vernant:** Of course. Aristotle considers it a pleasure of the intellectual order. He says that there is more truth in tragedy than in historiography, because the latter by necessity describes what has occurred at a given moment in a particular place, while tragedy demonstrates not what has occurred, but what had to occur by necessity and according to all probability. Tragedy, being of the order of the general or the necessary, is therefore much closer to what is true intellectually. An intellectual process can translate terror and compassion into purgation. In providing access to a truth, tragedy provides a lesson. By contrast, Plato rejected tragedy as pathetic.

**Benvenuto:** What does Aristotle mean when he asserts that Oedipus is more tragic than any other tragic hero, even Antigone for example? How do those two tragic characters-Oedipus and Antigone, the most successful in modern thought-differ?

**Vernant:** The leading role in *Antigone* is feminine. Women play a very important role in tragedy, in that they are more often the bearers of truths or values than are men. The Greek city was a purely masculine entity, where women had no place, yet no culture is homogeneous. In any society women can be redeemed. Their political disqualification qualified Greek women to play a religious role, i.e., in the cults of Dionysus, or of the Mysteries, or in rituals such as the Thesmophorias. Tragedy also reveals certain feminine aspects which were kept camouflaged in the Greek city.

*Antigone* represents blind loyalty to the value of the family. Her two brothers are all that remain of her lineage and, consequently, she cannot choose between them. Both are dead, and without her family she is nothing. It is truly impressive that she never mentions her lover, Haemon; he is of no importance. Her uncle, Creon, rules the city and incarnates civic, i.e. male, values. *Antigone*, on the other hand, incarnates family values, and this limitation makes her very sensitive to certain duties-i.e., the burial of the dead, which was not given importance by the city. However, when these values lose importance, then a tragic conflict between civic and family values arises.

**Benvenuto:** Your interpretation is very close to that of Hegel.

**Vernant:** Yes. *Antigone's* limited horizon was valid for women in general, although this limitation renders her sensitive to what she calls "unwritten law". The chorus chants to her: "You are just like your father! You are an obstinate and narrow-minded individual. You go always and only in the same direction". But she is ignorant of Eros, that is, of love for the stranger, for the male who will be her husband. And the eulogies of Eros, of desire, are very important.

**Benvenuto:** Oedipus is also nailed to his family, despite himself.

**Vernant:** Of course. But Oedipus carries within him all his contradictions. He is both ruler of the city and member of his family. And then, he is he who knows, for whom truth is fundamental. He is at the same time the highest of the high, and the lowest of the low. With Oedipus all conflicts are centered within one individual, while onstage conflicts usually develop between the various roles.

Hyppolytus is another character who in one thing goes to the extreme; in his youthful purity, he rejects voluptuousness, and thus reflects Artemis. But there is a disturbing aspect in that perfect purity to which he aspires: he rejects Aphrodite. The tragedy explodes because if Artemis is certainly significant, so is Aphrodite. For the Greeks, the gods oppose one another and represent conflicting human experience. Total dedication to Artemis inevitably means scorn for Aphrodite. And to the shepherd who, at the beginning of the tragedy, criticizes Hyppolytus, saying to him: "But do you not greet the statue of Aphrodite?", Hyppolytus responds: "This no, I do not wish to know her". But it is impossible to live completely one-sided, because the other side will ultimately take its revenge.

**Benvenuto:** In this historical context, what is the relationship between catharsis, as intended in tragedy, and *sophrosyne*, temperance, as a political and ethical Greek ideal?

**Vernant:** This is a difficult question. To the extent to which catharsis is the re-establishment of a certain equilibrium, it is an element of *sophrosyne*-at least in the fifth and fourth centuries B.C.. Before tragedy, *sophrosyne* ignored that tragic form of cathartic experience. *Sophrosyne* was self-control. However, things changed between the Archaic epoch and the sixth century. At the time when Aristotle wrote, *sophrosyne* existed, but there was also a new aspiration, developed by philosophy, towards a more perfect, constant and unique divine. Self-mastery remained a Greek ideal-however, it had different nuances during the epoch of tragedy. When it was in full expansion, it translated the new vision of the world and the divine as lacerated by contradictions, which in some way must be assumed and which, at times, can be fatal to who insists on being completely one-sided. The spectator, through tragic catharsis, is able to recover a certain psychic equilibrium. Terror and compassion are purified by a message which implies a truth regarding man.

**Benvenuto:** Why do heroic figures such as Antigone or Oedipus still exercise so strong an influence? Why do so many philosophers and psychoanalysts focus on these two tragic figures in particular? For example, have you read the transcription of Lacan's seminar on Antigone, in *Ethics of Psychoanalysis*?

**Vernant:** Yes, although I do not remember it well. I recall only that he had some very sensible things to say about Antigone.

Oedipus, Antigone or Ulysses are currently such heroic figures because their final destination is unclear. In fact, only a truly great text is read differently over time. We never definitively finish reading the *Odyssey*, or a Greek tragedy. There are thirty-six different interpretations of a Greek tragedy. Are some of these more valid than others? That is another difficult question to answer.

As an historian, I believe that all interpretations are valid, if they are presented well and have been thoroughly thought out. However, to understand what that text represented for the spectator and the author of that epoch, an awareness of the manner in which the text was constructed is essential. I obviously do not mean by this that "my interpretation is the only true one!" But sometimes it is possible to say that an interpretation is false, because certain passages in the text invalidate it. But there is always space for new interpretation.

*Translated from the French by Joan Tambureno*

## **Notes:**

1) This conversation took place in Paris, in May of 1994, as part of the Multi-Media Encyclopaedia of Philosophical Sciences, a program produced by RAI Radiotelevisione Italiana, and the Italian Institute for Philosophical Studies. Our special thanks to RAI Corporation for having permitted publication of its transcription.