"Mine wicked, wicked eyes!": Aristotle on Responsibility and Forgiveness in Sophocles' Oedipus Trilogy

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Among the actions of which men are capable, forgiveness is perhaps one of the noblest and most complex. Many tend to associate both the origins of and emphasis on this action with the Christian tradition, which, because of the allegedly unavoidable sinfulness of mankind, views it as necessary for salvation.[1] Hannah Arendt, though not a Christian, attributes the "discovery" of the role of forgiveness in the realm of human affairs to Jesus of Nazareth,

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[1] See, for example, Jesse Couenhouen, "Forgiveness and Restoration: A Theological Exploration," 148–170. One might want to compare Montague Brown, "St. Thomas Aquinas on Human and Divine Forgiveness," 1–8, where the author does acknowledge that Aristotle has spoken about forgiveness, but finds his examination severely limited in light of the more extreme form of forgivness found in Christianity.

who maintained that men, not just God, have the power to forgive.[2] Forgiveness, as she sees it, is that act whereby the irreversibility of actions, and their sometimes unpredictable consequences, are released from the never-ending chain of reaction and revenge.[3] What distinguishes forgiveness from every other action is its power to heal rifts between human beings in a community, rifts which stem from the fact that it is impossible to know with certainty the long-term consequences of one’s actions. Although the forgiveness exemplified by Jesus of Nazareth is certainly not merely political and is not confined exclusively to the realm of *human* affairs, this is, nonetheless, the manner in which Arendt appropriates Jesus’ insight for her own purposes.

Contrary to this popular opinion about the origins or the “discovery” of the capacity of forgiveness, Aristotle dedicates a significant amount of time to the issue in his *Nicomachean Ethics*.[4] Although displaying many similarities to Arendt’s analysis, Aristotle’s treatment of the subject diverges in some important areas. While both maintain the importance of forgiveness for the proper functioning of political communities, they seem nevertheless to disagree on the extent to which it is effective and the types of situations in which it is appropriate. The laws, in Aristotle’s understanding, serve the function of putting an end to the long chains of reaction and revenge that characterize a lawless state of affairs, but they do fall short of this goal in certain situations. Forgiveness becomes necessary when laws fall short of actualizing this goal. Forgiveness is, for Aristotle, a sort of “sympathetic understanding,” or *sungnomika*, where one not so much “heals a rift” between individuals in a community, as Arendt would have it, but rather comes to understand and identify with a person who, either on account of force or ignorance, finds himself committing an action the particular context and motive of which he does not recognize as his own—that is, an action that he does not recognize as stemming from his own person. To forgive, one must determine whether the person in question is responsible for his action, and if so, whether this responsibility is mitigated by the particular context.

Arendt’s analysis of forgiveness and its role in human affairs appears, at least in *The Human Condition*, to develop out of an awareness of the tragedy of

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[2] Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 238.

[3] Ibid., 240–241.

[4] All citations of Aristotle's *Ethics* refer to the translation of Robert C. Bartlett and Susan Collins.

the human condition. As she treats the topic in the context of a discussion of human action in the sphere of freedom, she, unlike Aristotle, makes no mention of forgiveness for actions performed through compulsion or force; for the latter would not constitute, in her view, an action in the full sense of the term. An action taken due to compulsion or force is not an action since the realm of action is precisely the realm of freedom, where people come together in a public arena to freely display who they are and what they are capable of. More precisely, her analysis centers on the notion of ignorance, and seems to suggest that *every* human action is undertaken in ignorance of its full context and ultimate consequences—especially in the modern world, where humans through technology have unleashed forces hitherto unknown and unseen on earth, and the long-term consequences of actions committed are now largely unknowable.

This argument seems rather plausible, as it might be impossible to know the infinitude of effects, extending into a boundless future, and the infinitude of conditions that constitute an action, which arise out of an immeasurable past. When we come to act in the world, we bring our past along with us. Because our minds are limited, it is hard, if not impossible, to account for all of these particular variables which determine or condition us to act in one way rather than another. This same limitedness prevents us from knowing for certain the long-term effects of the things we do, which extend not only past the action itself, but even beyond our own lives.

One is perhaps reminded here of the situation of Oedipus, who though intending to act virtuously, brings about the most terrible of results, with both long-term and short-term consequences for the political community. One only has to look at the fate of Thebes after Oedipus' self-exile and death, which is characterized by civil strife, fratricide, and general instability.[5] Arendt might suggest that the insight contained in this extreme example is that every human being, no matter their origins, is caught in the grips of a fate he or she does not completely intend to live out. In the modern world, it is no longer the gods who determine our fates, but the principle still applies. For her, only forgiveness can make the tragedy of the human condition—which arises because we fulfill our fates through ignorance of how to avoid them—worth positively affirming, as it can preserve the human relationships that

[5] See Sophocles' *Antigone*.

make community possible and which have been destroyed by the unpredictability inherent in our actions.

Aristotle comes at the issue from another angle. He would emphasize that one must forgive *when* one ought, *for the things* one ought, *in relation to* the people one ought, *for the sake of* what one ought, and *as* one ought (1111a1–10). His analysis, although undertaken at a level of abstraction removed from any concrete situations, affirms the necessity of knowing the particulars of a given situation, both the particulars of the action being forgiven and those of the one forgiving. A person who is in a position to forgive another must assess not only the concrete circumstances of the person to be forgiven—Was he involuntarily drugged? Could he have possibly known who he was killing?—but also his own circumstances. Will this act of forgiveness benefit or harm the political order? Will it prevent or promote instability? Will citizens or subjects begin to believe the laws are too lax or too rigid? The person in a position to forgive must ask all of these questions. In contrast to Arendt, who suggests that there is an involuntary and unpredictable element in every action, since its outcome and previous history are mostly unknown, Aristotle affirms the capacity of the human to act voluntarily, knowing the particulars of a given potential action and choosing to carry it through. According to Aristotle, only in this way can one attribute any sort of responsibility to individuals as the origin of their own actions.[6] Aristotle thus allows for knowing the particulars of an action and still choosing poorly based upon this knowledge. This knowing constitutes the root of responsibility.

Further, there is more to the difference between Aristotle and Arendt than is apparent at first. It is true: for both Arendt and Aristotle, the themes of human responsibility and forgiveness are critical for a proper assessment of the health, or lack thereof, of any human community. The health of a polis or state, one could say, is in direct proportion to the extent to which it can forgive those who violate its laws. However, the key issue is how Aristotle determines whether an individual should be forgiven. Is it humanly possible to know the

[6] Arendt obviously does not believe there is no such thing as human responsibility. See her more in depth discussion of these issues in the collection of essays entitled *Responsibility and Judgment*. There is, however, a major difference in focus between her discussions of action in the *Human Condition* and her discussion of responsibility in *Responsibility and Judgment*. Her focus in the former work seems to be on the unintended long-term consequences of action in the realms of science and technology, while in the latter she is simply talking about political responsibility and the necessity of resisting totalitarian governments.

infinitude of particulars that constitute a given action? Or is forgiveness merely a function of the political order, something simply with practical or pragmatic value? Does he merely assert that there is a distinction between voluntary actions on the one hand, which are subject to praise and blame, and involuntary actions on the other, some, but not all, of which are liable to be forgiven? Or is this issue more complex, especially when considering a concrete situation like that of Oedipus? Determining which actions are forgivable, and why they are forgivable, is a sticky problem. So, the following two problems emerge: first, in light of Aristotle's and Arendt's analyses of forgiveness, what is the role and what are the limits of forgiveness in the tragedy of Oedipus? And second, how does the situation of Oedipus perhaps point toward different understandings or degrees of forgiveness?

We must first delve more deeply into Aristotle's understanding of the voluntary, involuntary, and the equitable since each term is crucial in a discussion of forgiveness. Aristotle mentions in Book 3 of the *Nicomachean Ethics* that only involuntary actions are subject to forgiveness (1109b31). In these cases, someone does what he ought not do because the matters involved in the action surpass human nature and could be endured by no one—for example, in the case of extreme torture. These involuntary actions can be split into two groups: those that take place on account of force and those perpetrated through ignorance. A forced action is one whose origin and agent is external to the person involved, where the latter contributes nothing, or almost nothing, to the action (1110b1–5). Beginning with this very general definition of forced action, Aristotle then dives into some of its complications, since it is not at all clear what kinds of specific actions are determined by force. Asking whether noble and pleasant things are capable of forcing our actions, he quickly dismisses this notion because it would suggest that every action in human life is forced (1110b13–18). For an action to be forced, there must be involved in it some physical or psychological compulsion which a human being, under any circumstances, could not possibly resist.

The other cause of involuntary actions is ignorance. Aristotle distinguishes between acting *on account of* ignorance and acting *in* ignorance. In the latter case, one commits an action in a certain cloudy state of mind, either resulting from excessive anger, passion, or inebriation.[7] These sorts of

[7] To point ahead to our discussion of tragedy, one might perhaps think here of Agave, who in Euripides' *Bacchants*, murders her son Pentheus while under the spell of Dionysus.

actions are not necessarily involuntary and subject to forgiveness since the person in question can be said to have voluntarily chosen to put him or herself in such a cloudy state of mind—for example, he orshe voluntarily chose to become intoxicated. But this example raises perhaps the biggest question in Aristotle's analysis of human responsibility and the voluntary. Could one possibly say that the person in question, through a regressive etiology going back to his or her early childhood, is not responsible for his/her being in such a state as to voluntarily choose to put him or herself in the cloudy state of mind that would lead to acting in ignorance? It seems one could trace this lineage of causes and cloudy states of mind back to the birth and improper rearing of the person in question, who acts badly voluntarily as a result of previous *involuntary origins*. If this were the case, then everyone would be subject to at least partial forgiveness for their ignoble actions, insofar as they have not deliberately chosen their origins. The concept of *fate,* for good or for ill, would seem to lead in this direction, since it highlights the extent to which human actions, and their results, are out of human control. One is here easily reminded of Oedipus, who fifteen years prior to the events in *Oedipus the King*, learns of his fate from the Oracle of Delphi. Despite all efforts to evade his fate, Oedipus's end is contained in his involuntary beginnings.[8]

> But what does it mean to act on account of ignorance? This matter is much more complex. The idea that fate in a way exculpates individuals from their bad actions perhaps reflects too much of a modern, post-classical understanding of human responsibility and natural determinism. Aristotle has much more to say on this matter. Taking another stab at the issue, he uses the terminology discussed so far to make some further distinctions: Everyone who is corrupt, then, is ignorant of what he ought to do and to abstain from; and through this sort of error people become unjust and bad in general. But one does not wish to use the term involuntary when somebody is ignorant of what is advantageous; for the ignorance involved in one's choice is the cause,

[8] One might ask whether fate is the same thing as personal history or whether fate and rearing are intertwined. While a full exploration of this question is beyond the scope of this paper, it would be correct to say that in the case of Oedipus they are inextricable. Although one could say that Oedipus's fate could not be avoided in spite of his rearing and foreknowledge, the whole point of the story is that his parents mistake the actions that would avoid his fate for the actions that actually fulfill it. His fate is fulfilled *precisely because* his parents take due measure to avoid it. In this sense, personal history and fate cannot be separated. They simply play ironically on the dark background, of which we are all ignorant, that follows one throughout life.

> not of what is involuntary, but of one's corruption. Nor is the ignorance of the relevant general principle the cause of an act's being involuntary.(1110b28–35)

Here, Aristotle acknowledges that every corrupt human being acts both in ignorance and on account of ignorance of what ought to be done. Through habituation in choosing in ignorance, this person has become incorrigible. But unlike an educable or decent man, who knows what is advantageous but sometimes errs involuntarily on account of ignorance as to the particulars of a given situation—which would be to act on account of ignorance—the ignorance of the corrupt man does not lead to acting involuntarily, since he could easily know the particulars of his circumstances if he tried. His ignorance leads only to the perpetuation of his corruption.

Aristotle here explicitly states that ignorance of a conventional or general ethical principle—for example, the prohibition against incest—is not the cause of an involuntary action. This is a subtle distinction. There can be ignorance of general unwritten laws and there can be ignorance of the particulars of a given action in which the unwritten law is enacted. The former, though perhaps resulting from an improper upbringing, does not make an action involuntary, and thus cannot be forgiven. The latter, as long as the individual displays the requisite amount of effort in knowing the particulars, is involuntary and thus forgivable. What distinguishes Oedipus from a thoroughly corrupt man is the fact that he knew, and attempted to act on, the general unwritten law prohibiting incest. Indeed, he deliberately leaves Corinth for Thebes so as to avoid trespassing this law. Oedipus is caught in the grips of fate, insofar as he could in no way have known the relevant particular details which led to the murder of his father and incest with his mother. No one, with the exception of a drunkard at dinner in Corinth, ever mentioned the possibility that Polybus and Merope were not his parents. Through the very same fate, he knows the general unwritten laws of virtuous action, but is unaware of the particulars of the situation in which they can be applied.

However, one must not overstate Oedipus's virtue. A man who, in a state of rage, kills a random traveler at a crossway for not giving up the right of way, could hardly be said to be prudent or thoroughly virtuous. One wonders why Oedipus, knowing his fate, does not refrain from killing *every* man in *every* context, since any man could possibly be his father. He thus seems to be neither completely corrupt nor completely virtuous. Although Oedipus is an extreme example, one could say that the perfectly corrupt man,

in contrast, would neither seek to avoid committing an action contrary to a general unwritten law—since he would not be aware of it—nor would he concern himself with the particulars of a given situation that would determine their accordance or discordance with it. This thoroughly corrupt man would not seek to avoid killing his father, nor would he be aware that this action is wrong.

The problem of Oedipus is unique to the extent that, in Aristotelian terms, it presents a man with full knowledge of the way a person ought to act—indeed, part of his name, *oida*, means "I know"—and one who endeavors to act on these general unwritten laws, but who nevertheless commits a series of deeds the horror of which is beyond even the capacity of the corrupt man to conceive. This complicates the situation of Oedipus to an extreme degree. One can certainly hold him responsible for killing his father, since he imprudently acted in a fit of rage against an apparently minor offense. Yet, one cannot hold him responsible for *knowing* that this was his father, since he did not. Nor can one condemn him for becoming King in his father's stead or marrying his mother, since these actions were not discordant with any general unwritten laws he was aware of at the time. Oedipus himself justifies his action in *Oedipus at Colonus*: "For tell me this: Suppose my father by some oracle was doomed to die by his own son's hand, could you justly put the blame on me—a babe unborn. … And if when born I met my father in a fight and killed him, ignorant of what I did, to whom I did it, can you still condemn an unwilled act?"[9] These actions were done on account of ignorance of the relevant particulars of the given situation, particulars which in no way could have been known by Oedipus at the time, and thus seem forgivable to a certain degree. These actions are involuntary to the extent that, had he known the particulars, he would not have carried them out.

In this analysis of forgiveness and Oedipus's tragic situation, another Aristotelian concept becomes important. In order for someone to be forgiven, or to be held to have acted involuntarily, the person in question must experience *pain* and *regret* for the immoral action (1110b18–25). One absolutely cannot forgive someone who neither desires forgiveness nor feels regret for what he has done. Oedipus, we can say, certainly experiences shame and

[9] Sophocles, *Oedipus at Colonus*, 305.

regret.[10] The despair he experiences when the unknown particulars of his situation are revealed is beyond question. Unlike the corrupt, or even decent man, Oedipus feels shame coming from the intense awareness of his moral limitations as a human being. In light of this problem, Ronna Burger makes the connection between human moral deficiency and *equity* as the source of flexibility in justice. She remarks that the decent human being would never feel shame in the performance of deeds for which he could not justifiably be held responsible, for "he is saved from a tragic sense of moral deficiency by his refusal to accept responsibility for unintended deeds, whether understood as effects of the God's manipulation or unconscious motivations." She later expands upon this issue: "His point of contrast would be Oedipus, whose lack of responsibility for his deeds done in ignorance does not lessen the intensity of the shame that leads him to blind himself in anticipation of meeting up with his father and mother in Hades."[11] Burger explicitly states here that Oedipus is not responsible for his actions. Neither would decent or corrupt men be held responsible if they had committed the very same actions. Unlike the latter two, however, Oedipus feels a deep sense of shame and agony for his actions. It is both horrible and irreversible. Oedipus, in this situation, seems to be the representative of mankind—that is, of every human being who, at one time or another, has committed an involuntary horrible action. Both the decent and the corrupt man, in Burger's account, appear to be either beyond or below the human being. The former feels no shame for actions for which he cannot justifiably be held accountable, and thus remains blind to the tragedy of the human condition. The latter never feels shame because the moral does not exist for him.

Oedipus's regret would seem to render his actions entirely forgivable, since his case now completely meets Aristotle's "criteria" for forgiveness. He acts on account of ignorance—as opposed to in ignorance—of the particular details of the situation which lead to his actions. He could in no way have known these particular details even if he had made more of an effort to do so. He experiences the proper amount of shame and regret once he discovers what he has done. He voluntarily exiles himself so as to punish himself for an action for which he was not totally responsible. The fulfillment of these

[10] See, for instance, the Theban Official's description of Oedipus's self-blinding in *Oedipus the King*: "'Wicked, wicked eyes!' he gasps, 'You shall not see me nor my crime, not see my present shame,'" 255.

[11] Ronna Burger, *Aristotle's Dialogue with Socrates*, 90.

criteria would certainly seem to make Oedipus one to be pitied and forgiven. But here is the crux of the issue: who can forgive him? In the case of Oedipus, where does forgiveness come from or from whom? Since the two people he most severely violated are dead—namely, his mother Jocasta and father Laius—what would forgiveness look like in his case? As I mentioned earlier, both Aristotle and Arendt define forgiveness in terms of the political. For Arendt, it is what aids in healing the rifts between human beings that are the inevitable result of acting in the public sphere. For her, it helps to preserve this public sphere. "The public realm," she says, "as the common world, gathers us together and yet prevents our falling over each other, so to speak. What makes mass society so difficult to bear is not the number of people involved … but the fact that the world between them has lost its power to gather them together."[12] Forgiveness is precisely what preserves this public realm or common world. For Aristotle, on the other hand, forgiveness is intimately linked to the equitable, as the particular virtue that makes up for the rigidity inherent in justice. Because laws are always general rules and the lawmaker cannot foresee all of the possible exceptions to these rules, there must be a mechanism in place that allows these laws to make the appropriate exceptions without at the same time undermining themselves. This is the role played by the equitable.

Burger demonstrates the etymological link between forgiveness and the equitable: "Correct decision (*krisis*) about the equitable in particular is the work of the so-called "judgment" (*gnome*), which Aristotle ties linguistically to consideration (*eugnome*) and forgiveness (*sungnome*) (1143a19–24)."[13] The equitable man is one whose understanding of justice and just action is not strictly determined by the law. One could say that he follows the "higher law" that the laws of the city aim to actualize but never do.[14] Forgiveness, here, would be that element of the equitable which allows a certain amount of breathing room in situations where the law would dictate harsh punishments. Because of the generality of the law, and its blindness to the specifics of certain situations, the equitable, in the form of forgiveness, makes certain concessions to human nature and mitigating circumstances.

[12] *The Human Condition*, 52.

[13] *Aristotle's Dialogue with Socrates*, 122.

[14] Eric Salem, *In Pursuit of the Good: Intellect and Action in Aristotle's Ethics*, 82.

The distinctiveness of Oedipus's crime is that it seems to transcend the categories of the laws of the polis. His self-exile and rootless wanderings between various poleis show that he, as an individual having committed an unprecedented action, cannot be contained within the political. The equitable, as a virtue which helps to preserve the political, cannot be applied in his case. As we see at the very end of *Oedipus the King*, Creon, the new ruler of Thebes and both Oedipus's brother in-law and uncle, neither wants to punish nor forgive Oedipus for what he has done. He allows Oedipus to punish himself with exile, aware of the fact that his deed transcends the self-understanding of the polis and its laws. Creon simply cannot act equitably in relation to Oedipus, for there is no penalty great enough for his action and he himself is not in any position to forgive.

For Aristotle, equity, in the form of forgiveness, helps make up for the generality of law. It prevents hard-headed clashes between equal claims to justice. It is what gives the law some breathing room, both in terms of financial transactions and punishments for crimes committed involuntarily. Yet, Oedipus's crime seems to go beyond this merely political understanding of equity and forgiveness. There is no forgiveness, in Aristotle's understanding, for Oedipus because his crime cannot be contained under any general unwritten law that the Lawmakers of the city would have been able to conceive of at the time of the polis's founding. So, although Oedipus' actions seem to meet all of Aristotle's "criteria" for forgiveness—to the extent that they were committed in ignorance, involuntary, and inspired regret—he cannot truly be forgiven. Arendt's understanding of forgiveness, as that which heals rifts between human beings, seems equally limited in this regard, since there are no other human beings to forgive him. Creon and the other citizens of Thebes can pity him but they cannot forgive him. Neither the polis nor any person within it is in a position to forgive Oedipus. The people with whom his actions have created rifts are dead, unable to heal what has been done, and the distance between himself and the polis cannot be bridged in terms of the polis itself. Oedipus seems in need of a higher form of forgiveness.

The case of Oedipus demonstrates the limitations of the notion of forgiveness understood as that which helps preserve political relationships or political stability. Therefore, his case points to two mutually exclusive possibilities: either his case is paradigmatic, and the human condition is, at its core, tragic, since the human soul contains elements which transcend the confines of the polis while simultaneously needing to live within it—that is,

the human condition is one of restless wandering between various civilizations and political orders, without end, solution, or salvation, since there is no forgiveness forthcoming from the divine for the conditions we have created for ourselves. Or, the case of Oedipus points beyond itself to a higher trans-political form of human community, which is preserved by a higher form of divine forgiveness or grace. While the implications of this possibility are beyond the scope of the current article, it would be true to say that this act of forgiveness would completely transform the tragic condition exemplified by Oedipus, and would put an end to his restless wanderings.

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