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## A FREE MAN IN SEARCH OF THE TRUTH ABOUT HIMSELF. AN ATTEMPT AT A MORAL-THEOLOGICAL REINTERPRETATION OF SOPHOCLES' "OEDIPUS THE KING"

### Abstract

Sophocles' "Oedipus the King" is one of the oldest and most famous tragedies that belong to the common patrimony of humanity. It raises issues to which each generation must find its own answer. Some of these issues become particularly relevant at moments when the foundations of common anthropological concepts are shaken, as they are at the present time. The reference to pre-Christian literary works can be a starting point for a dialogue with those who do not share the Christian worldview but are open to an exchange of reflections about man. In this article the author, starting from the specifics of the adaptation of the myth in the Sophocles' edition, through an outline of the wealth of interpretations of his tragedy through the centuries, arrives at a proposal for the moral-theological reinterpretation of this work in today's world with the help of two examples: the question of the origin of the person in the context of parenthood and moral responsibility in a world dominated by individualism and a weakened belief in actual human freedom.

**Keywords:** "Oedipus the King", parenthood, identity, moral responsibility, determinism

## WOLNY CZŁOWIEK W POSZUKIWANIU PRAWDY O SOBIE. PRÓBA TEOLOGICZNMORALNEJ AKTUALIZACJI „KRÓLA EDYPA” SOFOKLESA

### Abstrakt

*Król Edyp* Sofoklesa jest jedną z najstarszych i najbardziej znanych tragedii należących do wspólnego dziedzictwa ludzkości. Porusza zagadnienia, na które każde pokolenie musi znaleźć własną odpowiedź. Niektóre z tych zagadnień stają się szczególnie aktualne w momentach zachwiania fundamentów wspólnych koncepcji antropologicznych, jak ma to miejsce w obecnym czasie. Odniesienie do przedchrześcijańskich dzieł literackich może być wyjściem do dialogu z osobami niepodzielającymi światopoglądu chrześcijańskiego, ale otwartymi na wymianę refleksji o człowieku. W tym sensie w artykule autor, wychodząc od specyfiki adaptacji mitu w wydaniu Sofoklesa, poprzez zarys bogactwa interpretacji jego sztuki na przestrzeni wieków, dochodzi do propozycji teologicznomoralnej aktualizacji tego dzieła w dzisiejszym świecie przy pomocy dwóch przykładów: kwestii pochodzenia osoby w kontekście rodzicielstwa oraz odpowiedzialności moralnej w świecie zdominowanym przez indywidualizm oraz osłabioną wiarę w faktyczną wolność człowieka.

**Słowa kluczowe:** *Król Edyp*, rodzicielstwo, tożsamość, odpowiedzialność moralna, determinizm

## INTRODUCTION

Among the elements of ancient classical culture that have survived to our time and continue to shape social life, there is undoubtedly the theatrical tradition, in which tragedy occupied a special place with the ancient Greeks. They created a canon of this genre, comprising works “in which the center and driving force of the plot is the insurmountable conflict between the aspirations of an outstanding individual and higher forces: fate, the laws of history, social interest, moral norms, etc., leading inexorably to his defeat” (Sławiński 2002, 585-586). Tragedy makes it possible to vividly depict and stimulate reflection on the fundamental issues of human existence, especially in terms of the anxieties and contradictions that hinder it. To the ancients it helped to express feelings of disagreement with the experienced cruelties of fate, and thus in a way to overcome them, causing catharsis or “purification.”

One of the most famous Greek tragedies, which has seen countless adaptations, is Sophocles’ “Oedipus the King,” a play first staged in Athens in the fifth century BC. Its cultural success was not only due to the relevance of the themes taken up or its artistic qualities, but also to its reception over time. The questions and answers given by Sophocles (497/496-406 BC) to his contemporaries about man’s condition and fate appear in a new light at a moment of anthropological turmoil of our time. This turmoil concerns the very identity of man, stretched between uncertainty about his own gender (now treated as a rather fluid, ambiguous and multifaceted reality) and the question about the further course of evolution (which seems to be able to be controlled at last by man, as transhumanism promises). Of course, the question remains to what extent modern man is inclined to return to the works of antiquity, but it is certain that he too will not escape timeless questions, even if he does not consciously pose them to himself. This also applies to the younger generation, which in the age of the dominance of social media, i.e., information fast-food, may sometimes seem not to care about classical cultural currents.

We may then look at these timeless issues from the point of view of moral theology. In this way, it can more easily enter into dialogue with the post-Christian world, referring to the common cultural heritage of humanity, “untainted” in its genesis by the temporal term “after Christ.” This is all the more important insofar as progressive secularization is becoming increasingly distrustful and even hostile to any religiously motivated arguments. An appeal to classical culture could allow the essential contents of the Gospel to be conveyed if they were shown as apt answers to the inevitable problems posed by these timeless, albeit pre-Christian works.

This article is an attempt to apply a moral-theological reinterpretation to “Oedipus the King” in Sophocles’ rendition, not to provide another literary reading of the play, but to treat the play as a background for the aforementioned considerations. The problems highlighted cannot be adequately developed in this context, hence there is no place here to join the theological discussions undertaken

regarding these specific issues. But they are meant as an invitation to reflect on the possibilities of using the message of the play in the moral-theological confrontation with today's challenges.<sup>1</sup>

In order to properly contextualize today's reception of this work, the starting point is to show the specifics of Sophocles' adaptation of the myth. Next, some important aspects of the play's interpretation over the centuries will be outlined, so that the third part will focus on two examples of possible current moral-theological meaning of the work.

## 1. SOPHOCLES' INTERPRETATION OF THE MYTH OF OEDIPUS

The myth of Oedipus was taken up by various ancient authors<sup>2</sup> which resulted in different interpretations. But the individual authors had to refer to certain common elements of this original story. "Oedipus the King" is only a part of Sophocles' trilogy devoted to it (along with "Antigone" and "Oedipus at Colonus"), hence the myth itself covers more content than the work discussed here. The mythical narrative of Oedipus belongs to the history of the rulers of Thebes, the Labdacid family. Its descriptions can be found in relevant publications (e.g. Lubach 1992, 152-154; Libera 2012, 7-11). At the center of the myth is the tragic fate of the king of Thebes, Oedipus who, raised in Corinth by the orchestration of an inexorable fate, unwittingly kills his father Laius in an accidental conflict. Then, as a reward for defeating the Sphinx plaguing Thebes by answering its riddle, he becomes king of the city and marries the dowager queen, Jocasta, i.e. his mother, conceiving four children with her. When everything comes to light, Jocasta commits suicide and Oedipus in despair blinds himself.

In his adaptation of the myth (Libera 2012, 12-14), Sophocles departs significantly from the version of the elder Aeschylus, who treats the seduction by Oedipus' father, Laius, of Chrysippus, son of king Pelops, which resulted in the young prince's suicide, as the first fault in the Labdacid family, casting a shadow

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<sup>1</sup> On June 13, 2022, the play "Oedipus the King," directed by Jacek Raginis-Królikiewicz, won the Grand Prize of the 21st Festival of Polish Radio Theater and Polish Television Theater "Two Theaters 2022." Earlier, on April 25th of the same year, the premiere of this play took place at the "Television Theater of Polish Television" (TVP). The immediate cause for reflection on the relevance of the message of "Oedipus the King" from the perspective of timeless moral issues was the request of the director of the play, addressed to the author of this article, to help him search for aspects of this ancient work by Sophocles that could be included in a contemporary update. The aforementioned success of the Raginis-Królikiewicz edition of "Oedipus the King" can be taken as a sign of the vitality of classical literature.

<sup>2</sup> The works of some of these authors have not survived at all (except for their titles). In his general presentation, Laubach mentions Achaëus of Eretria (c. 484 – c. 401 BC), Nikomachos of Alexandria (5th century BC), Xenocles (5<sup>th</sup>-4th century BC), Meletus of Athens (5th century BC), but of greatest importance were the three great Athenian authors of the 5th century BC: Aeschylus (525-456 BC), Euripides (c. 480 – c. 406 BC) and Sophocles, situated chronologically between the latter two (Lubach 1992, 153).

over subsequent generations. Sophocles omits not only this theme, but also the wrath of goddess Hera, resulting in the arrival of the Sphinx, while an additional oracle for Oedipus becomes important in his interpretation. Another peculiarity of Sophocles' interpretation according to Libera is the abandonment of an external perspective in favor of an internal one (from the protagonist's point of view) and a retrospective narrative instead of a chronological one (the story is shown from the end). Sophocles presents a play on the general human condition, identifying his hero with every human being. Oedipus doesn't really know who he is, and what he knows from others may not be true. In this way, human identity as such is portrayed as fuzzy: he doesn't fully know where he came from. Such a man can obtain happiness by satisfying his needs and ambitions, or suffer unhappiness through suffering. Significant are the last words of the play, referring to traditional Greek thought and uttered by Corypheus as a final reflection on human fate based on the story of Oedipus, warning against conviction of one's own success before the end of the life (Sofokles 2012, vv. 1528-1530)<sup>3</sup>. The author demonstrates trenchantly that, on the one hand, the condition of happiness is to have offspring, but on the other hand, this offspring is exposed to misfortune. Life choices always remain subject to error despite good intentions. Hence Sophocles concludes in the unfinished "Oedipus at Colonus" – it is better not to be born at all or to return to where you came from (Libera 2012, 14).

In addition, the author of "Oedipus the King" refers to the version of the myth contained in the so-called "Delphic Oedipodeia," where, unlike the "Cyclic Oedipodeia," Oedipus does not remarry after the death of Jocasta, and where the role of god Apollo and the infallibility of his oracle are emphasized, as well as the unnaturalness of Oedipus' relationship with his mother (Chodkowski 2007, 13-15; Lubach 1992, 154).

Sophocles constructs his expressive characters according to the rules of ancient tragedy (Popławska and Rzehak 2008, 334-335). Oedipus' crime is the result of the so-called "tragic flaw," by which we speak of "tragic guilt." His misfortune is compounded by his own pride (*hybris*), triggering a conflict with soothsayer Teresias and Creon, brother of Jokasta, whom he accuses of plotting against him on the basis of the fortune-teller's initial words, revealing to him the identity of Laius' killer. Through *hybris*, he hastily curses the killer, namely himself. The plot thus contains a *peripeteia*, an "abrupt turn", where the outcome of the actions is opposite to the protagonist's initial intentions and culminates in the final catastrophe, which is Jocasta's suicide and Oedipus' self-mutilation as well as the curse that haunts their offspring.

According to the canon of rules, tragedy was supposed to evoke "pity and trepidation" in the audience. In Sophocles, this happens in the first place thanks to imbuing the play with "tragic irony": the protagonist gradually discovers the

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<sup>3</sup> In references to "Oedipus the King", I use A. Libera's translation. All the translations from foreign texts are mine.

truth, which the audience (familiar with the content of the myth) already knows (Chodkowski 2007, 29). Since Oedipus is neither a ruthless villain (he doesn't know what he's doing) nor an angel (he is prone to anger), the possibility of positive identification with him and thus the intensity of feelings in the audience is increased, as they are prepared to hear the whole truth. In one of the songs of the chorus, Sophocles can thus include imperatives relevant to religious Greek thought: "the need for purity in words and deeds as a condition for a happy life, adherence to the eternal truths of God, avoidance of the dangers caused by an attitude of pride – and finally, he warns that a lack of faith in the oracles undermines the foundations of religion itself" (Chodkowski 2007, 44). Oedipus' catastrophe manifests itself in contrast: the king blessed at the beginning by his people becomes a blind man completely dependent on someone else's will (Chodkowski 2007, 61), and the accumulation of misfortunes falling on the characters is so exceptional that the final message of the tragedy becomes additionally harrowing for the viewer, who notices the role of one's own fate, which is not originated by fault of one's own: we are not the masters of our actions, but depend on a higher power (Chodkowski 2007, 71).

In conclusion, it can be said that the essence of Sophocles' adaptation of the myth centers on this very statement: man is ultimately helpless in the face of his fate, but our suffering can be alleviated by humbly submitting to divine judgment.

## 2. SELECTED ASPECTS OF THE RECEPTION HISTORY OF "OEDIPUS THE KING"

The importance of Sophocles' work was determined by the artistry of its author, supported decades later by Aristotle's authority, who declared "Oedipus the King" to be "the most beautiful tragedy" (Chodkowski 2007, 67). The concentration of evil through the breaking of two taboos (patricide and incest) and the inevitability of misfortune as a universal motif of human existence also intensified the power of the play's impact on subsequent generations, influencing the fact that Sophocles' hero became a timeless archetype (Libera 2012, 5-7). Significant development of interest in the character of Oedipus and especially in the work of Sophocles began with modernity, especially from the 17th century, when the tragedy entered permanently into the canon of Western drama<sup>4</sup>. At first, however, the plays were rather loosely based on the Oedipus motif with allusions to modern times, and the situation changed only in modernism, at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, when a particularly large number of works about this character were written. Its importance was emphasized, among other things, by the reference in the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), while discussing the Apollonian and Dionysian drives as constitutive of Greek culture.

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<sup>4</sup>In the synthesis of the reception history of the Oedipus motif presented here, I refer essentially, except in the places specified, to the analysis: Lubach 1992, 156-181.

The popularity of the Oedipus myth and its recognition in mass culture in the 20th century was particularly influenced by the psychoanalysis of Sigmund Freud, who found in this character a model for his theory of the so-called “Oedipus complex,” i.e., the claim that in early human development there is a phase in which a person feels sexual attraction to a parent of the opposite sex and a desire to remove a parent of the same sex as a rival. According to Freud, the popularity of this play with contemporaries was due to their realization of the existence of subconscious, primal feelings in them – the desire to kill the father and to have sex with the mother (Chodkowski 2007, 47). In the case of boys, fear of the father eventually causes the suppression of the desire to have sex with the mother, through which the superego is formed, i.e., identification with the norms of the parents takes place. The theory of the Oedipus complex was later questioned, among other things, due to its naturalistic explanation of the processes of culture formation and the treatment of pathological phenomena of the upbringing period as a universal phenomenon (Dux 2019, 163-197). It can also hardly be said to have anything to do with the Oedipus myth, since the latter “actually has sex with his mother, and his fear stems from an oracle, not from an awareness of danger” (Chodkowski 2007, 47). This does not change the fact that the name “Oedipus complex” still exists in the popular consciousness.

The different treatment of the Oedipus myth in the 20th century was also conditioned by treating it as a costume for expressing issues relevant to modern times, thus going beyond the canon of mythological presentations in adapted ancient works. Some works of the time use only the motif itself, and not the character of Oedipus directly. In the 1950s, on the other hand, existentialism dominated in theatrical art, resulting, among other things, in the mythologization of drama.

In 1967, “Oedipus the King” was notably subject for a film adaptation by Pier Paolo Pasolini.

In Polish literature, Oedipus was not a popular character for a long time, as especially during the Partitions of Poland (Romanticism and Positivism) there was a demand for other heroes. The situation began to change from the period of Young Poland (the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries), and immediately after World War II the existentialist perspective reached Poland as well. In general, the work becomes attractive as a generalization of the drama of a man helpless in the face of his own fate. Moreover, in the 20th century, with the development of staging possibilities and director’s freedom, various creative stagings of “Oedipus the King” appeared, even without interference with the text of the drama. The tradition of such adaptations seems to include the recent television adaptation of Raginis-Królikiewicz, mentioned at the beginning, where the temporal context clearly influenced the presentation of the plague devastating Thebes using images familiar with the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic; moreover, apocalyptic elements were used in the film’s interpretation, and the character of Oedipus was portrayed along the lines of modern celebrities or popular politicians (Trójka 2022).

The centuries-long reception of the Oedipus motif, and in particular one of its original adaptations in Sophocles' work, indicates the interpretive richness of this tragedy, generating disputes among scholars up to today. It also turns out possible to challenge even seemingly permanently established hermeneutical canons. Thus, Wolfgang Schadewaldt, as early as 1956, among other things, considered outdated the treatment of the tragedy as a "drama about destiny," justifying it by the fact that Greek tragedy knows no absolute fatalism, i.e., *compulsion* to act (Schadewaldt 1956, 21-31). As the most important aspect of his interpretation, Schadewaldt points to the context of the work's composition: the '20s of the 5th century BC, in Athens during the Peloponnesian War, after the death of the Athenian leader Pericles due to a plague (!), in a situation of imminent collapse of the world known to Sophocles, including the "de-divinization" (*Entgöttlichung*) of social space. In view of this, there must be a cleansing through the tragic sacrifice of an outstanding man. He who is soiled by evil is at the same time one of the noblest, and this is what is so tragic. Similarly, according to this author, it is impossible to talk about the question of guilt with regard to Oedipus, nor of "metaphysical guilt," since he commits all evil acts unconsciously. Instead, one should talk about the drama of discovering the truth, and the tragedy lies in the fact that Oedipus' path to discovering the truth about himself is at the same time the path of his catastrophe. The motif of the thirst for knowledge, so strong in Sophocles' drama, also takes on special significance in the context of our modern information civilization. Ultimately, therefore, this tragedy can be regarded as a multi-threaded generator of extensive reflections on man: "Sophocles' 'Oedipus the King' is nothing less than a tragedy about man in general, a stirring *ecce homo* that still concerns us today" (Schadewaldt 1956, 31-32). The implication is that "Oedipus the King" can still agitate, because modern man, too, still remains a mystery to himself.

### 3. CONTEMPORARY EXEMPLIFICATION OF THE MORAL-THEOLOGICAL ADAPTATION OF "OEDIPUS THE KING"

The open questions of interpreting "Oedipus the King" raised and the current importance of anthropological issues, while there is an increasingly profound re-evaluation of traditional claims about human being, prompt moral-theological reflection on the basis of this work. The following exemplifies two areas where such reflection, in the author's opinion, is particularly relevant today.

#### A. Parenthood and the mystery of one's own origins

One of the timeless issues that comes to the fore in "Oedipus the King", regardless of its specific interpretation, is the question of parental relations or the mystery of one's own origins. The latter is the main driving force behind the plot of Sophocles' play. The unrestrained desire to know one's own past, which defines one's identity, can be seen as a sign of recklessness or disordered curiosity, but also as an expression of people's natural desire to know about themselves. Oedipus is an example of how this riddle can

impinge on one's entire life, making it inconvenient and demanding a solution, even at the cost of leading oneself to disaster. One may ask, then, whether it would not have been better for Oedipus to give up and remain in a "comfortable unconsciousness." Oedipus, however, is unable to abandon this pursuit. Even if he were to give up knowing the truth, having already known a part of it, he would have no more peace, and so his life would become unbearable (Sofokles 2012, vv. 1076-1078).

And it is at the moment of finding out the whole truth that Oedipus' greatness is revealed to the highest degree, as he makes an effort to face the most difficult question of his life – the awareness of who he is. Moreover, finding this out is impossible without determining blood ties.

In the current era, with the rapid advances in technology, the unambiguity in matters of kinship and descent that Oedipus achieved is becoming increasingly blurred and sometimes even impossible. As the dominant consumer culture puts well-being and the fulfillment of dreams first, and enduring human nature ceases to be the absolute point of reference and becomes instrumentalized, further taboos concerning the emergence of human life are being broken. As a result of genetic and reproductive manipulation, a human being today can have several parents (e.g., those who adopted him, those from whom genetic material was taken, or those in whose body the human being developed). In this situation, more and more people do not know who their father (and sometimes even their mother) is, with the very concepts of "father" and "mother" ceasing to be unambiguous, as it is increasingly necessary to specify what kind of parenthood is meant (e.g. "social," "genetic," "biological") (Błasiak 2017, 31). Of course, the problem of the disintegration of the ("traditional") family by the increase in divorce and patchwork families, and the multiplied disorientation in matters of family ties and kinship relations as a result, is a topic that would merit separate discussion in this context as well.

Gender in parenthood also seems to be playing less and less of a role now that there is open talk of "rainbow families" and no difference in raising children by homosexual and heterosexual couples. The constant broadening of the definition of the family to include more and more new social phenomena, however marginal, contributes to the general confusion about the morality of various experiments on this basic area of human life. It is already technically possible after age 60 to give birth to children, to freeze one's own egg cells in order to postpone conception "for later" (social freezing) and to carry out fertilization with sperm from dead men. There is talk of an artificial uterus to finally liberate women from the "tyranny" of their reproductive biology. Children can also be ordered according to a desired genetic profile as so-called "designer babies". One has to assume that the anthropological chaos that is the inevitable consequence of many of these phenomena, while already apparent today, is likely to manifest itself with even greater force in future generations.

The myth of Oedipus indicates that the desire to know (unbeknownst to themselves) one's parents – first and foremost the father, and with him perhaps

other relatives – is not some additional issue in life that one does not need to be particularly concerned about, but is one of the most primal human needs, the fulfilment of which depends on the realization of one's own existence. As a result of cultural changes, more and more people are now experiencing this desire.

Related to this issue is also the problem of continuity of generations. In Western civilization, with the spread of individualistic attitudes and the decline in the sense of responsibility for the community of which one is a part, the awareness that procreation is necessary for the survival of this community has also been shaken. A person, who from an early age is accustomed to the idea that he or she primarily has rights and that others have obligations, often takes no more interest in the community than as a source of some benefits supposedly due to him or her under certain contracts. The awareness that having one's own children influences those benefits to continue has been largely lost in younger generations. While in the Oedipus myth the strong desire to have offspring corresponds to the values of the time, nowadays post-industrial societies in general have a skeptical view of procreation, being already experienced in ways to avoid conception or get rid of its effects.

Without recalling at this point the well-known teaching of the Church on the value of procreation and parenthood and their significance for the human condition, it is at least worth mentioning that the connection of sexuality with parenthood and with the identity of the person is a fundamental anthropological fact, if one agrees that personal experience from the moment of conception proceeds through the interaction of the male and female factors, without which fertilization cannot occur (Sgreccia 2019, 495). One can, of course, try to circumvent or obscure this fact by means of various techniques or the subsequent socialization of the human being, but this will, however, always be secondary to this primordial experience of humanity, that life has an intrinsic connection with the biological combination of genetic materials derived from man and woman. This primordially, in turn, forces us to at least reflect on the meaning of the human bipolarity and on the consequences of its rejection.

Oedipus is not wrong in recognizing that there is such a thing as an inappropriate relationship with his mother's body, and that this relationship decisively affects his entire existence. The signing of the body with sexuality also applies to the whole person, because the body cannot be separated from it. And it is precisely because the entirety of the person is integrally inscribed in bodily structures that the physical relationship between two people touches the depths of their personal identity, involving other dimensions of the person besides the body: the soul and the spirit. The complementarity of persons is a natural condition for the exchange taking place between them, the sign and actualization of which becomes bodily union. This complementarity conditions love, which consists of self-giving and which opens at the same time to the gift of new life (Melina 2009, 76-77). In this manner the unity of spousal and parental love is stated in the 1987 document on respect for human life in its origins of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith: "Spouses mutually express

their personal love in the ‘language of the body,’ which clearly involves both ‘spousal meanings’ and parental ones. The conjugal act by which the couple mutually expresses their self-gift at the same time expresses openness to the gift of life. It is an act that is inseparably corporal and spiritual. (...) In order to respect the language of their bodies and their natural generosity, the conjugal union must take place with respect for its openness to procreation; and the procreation of a person must be the fruit and the result of married love” (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith 1987, II.B.4).

Hence, there is an association in Catholic moral doctrine, which is oriented toward the integrity of the person, between sexuality and the complementarity of masculinity and femininity, as well as between this complementarity and parenthood, that determines the identity of successive human beings. This association helps to approach with renewed seriousness the motif of the restless search for the truth about one’s origins as the archetype of human attitudes in “Oedipus the King”, in order to recognize that this awareness belongs to the natural needs of human being, which cannot be disregarded.

#### B. Moral Responsibility vs. Determination by Fate

What in modern times fills in “Oedipus the King” with exceptional indignation and generates an internal protest in people accustomed to the narrative of “being the architect of one’s own fortune” (Szutta 2021, 37) is undoubtedly the question of Oedipus’ guilt, which is the subject of multiple interpretations (Chodkowski 2007, 76). At first glance, “Oedipus the King” surprises due to the concept of moral guilt regardless of (un)awareness of the committed act. After all, the heir of a culture built on the Judeo-Christian tradition has known at least since the time of the prophet Ezekiel (cf. Ez 18) the principle that punishment falls only on the perpetrator, not on his relatives. Moreover, in order to be fully responsible for one’s actions, one must be aware of them (Szutta 2021, 37). Therefore, it is all the easier to have solidarity with Oedipus, who bears no moral guilt for what happened to him (unless we focus on the unconscious murder of his father, which today we might call “exceeding the limits of self-defense,” but the mere fact of murder in this situation for the mentality of “Oedipus the King” time was not a fundamental problem).

In a world ruled by destiny, all this is irrelevant. Ancient fatalism pronounces the inevitability of human fate. But the story of Oedipus regarding the pre-determined nature of his actions is not so clear-cut as to treat his fate directly as a “tragedy of destiny” (Lubach 1992, 154-155). Indeed, on the plot of the drama, Oedipus fulfils acts of free will (he rules, makes decisions, investigates, etc.). The problem arises, however, when the audience discovers that there is a second plane, that of higher forces, which contains tragic necessity (which is not, however, pure determinism, for the hero’s actions themselves are free). It is this inevitability that requires that, in spite of all his (real) strength, intelligence, and freedom of action, the hero nevertheless turns out to be limited and weak in the supernatural order. Chodkowski finds here the universal and timeless message of the tragedy: “What,

then, is the lesson that can be drawn from the story of Oedipus, as presented in Sophocles' play? It is a lesson about the fragility of human being's fate and the limitation of their knowledge" (Chodkowski 2007, 76). One can also put it even more radically: "Modern person can seemingly do anything, and yet he or she stumbles at any chance, at any imperfection of probability. And this fall often turns out to be fatal" (Wesołowska 2005, 69).

Chodkowski also draws attention to an important distinction in Oedipus' guilt, present in the literature of the subject (Chodkowski 2007, 76-78): one can speak here not so much of *moral* guilt, but of *tragic* guilt. Oedipus had no knowledge at the time of his choice (therefore he could not bear moral guilt). Thus, in this view, the problem of (personal) responsibility is not posed at all. Oedipus' actions did bring him disaster in the form of a change of fortune (hence we speak of *tragic* guilt), but the evil that was done was already attributed to what he could have chosen.

The problem described can also be seen in the issue of regret and conversion, which are inextricably linked to guilt. In addition to the fact that Oedipus' personal moral guilt cannot be spoken of, it is also difficult to find in Sophocles, or in ancient Greek mentality in general, an adequate post-positive conception of regret (Jeremias, Eßer and Schröer 2010). Therefore, Oedipus cannot regret something that he had no idea about at the time of committing it, but only recognize his terrible fate and despair because of it. It's different in Christianity: where it is possible to attribute responsibility for specific actions to specific individuals, regret is a prerequisite toward conversion, a change of direction made possible by Christ's sacrifice.

Finally, it can be considered that it is Oedipus' greatness in his overwhelming pursuit of truth and justice that brings him disaster (Lubach 1992, 155). Undoubtedly, this natural human striving for truth is hampered today by the prevailing pluralism, relativism and cognitive skepticism about the existence of one truth. In the practice of many people's lives today, it also seems fundamental to ask whether the truth really "sets one free" (cf. John 8:32), or whether it rather becomes inconvenient knowledge, forcing one to reevaluate and change direction. When it comes to arguing about the most important things, establishing the main lines of social conduct, it sometimes seems that the risk of conflicts is too great to pursue general settlements. The very concept of man and his place in the world become the subject of such disputes. On the other hand, having gained more and more knowledge about reality, putting into our hands sometimes unprecedented means of controlling others and ourselves, we are forced to develop at the same time an ethical reflection that also includes the possible consequences of our own actions, so that our knowledge does not turn against us. This is why the pursuit of truth, however difficult it may be, is so necessary for a life worthy of the name "human," i.e. marked by conscious and free choices that actualize the unique dignity of man. Oedipus could therefore be a model of such a pursuit of truth, which may cost him dearly, but allows man to preserve his humanity.

However, if "fatalism" in the sense of the limitation of a weak person by higher forces would be reconcilable with the existence of free action, in the sense

outlined above, then some of today's tendencies in the social and natural sciences aim to derelict the latter, seemingly unshakeable *differentia specifica* of human condition as well. As Robert Spaemann aptly notes, in this model of determinism, the conditioning of natural phenomena by the laws of nature is transferred to the human psyche. As a result, human acts, hitherto considered to be manifestations of freedom, could be treated merely as the consequence of some neuronal interactions generated by an unspecified biological "nature," which would, in effect, make any ethics impossible (Spaemann 2006, 206-214). This monistic vision of person would be an exact negation of the Enlightenment affirmation of the human subject as an independent center of its own action. However, the reconciliation of human nature in the sense of the objective conditioning of the individual with the perspective of the person, i.e., the unique, subjective and free form of the realization of this nature, does not have to take place by rejecting one or the other, but can transpire on the basis of the mutual, symbiotic relationship of the two factors within the person. This is demonstrated by Spaemann when he speaks about the permanent relation of freedom to human nature, which thus transcends itself, but nevertheless remains itself in the act of individual realization (Spaemann 1973, 956-969). For this, however, it is necessary to abandon the modern paradigm of exploitation, i.e., unfettered domination over nature (both non-human and one's own nature) in favor of respecting its purposefulness (Spaemann 1973, 965). With such a paradigm of respect for nature, it is possible to affirm free will in relation to reason as the necessary conditions for the self-realization of person, called and capable of his own unforced response to God's saving initiative (Kokoszka 2005, 31-32).

The question of Oedipus' responsibility—regardless of the validity of such a claim in a moral sense, as outlined above—is also a question of the consequences of his own actions on those around him. Oedipus is concerned about the fate of his children, primarily his daughters, who are also marked by his disgrace as having been born of incest (Sofokles 2012, vv. 1486-1496).

The conviction of the disgrace caused by parents to their children, or that which weighs on subsequent generations due to the sins of their ancestors, is a good background for highlighting the Church's teaching in this regard. A particular field concerned with this aspect of the Oedipus story today is the question of the dignity of the emergence of human life, in the context of various immoral techniques of artificial procreation. Since "every person must be respected for himself: in this consists the dignity and right of every human being from his or her beginning" (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith 1987, I.6), in view of the accusations that are emerging that the Church rejects persons conceived in a "wicked" way, i.e. that contradicts their dignity, it should be emphasized that: "Although the manner in which human conception is achieved with IVF and ET cannot be approved, every child which comes into the world must in any case be accepted as a living gift of the divine Goodness and must be brought up with love" (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith 1987, II.B.5). Human dignity does not depend on the

circumstances of the origin of life, even if this fact itself is the result of a forbidden act. One cannot be deprived of this dignity, nor can deprive him- or herself of it nor can it itself be graded. However, this does not change the fact that the aforementioned circumstances can negatively affect a person's life and cause him or her suffering. Hence, the Magisterium sees the question of the consequences of a person's actions towards third parties differently from Oedipus: while no, even incestuous relationships or other acts affecting the identity of specific people, can take away their ontic dignity, the consequences of the sins of parents can injure their offspring.

This distinction in bioethical contexts can be illustrated as follows: "In the face of this manipulation of the human being in his or her embryonic state, it needs to be repeated that 'God's love does not differentiate between the newly conceived infant still in his or her mother's womb and the child or young person, or the adult and the elderly person. God does not distinguish between them because he sees an impression of his own image and likeness (Gen 1:26) in each one... Therefore, the Magisterium of the Church has constantly proclaimed the sacred and inviolable character of every human life from its conception until its natural end'" (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith 2008, 16). This does not mean, however, that all ways of bringing others into existence are correct; those which have their roots in acts that can cause evil are unacceptable: "Because the risks connected to any genetic manipulation are considerable and as yet not fully controllable, *in the present state of research, it is not morally permissible to act in a way that may cause possible harm to the resulting progeny*" (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith 2008, 26, emphasis in original). In this context, "Oedipus the King" becomes an incentive to rethink interpersonal relationships, which, although they affect the lives of individuals, do not completely determine them. The teaching of the Church may prove helpful here in overcoming extreme attitudes about human interdependence: the complete determination of an individual's fate by the actions of others, but also his or her absolute autonomy, divested of all relationality.

## CONCLUSION

As this article attempted to show, a return to the timeless themes addressed in "Oedipus the King" can prompt reflection on relevant moral-theological issues of today. This reflection can, on the one hand, lead to a current answer to the questions about personhood posed by Sophocles, and on the other hand, it can use his work to face new anthropological challenges on the basis of those questions, developing issues already noticed in the fifth century BC. At the same time, the philosophical and pre-Christian background of the work in question allows, by contrast, to see the specificity of the moral teaching of the Church to try to propose it anew, starting from the anxieties and aspirations that have always occupied the

human race. Such issues include the mystery of the origin of person and the whole complex of questions related to parenthood and the transmission of life, which determines the identity of human being, the various taboos that regulate this domain, as well as moral responsibility in the face of deterministic doubt in the reasonableness and freedom of human nature. While “Oedipus the King” brings to the fore many timeless intuitions, such as the necessity of knowing one’s own identity for the right development of human being, and the limitation of human acting due to factors beyond one’s will, Christianity brings its own unique linkage of human greatness and weakness through a directly proportional relationship: as an unnecessary being that may not exist and is dependent on other parts of creation, person is at the same time open to eternity and capable of free choices that realistically co-determine that eternity.

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