

Ecology and Thought: Oedipus and Nature's Rage

CRITICISM

Issue 9 (Summer 2019)- Voyages- Journal of Contemporary Humanism

Non-fabricated news: hurricanes and tornadoes devastate cities, eco-systems crash, oceans are saturated with plastic, climate has become unpredictable and hostile, food contains health damaging chemical components, detergents created to increase hygiene are polluting the environment, nuclear waste endangers life. Mother Nature is no longer the generous and protective divinity that enables human life to prosper. She has been completely de-sacralized, exploited and transformed by domineering humans, whose artificial culture has reached an alarming peak. Environmentalists repeatedly inform us about the risks, ethicists are warning that economic and technological development without ethical norms leads to catastrophic outcomes; international conferences have reached agreements to reduce emissions that cause climate change, and yet not only is there no significant change, but emissions increase, plastics advance and the population augments. It looks like humans are not able to undo what they have done, or for the moment find efficient ways out. Yet what seems to be more disquieting is the pervasive mental inertia that impedes them to actually recognize the problem. The areas of the world's population that produce most of the environmental damage and could take decisive steps to address these problems enjoy the commodities of cities and pass their free time amusing themselves or absorbed by the parallel world of their technical devices. The people with political and economic power have other things on their minds too: politicians are busy to obtain or reinforce consensus, the richest persons are investing in the conquest of the Moon and Mars.

There is a tragic dimension to the present condition of humanity and its relationship to Nature, an estrangement from responsibilities that calls to mind the story of Oedipus, as related by myths and Sophocles' tragedy: *Oedipus the King*.¹ Oedipus' dire fate was set before he was born as a result of his father's errors, but he added his own faults, as in a chain impossible to break, which affected not only him but his children as well. The damage mankind has produced to Nature started before the present generations were born, but we are accentuating it as we cannot break the chain of scientific, technological and industrial development we have inherited, together with the mission to continue the spiral of progress, and the myth of money as measure of all things. All this is involved in environmental changes and will impact future generations in an even more severe way.

Long before Oedipus' birth, his father Laius was a guest of king Pelops and abused his son Chryssipus, who then committed suicide. Acting on impulse to satisfy his own pleasure, motivated by arrogant self-love and uncaring about the young man's feelings, Laius disrespected King Pelops'

hospitality and broke the natural law of life preservation and prosperity. It is impossible not to find parallels here with the abuses that humans inflict on the environment to satisfy the need for a better and more comfortable life, in ignorance of the hospitality Nature offers to humans, who are guests on Earth and should leave it as they found it, if not better for their children.

Laius' behavior betrays his mental split and detachment from his context: he no longer looked at Chrysis as the child of his host, but as an object of desire, and this objectification justified the abuse to his eyes. A mental split occurred in mankind's relationship to Nature too. For millennia humans were respectful of their habitat and they felt connected to each part of it as myths and rituals reveal. They were humble in front of the creative and destructive powers of Nature. Yet during the Renaissance, Western man disconnected himself from Nature. In the celebrated correspondences between the microcosm and the macrocosm, man was not conceived just as a component of Nature, albeit at the apex of creation, but as its mirror and counterpart. The terms involved in analogies can easily become interchangeable. Man acquired empowering dimensions, while Nature was anthropomorphized: it had a constitution that resembled human anatomy, as Leonardo da Vinci's notes from the beginning of his *Treatise on Water* point out, and being an equivalent to man, it could be treated as humans treat other humans: admiring and praising them, but also turning them into objects of exploitation, enslavement and mistreat.² The core of this new vision, which finds its most articulate expression in Giovanni Pico della Mirandola's *Oratio*, was the assumption that man was the measure of all things, an admirable being, entitled to become Nature's lord and master. According to Pico's rewriting of *Genesis*, Adam was created in indetermination but endowed with free will and the capacity to fashion himself as he wished. Pico does not see any limitation to man's freedom, who has no female partner in his version and commits no original sin. Given these premises man can thrive through philosophy and the practice of natural magic (the ancestor of natural sciences), which enables him to overpower Nature. This philosophical justification is at the root of the successive emancipatory projects of modernity promoting man's artificial culture, turning Nature into his object of study, the source of prime matter for his sophisticated inventions and lastly his waste dump.

In response to Laius' behavior, King Pelops cursed him to be annihilated twice by his own son: physically and symbolically, as king of Thebes and husband to the queen, for his son would kill him and marry his own mother. In Greek mythology Apollo turned this curse into a fate that would strike three generations, but even in a non-religious approach the conclusion is that human acts become the oracles of their future, as none is without consequences, or as Sophocles put it: *Time is an all-seeing eye/That searches out hidden guilt* (Sophocles, 45). The human agent is not able to foresee the outcomes of his actions. In antiquity there was anxiety about the unpredictability of human acts, that is why oracles were constantly consulted. This anxiety continued during the Middle Ages,

when Christians thought they were sure about their afterlife possibilities, going to hell, purgatory or heaven, but were convinced that only God knew their immediate future here on earth and their distribution to one of the metaphysical spaces after death. Since the early modern turn of thought viewed man as the actual master of his life, the future ceased to appear impenetrable and frightening, instead it could be designed through calculus, the great empowering art used to study Nature. The confidence in calculation resulted in equating it to predictability and the conviction that the future could be controlled. Over the past two centuries science and business interests have planned the future, but *time's all-seeing eye* has proved that inventions entering mass production which were greeted as highly beneficial have had unforeseen negative effects on eco-systems and ultimately on human life itself. Humans have always been at crossroads, forced to make decisions for their future, but they are unable to predict the long-term effects of their choices, as the world is a complex system with many actors and factors in permanent mutation. Here is an example from the field of technology: the electric car was invented in the first decades of the 19th century, but the producers' choice was for the oil car. Nobody could have anticipated then the return of the electric car today, and the consequences of that initial choice: the dependency on oil, the enormous power of big oil companies, the pollution, the international re-balancing of forces based on this energy resource.

After Laius is warned by the oracle that the curse will become effective, he and his wife commit another unnatural act: they order a shepherd to take the newborn Oedipus, his ankles pinned together, and abandon him in the mountains. The shepherd who had more pity for Oedipus than his own parents, became the instrument through which fate was to accomplish itself. He gave the newborn to a shepherd from Corinth, who in his turn brought it to the childless royal couple, and thus Oedipus was raised by the king and queen of Corinth as their own child. Laius' attempt to avoid his fate only deepened his guilt and made the bad prediction possible. The sequence of doing worse when trying to do better applies to mankind's attempts to correct errors of the past. For the sake of hygiene, the lack of which used to cause many diseases, disposable goods accumulate as dirt impossible to do away with. Recognizing the polluting effects of coal to produce energy, humans have devised nuclear power plants, whose waste is more dangerous as it remains radioactive for thousands of years.

Until the day when at a banquet a drunken man tells him that king Polybus and his wife Merope are not his biological parents, Oedipus grows up serenely as a young prince. This disclosure makes him feel 'very hurt, angry and insulted' (Sophocles, 29) and even if his parents reassure him, he goes secretly to Delphi to inquire the oracle about his identity. The god does not answer his question but tells him through the priestess that he will kill his father and marry his mother. The oracle's silence about his identity is significant. According to authors like Pausanias, in the fore-temple at Delphi there was an inscription that said "Know thyself" (*Description of Greece*, 10.24).

The oracle seems to have given hints about future actions, but the maxim implies that self-knowledge is essential to self-guidance, and a possible implication is that it depends on the person to go along with the prophecy or escape it by exerting reasoned self-control. Oedipus chooses to go along with the prophecy, thinking he can avoid it, just as his parents had done, and this approach contains a contradiction. He decides not to go back to Corinth, “so that those dreadful prophecies/ Could not possibly come true” (Sophocles, 30), which means that he takes for granted that king Polybus and queen Merope are his parents, without further inquiry into his origins, and heads towards Thebes. On the way he gets in conflict with travelers coming from the opposite direction: an old man in a carriage and his escort. The old man is king Laius. The conflict flares because the old king wants Oedipus to free the way, and when he refuses he is barged in by the driver and struck by Laius “with his two-pronged stick” (Sophocles, 30). At that point Oedipus reacts in uncontrollable anger and kills both Laius and his men, except one who manages to run away and will act as a witness later on. The incident highlights the similar behavior of father and son and the lack of communication between generations. Both Laius and Oedipus act impulsively motivated by arrogant self-love and none of them attempts to engage in a dialogue with the other, none of them reflects minimally before committing violence. Thus, the first part of the prophecy accomplishes itself.

This part of the story prompts reflection on how many people go along with the gloomy forecasts regarding the health of our planet, but think secretly they can avoid that future, without taking orchestrated action to change it. Arrogant self-love and lack of reasoned self-control characterize *homo sapiens*, in particular after the scientific revolution and the development of capitalism have given him the instruments to live longer and better, at the cost of his estrangement from nature. There is a thoughtless impulsivity in the way every new device is embraced, as if it were the solution to all our problems and sons act like their fathers or more recently fathers imitate their sons in the use of technology, following patterns they do not care to question or take a distance from.

One of the clues to humans’ irresponsible behavior toward the environment is the question of identity, which is central to Oedipus’ story. After leaving the oracle of Delphi without finding out who he actually was, and after killing Laius and his escort, the hero reaches Thebes and finds a city terrorized by the Sphinx and depressed by the news that their king had just been killed. Oedipus decides to challenge the Sphinx, burying deep in his conscience the recent murders he had committed, that do not bother him until many years later, when he is unmasked by the prophet Tiresias. The sphinx is a hybrid: head and breast of a woman, body of a lion, eagle wings and in some versions, a serpent tail, a sort of compendium of mother nature’s forces. She asks Oedipus what is the creature that walks on four legs in the morning, on two at noon and on three in the evening, having one nature and yet constantly changing. Oedipus answers: the human being, first a child, then an adult and finally

an old person. Defeated by Oedipus' intelligence the Sphinx threw herself down from a rock according to the myth or was 'shot down in full flight' by Oedipus in Sophocles' version (44). Natural forces succumb in front of this strange being, that defies its divisions into well-defined species by transmuting with every new stage in his life, and proves as Oedipus does, to possess the mind that grasps his own transformative nature. The self-confidence Oedipus lost when he found out that he might not be the natural child of Pelops and Merope is restored when he is offered the throne of the city and the widow of king Laius as a wife for having saved it from the terror of the Sphinx. Inquiring into his original identity no longer matters: he has a new strong identity, earned not by his origin, but by his own intelligence, he has political power and the gratitude and admiration of the citizens of Thebes. This newly constructed identity is a social validation of his intelligence, but it leaves apart both his biological history and his murderous deeds.

The issue of identity has been amply addressed over the past decades, mostly as a socially recognizable form of identification, based on race, religion and gender but the debate has turned rapidly into schematic ideology and label thinking. Moreover, humans identify now on their social media through their likes and dislikes, superficially distributed between pictures of landscapes, animals, fashion gadgets and rudiments of political, economic or scientific ideas. They construct an identity on internet, which they expect to be socially recognized, but is sometimes based on complete falsity, sometimes on shallow opinions on true or invented facts. The confirmation bias proves that *homo sapiens* does not like to be contradicted, the self-celebratory attitude inaugurated with the Renaissance is stronger than ever, and it produces legitimizing self-confidence but also obscures deep self-knowledge. Human subjects do not admit their capacity to misjudge, mistreat, or directly harm, in spite of the fact that this capacity lies deep within each and every of us, as it did in Oedipus, and as the experiments and researches of Philip Zimbardo have proved (Zimbardo, *The Lucifer Effect*). Self-celebration leads to self-ignorance: it deliberately pushes the dark side of human nature to the secret galleries of the mind, as the case of Oedipus proves (Sophocles, 7).

This explains partially the estrangement from responsibility as far as environmental damages are concerned. Another explanation can come from the way we use our reason, which again is illuminated by the story of Oedipus. He is the hero who deciphers the enigma proposed by the Sphinx, using his mental capacity to brilliantly solve problems. The riddle refers to the general features and ages of mankind, not to the specificity of his own self. His reason is directed outwardly, to the world, not inwardly towards his inner reality. This is further confirmed when the plague breaks out. The distraught citizens of Thebes ask for his help, trusting his ability to figure out solutions. Oedipus sends his brother-in-law Creon to the oracle and finds out that the city suffers because king Laius' murderer lives in it unpunished. Consequently, the protagonist promises to investigate and punish the

author of the crime and even puts a curse on him, completely ignoring he is cursing himself. The human paradox illustrated by Oedipus is his search for truth outside himself ignoring the part of truth that lies within himself, the inference being that in order to function well, the human subject should be able to conjoin self-knowledge and knowledge of the world.

When he summons the prophet Tiresias to identify the murderer and finds out he is the cause of the plague and the destruction surrounding it, in Sophocles' play Oedipus responds first in aggressive denial, accusing Tiresias and Creon of plotting against him. Putting the blame on others and considering an accusation of crime as an attempt to undermine one's authority is what happens currently when people, in power or not, shun their responsibilities. This attitude applies perfectly to environmental issues, where blaming others is easier, since a type of plastic or chemical is produced in one place, used in another and transported yet to other areas it ends up polluting. Responsibilities are divided, but because of this they turn vague and evaporate. The fact that Oedipus is the cause of the plague and his self-induced punishment the solution to it reveals the political dimension of Sophocles' version of the myth and hints at a stark reality: the responsibility of men in power is greater than that of common citizens, as they can take paramount decisions and implement them. In the field of environmental problems, without political legitimacy that would turn ideas into concrete measures, any discussions on changing the present negative tendencies are null.

Oedipus is an admired and respected king, but proves to be a regicide, a parricide, and has an incestuous relationship to his mother, Laius' widow, who gave him 4 children. He trespassed, albeit inadvertently, every natural and moral limit. The idea that the political leaders' lack of moral integrity translates into natural hazards is very old and shared by various cultures, as philosophical and literary works of the past testify. The foundation of this belief may be the intuition that human power can affect the natural balance outside the human sphere as everything was conceived as interconnected, and this intuition manifested itself long before mankind had the means to actually impact Nature in a massive and enduring way. Yet if in the past people looked at the behavior of their leaders to explain natural hazards, now each person partaking in the modern way of life contributes to the change of the environment and has a share in responsibility.

Acting in ignorance of who he was, Oedipus harmed his city and himself. The core of his tragic status is that he is both the savior of Thebes from the terror of the Sphinx and its polluter, the agent causing the plague according to the ancient explanation of disastrous epidemics. Jean Pierre Vernant pointed out that Oedipus' ambiguity and reversal of status is not the result of double play but stems from 'the duality of his being' (Vernant, *Ambiguity and Reversal*, 477), which is much more complicated and pitiful than if he had deliberately played double. Oedipus who starts the investigation to find Laius' murderer and is ready to act as judge and bring justice to the city, discovers he is the

author of the crime, so he reaches the point where the detective and the judge are one and the same as the criminal. The conclusion is that roles and functions are zeroed out when natural limits are ignored.

It is precisely an analogous confusion of roles and directions that makes the approach to environmental damage impossible to extricate. On the one hand, life sciences have recovered the natural roots of the human beings, reintegrating them into Nature. This is a good premise for the realization that unless the entirety of Nature is saved from damage, humans may not survive. But at the same time, we live in the most technological, chemical and radioactive era humankind has ever experienced and our present lifestyle cannot be conceived outside of this framework. Moreover, the very life sciences use technology to modify life forms, taking control over the evolution of our species, which means distancing humans once more from their natural roots. This is also confirmed by replacing human agents with computers and robots, turning them obsolete for certain jobs. So, in his race to become Nature's lord and master, man has reached the stage where he thinks he can control everything through technology and algorithms, but he risks being overpowered by his own creations as historian Yuval Harari is warning in his book *Homo Deus*.

Oedipus is accused of mental blindness, but how free is he in his choices, since everything seems to be pre-determined and every action takes him closer to the fulfillment of prophecy? The question of freedom of choice is very substantial today, when every new achievement enters global production, acquires financial relevance, and marketing and publicity induce consumers to buy it. In addition, it has become obvious that the internet can easily manipulate the way people look, vote or think. The unlimited human freedom Pico proclaimed, the freedom for which revolutions and wars were fought, has gradually turned into new forms of mental enslavement and the oddity is that all this has been obtained in the name of emancipation from social, political or biological restraints. How can self-examination and self-guidance occur when the mind is not free?

Nature is paying the price of our emancipation, but we are part of Nature, so we cannot escape the consequences of our own decisions and actions. Like Oedipus we are potential saviors of the Earth from irreversible damage and simultaneously the very agents causing it. In Sophocles' play the only solution for Oedipus to get out of that conflicting condition as savior and polluter of the city and restore the balance is self-annihilation by stepping down from the throne, asking to be exiled and using Jocasta's brooches to blind himself, paying thus in the flesh for his mental blindness. This is expected to placate social unrest, wipe off the plague and is also an admission of responsibility for his own acts, albeit some were performed unknowingly.

There is no sign today that we honestly profess *mea culpa* for depleting the planet, or that we deeply recognize our paradoxical condition as potential saviors and actual polluters of our habitats.

Additionally, there is no possibility to renounce the many conquests of science and technology that have prolonged human life and made it more commodious. Nor is there any new economic system surfacing at the horizon, and soon we will transfer our responsibilities to computers and algorithms, missing the chance of assuming them directly.

Humankind belongs now to two competing and tightly interconnected systems: Nature and the artificial culture we have created. Human artifices cannot exist without the data and the resources Nature provides, while Nature bears the burden of an expanding technological civilization benefitting a rapidly increasing population. If human civilization ceased to exist, Nature would prosper. If Nature were seriously damaged by a nuclear war for example, humans would die out. Nature is creative and destructive, but not self-destructive. Mankind's artificial culture can be creative, destructive *and* self-destructive. And while Nature always finds the balance between creation and destruction, the human species has an innate tendency to excess, is impulsive and bellicose, greedy, arrogant, and blind to the consequences of its actions. Nature knows her ways, but humans are still an enigma to themselves. Will humankind self-inflict punishment for its thoughtless choices and deeds, or will an enraged Nature give us all a lesson of humility? Only *Time's all-seeing eye* will tell, to cite Sophocles again.

Notes

1. For the benefit of our discourse the chosen reference is *Oedipus the King* and not *Oedipus at Colonus*, where the perspective on the character changes.
2. "While man has within himself bones as a stay and framework for the flesh, the world has stones which are the supports of earth. While man has within him a pool of blood wherein the lungs as he breathes expand and contract, so the body of the earth has its ocean, which also rises and falls every six hours with the breathing of the world; as from the said pool of blood proceed the veins which spread their branches through the human body, so the ocean fills the body of the earth with an infinite number of veins of water..." (Leonardo, 45-6).

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