

CONCEPT OF STRUGGLE BETWEEN FATE AND FREE WILL IN *THE THEBAN PLAYS* – A REASSESSMENT

Dr Zeba Siddiqui
Assoc Professor
Amity University MP

Abstract

The central theme of the Theban plays of Sophocles is the struggle between fate and free will. Unlike Euripides who partially believed in the existence of something such as free will, Sophocles believed in the traditional faith and believed that free will is nothing it is only fate which governs the life of the hapless humans. The dominant sense that one gets upon reading his plays is that man is just a plaything in the hands of the gods, or fate, or forces which are hidden from his sight and his understanding but which are nevertheless very strong and out of his control.

Keywords: Theban Plays, Sophocles, Fate and free will

Introduction

Classics pass what the modern philosopher Nassim Nicholas Taleb calls ‘the Lindy effect’. The Lindy Effect says that the future longevity of a book, a product or an idea in market is directly proportional to the time it has already spent surviving in the market. In short, the Lindy Effect is the test of time.¹ It says that something which has been there for thousands of years is there for some reason even while it is beyond everyone to understand why it is so.

Classics, do pass this test of time. They are eternal in the sense that they reflect the universal desires and urges of human beings. They convert what Carl Jung says as ‘universal archetypes’ into credible narratives, into simple stories and conveys great truths about life and reality to posterity.² The question of fate and free will is one such great universal question which has formed the subject matter of literature ever since the ancient times.

The classical Greek dramatist Sophocles has taken up this eternal struggle between fate and free will in his most famous “Theban trilogy” which is more colloquially known as the “Theban plays”. They tell some of the most famous stories of history, the story of Oedipus and his sister Antigone. The trilogy consists of three plays: *Oedipus the King*, *Oedipus at Colonus* and *Antigone*.³

Discussion

The great tragedians of ancient Greece did not dare invent a subject for themselves. They always reworked a mythical theme. It was so because they believed that everything worthwhile has been said by the ancients, and that is why they do not have to invent anything new, just reinterpret it in the modern contemporary idiom. Sometimes, modern stories were also invented, especially by comedians, but it was rare for a tragedian to do that, especially for someone as Sophocles who was conservative even by the standards of his time.

Sophocles was an eyewitness of the great battle of Salamis in which the Greek city states had come together to defeat the great naval and military power, Persia. Persia was the greatest land and naval power of their time and functioning decisively if not efficiently under the dictatorship of its King, the Supreme Commander, Xerxes. The Greek city-states on the contrary were tiny by comparison, in population and also in resources, military and civil. Even then, through great collaboration and great sense of future, the Greeks did come together and fielded joint armies through their fledgling democracy and defeated a far greater power than themselves. Athens was the city-state with the greatest urge for democracy and it is generally its initiative which is credited with the ultimate Greek success.⁴

One side effect of this was that the Greek national consciousness formed in reaction to the foreign invasion. While Persia was a greater power in military, Greeks did not lack in literature and art and thus while Herodotus produced an hour by hour account of the great battle of Salamis, and other important battles like Marathon and Thermopylae, playwrights like Aeschylus and Sophocles produced great tragedies which created a national consciousness in the Greeks, a sense of oneness and belonging. One tool to do this was to re-affirm the power of the ancient gods at whose mercy man functioned

“These myths were the only national memory of the remote past, of a time before the Greeks invented the alphabet, so that, shifting and changing thought they might be, they had the authority, for the audience, of what we call history. The masked actors on stage were the great figures of the audience’s past, their ancestors. Since these myths, retold from generation to generation, were shaped by the selective emphasis of an oral tradition that preserved and created images of universal significance, the masked actors presented to the audience not only historical figures from their past but also poetic symbols of their life and death, their ambitions, fears and hopes.”⁵

Oedipus is a victim of his fate. He is the King and a plague is ravaging his kingdom. As he consults the godly oracles they tell him that the plague is the result of an ungodly act on his land, the fact that the murderer of the king who ruled the country before him has never been caught. He again consults the oracle who tells him that he himself is the murderer.

To this, Oedipus is shocked and accuses the oracle of having been bribed. Thus we see that the primary character is thinking of rational reasons for the turn of events. However, as the oracle is leaving his palace in anger, he murmurs that in the end the murderer will be known to everyone as the one who has slept with his own mother and has produced children with her and thus his children are also his brothers and sisters.

Incest is considered to be the greatest sin in a traditional society. Anyone who is accused of this sin is an automatic social outcast and is scorned by everyone. In the play Oedipus Rex, it is also a great crime but a crime which is committed without the knowledge of the perpetrator himself.

Oedipus’s wife, the queen Jocasta then reassures Oedipus that not all prophecies come true as one oracle had also depicted that her former husband, the King Laius would be killed by his own son but it was not so and he was killed by bandits by a bend on the roadside outside the city. Upon hearing this, Oedipus becomes suspicious as he had in his life had killed a man by the bend on a roadside outside the city which he ruled now.

But how could it be? How could he be the son of King Laius? Jocasta tells him that upon hearing the prophecy King Laius had his new born son killed by giving him to a servant and telling him to throw off a cliff. So he must surely be dead.

However, Oedipus becomes a little suspicious and manages to find the servant who was entrusted with killing the newborn son of King Laius. He then knows that the new born son was not killed but given to a farmer to bring

up. Oedipus then realizes the whole horrible story as before coming to the city he now ruled he lived in a different city and was the son of a farmer.

It then transpires, that Oedipus was the son of the former king of the city he now ruled, of king Laius and he was not killed at his birth but survived and brought up by a farmer. When he was once coming to the city he now ruled, he came upon a group of attackers, which happened to be King Laius in disguise and had killed him. He then proceeded to the kingdom and it so happened that fell in love with his own mother unbeknownst of the truth and married her, became the king and fathered children with her.

These Attic tragedies pitted the hero against the gods; free will against fate. The hero represented the free will and gods represented the fate and in the end fate won, the gods won against the hapless humans. No matter how good a person was, if the fate was to make him commit a crime he would commit a crime, even while not knowing of the crime and would suffer from the consequences. One cannot escape his fate, seems to be the dominant message of the Theban plays of Sophocles.

“...the Attic tragedians, in play after play, set these heroes, in their actions and suffering, against the background of the city. The ancient myths (and the epic tradition that first gave them literary form) were concerned with the fate of the hero; the drama is concerned also with the fate of the city which he defends, attacks, rules or represents. And the chorus, which is a representation on stage of the community, constantly calls attention by its very presence as well as its song to this larger dimension.” [Fagles, 25]

Just like modern times, the debate between fate and free will was raging on. A brand of philosophers like Sophists believed that it was “the individual man (who) is the measure of all things, of the existence of what exists and the nonexistence of what does not.” [Fagles, 136]

In the play, Oedipus Rex however, it is fate which is measure of all things. Oedipus is generally a good king who would not knowingly do bad to others, let alone committing the ultimate sin of fratricide and incest. How could a gentle soul like him kill his own father and his own mother? It turns that he did it and did not even know that he had done it. It was the gods who had done it or in other way it was meant to be.

For a modern Enlightenment audience this seems to be mightily unfair that a man is punished for crimes that he committed unknowingly. For the crowning knowledge of Enlightenment dictates that it is the man who is the arbiter of all the things. However, recent studies in twenty first century have proved that there is no such thing as free will. In the words of modern philosopher Sam Harris:

“Free will is an illusion. Our wills are simply not of our own making. Thoughts and intentions emerge from background causes of which we are unaware and over which we exert no conscious control. We do not have the freedom we think we have. Free will is actually more than an illusion (or less), in that it cannot be made conceptually coherent. Either our wills are determined by prior causes and we are not responsible for them, or they are the product of chance and we are not responsible for them.”⁶

The most cherished notion of humanity, the most important background idea behind the institutions of democracy, adult franchise and free market is the idea of free will, the idea that man knows what he wants, what is good for him and he can choose what is good for him. If the very idea of free will collapses, then so do all other concepts related to it. It seems that Sophocles, the ancient Greek tragedian had an inkling of the eternal truths that the modern neuroscience is now delivering.

“The popular conception of free will seems to rest on two assumptions: (1) that each of us could have behaved differently than we did in the past, and (2) that we are the conscious source of most of our

thoughts and actions in the present. As we are about to see, however, both of these assumptions are false. But the deeper truth is that free will doesn't even correspond to any subjective fact about us—and introspection soon proves as hostile to the idea as the laws of physics are. Seeming acts of volition merely arise spontaneously (whether caused, uncaused, or probabilistically inclined, it makes no difference) and cannot be traced to a point of origin in our conscious minds.” [Harris, 6]

CONCLUSION

Literature reflects some of the greatest truths about life and the nature of truth. The business of science too is to look for truth. It is often that we find that some latest scientific discovery is already hinted at in ancient literature. It seems that Sophocles, the ancient Greek dramatist had an inkling of how fate works through the ancient mythical stories about the Greek religion and he wove the struggle between free will and fate in his tragedies, all the while showing that it is fate which is the more powerful of the two.

REFERENCES

-
- ¹ Taleb, Nassim Nicholas. *Antifragile: Things that Gain from Disorder*. London: Penguin UK, 2012. p. 85.
 - ² Jung, C. G. *Man and His Symbols*. New York: RHUS, 1968. p.71.
 - ³ Sophocles. *The Three Theban Plays*. London: Penguin, 1984.
 - ⁴ Holland, Tom. *Persian Fire: The First World Empire, Battle for the West*. London: Little, Brown Book Group, 2006. p.195.
 - ⁵ Fagles, Robert in *Sophocles. The Three Theban Plays*. London: Penguin, 1984. p.23.
 - ⁶ Harris, Sam. *Free Will*. New York: Free Press, 2012. p.5.