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The Sin of Oedipus

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Two inferences may be drawn. First, that Thucydides got his account of the battle from one of the *ἱππεῖς*, who saved themselves disgracefully; his bias against Cleon kept him from moderating in a critical spirit the partisan account of his informant. Second, that the Athenian democracy, indignant at the insubordination and cowardice of the *ἱππεῖς*, avoided using them afterwards unless in operations very near Athens, as against Decelea, or in conjunction with a democracy such as Argos. To their political fears they sacrificed even

great military advantage. This latter inference finds support in Aristophanes. In *Wasps* 288 (produced 422 B.C.), we read: 'There will come along a rich man, one of those who are betraying Chalcidice'; in l. 475 Bdelycleon, representative of young aristocratic Athens, is described as *ξυνὸν Βρασίδα*; in the Peace (421 B.C.) l. 640 the charge is said to have been brought against any aristocrats among the allies *ὡς φρονοῖ τὰ Βρασίδου*.

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THE SIN OF OEDIPUS.

(A defence of Professor Murray's translation of Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus*, ll. 1183-1185.)

ὦ φῶς, τελευταῖόν σε προσβλέψαιμι νῦν,
ὅστις πέφασμαι φύς τ' ἀφ' ὧν οὐ χρῆν,
σὺν οἷς τ'
οὐ χρῆν ὁμιλῶν, οὓς τέ μ' οὐκ ἔδει κτανών.

THE *Spectator* for May 13, 1911, contains a review of Professor Murray's new translation of the *Oedipus Tyrannus*,¹ in which exception is taken to his rendering of the above lines.

'Thou Light, never again
May I behold thee, I in the eyes of men
Made naked, how from sin my being grew,
In sin I wedded and in sin I slew.'

'The attribution of sin to Oedipus,' says the reviewer, 'destroys at once the entire interest of the drama. The idea of "sin" essentially involves that of moral guilt, and from moral guilt he is throughout absolutely free. The fact of his freedom is the very thing that makes his fate so tragic, and to put into his lips words which are an open confession of crime is to mar the whole effect of a great and almost stupendous work.'

This criticism makes somewhat lightly two large assumptions: (1) That Oedipus is 'absolutely free from moral guilt'; (2) that the idea of 'sin' is equivalent to that of 'crime.' In his first assumption the critic seems to have ignored the important allusion

to the case of Oedipus in Aristotle's *Poetics*, c. xiii., where the philosopher discusses the character of the ideal tragic hero. We must not be presented with the spectacle of virtuous men (τοὺς ἐπικεικίς ἀνδρας) brought from prosperity to adversity, 'οὐ γὰρ φοβερὸν οὐδὲ ἐλεεινὸν τοῦτο ἀλλὰ μιαιφόν ἐστιν.' In the view of Aristotle the character of the ideal tragic hero should lie between the two extremes of perfect uprightness and utter villainy:

ἔστι δὲ τοιοῦτος ὁ μῆτε ἀρετῇ διαφέρων
καὶ δικαιοσύνῃ μῆτε διὰ κακίαν καὶ μο-
χθηρίαν μεταβάλλον εἰς τὴν δυστυχίαν
ἀλλὰ δι' ἁμαρτίαν τινα τῶν ἐν μεγάλῃ
δόξῃ καὶ εὐτυχίᾳ, οἷον Οἰδίπους. . . .

In an essay appended to his edition of the *Poetics*,² the late Professor Butcher has exhaustively discussed the possible range of meaning which the term *ἁμαρτία*, especially as used by Aristotle, can cover. He finds Aristotelian authority for the use of the term *ἁμαρτία* in four distinct senses. (1) An error due to unavoidable ignorance of circumstances. (2) An error due to ignorance of circumstances which might have been known, and therefore to some degree morally culpable. Both of these would be classed as cases of ἡ καθ' ἑκάστα

¹ *Oedipus, King of Thebes*. Translated by Gilbert Murray, D.Litt., LL.D. London: Geo. Allen and Sons.

² *Aristotle's Theory of Poetry and Fine Art*. By S. H. Butcher. Second edition, pp. 310-15.

ἀγνοια. (3) 'A fault or error where the act is conscious and intentional, but not deliberate. Such are acts committed in anger or passion.' A man acts thus *ἀγνοῶν*, but not δι' *ἀγνοίαν*.

(4) 'A defect of character distinct, on the one hand, from an isolated error or fault, and, on the other, from the vice which has its seat in a depraved will . . . a flaw of character that is not tainted with a vicious purpose.' Now, all these different forms of *ἀμαρτία* can be attributed to Oedipus. (1) His ignorance was partially unavoidable, for he could not have known that the man whom he attacked at the crossways was his father. But (2) beyond that he might, had he not been too engrossed with his own ambition, have discovered his error and avoided the further complication of marrying his mother. (3) He launches an awful anathema upon the slayer of Laius regardless of the possibility that he himself, who had slain a man and was, according to prophecy, destined to slay his own father, might be the guilty person. In irritation at the reluctant revelation of Teiresias, he accuses Creon of the murder and denounces the prophet as an accomplice. (4) These errors spring from a naturally hasty and headstrong temper, which further lead him to an excited curiosity as to his true parentage. When the *dénouement* comes, the whole result of his hasty action and behaviour recoils with redoubled force on his own head. The punishment is, it is true, disproportionate to the offence. This, rather than the 'absolute freedom' of the hero 'from moral guilt,' is of the essence of tragedy. But the offence is increased and the resultant blow aggravated by that distinct defect of character which yet 'was not the determining factor in his fortunes.'¹

It may of course be replied that, whatever may be the meaning of *ἀμαρτία*, it does not amount to 'moral guilt.' But the expression 'moral guilt' belongs, not to Professor Murray, but to his critic. It remains, therefore, to examine the second assumption, that sin and moral guilt are equivalent terms.

It is usually stated that the Greek

ἀμαρτία has an intellectual significance which is foreign to the Hebrew conception of 'sin.' But, it is plain that the Hebrew conception included wrongdoing which was more or less unintentional, in so far as the doer was the victim of circumstance, or the agency of a higher power, or the doings of others. The Hebraic idea of the hardening of a man's heart by Jehovah lies at the root of this extended meaning of sin. The phrase which Sophocles with his well-known irony causes Oedipus to hurl at the blind seer, *τυφλὸς τά τ' ὦτα τὸν τε νοῦν τά τ' ὄμματ' εἶ*, might equally well have been spoken by Moses to Pharaoh or Jesus to the Pharisees. Oedipus, like them, has been subject to the divine blinding which prevented him from seeing, lest he should understand and turn again and be healed.

Again, from Hebraism through Christianity we derive the notion of original sin which is frequently present to our minds even when we use the term 'sin' absolutely. Original sin is essentially the consciousness of guilt which we share with others. The sins of the fathers are visited on the children not only through their physical inheritance but through that part of their environment which is sometimes called their social inheritance; the acts of one generation produce a change in secular circumstance which reacts on the next. We do not, it is true, inherit sin in the strict sense, but tendencies to sin and the consequences of sin. Yet we describe these facts by declaring that we are 'born in sin and the children of wrath.' Though the fault is not ours individually but that of mankind, we share the common sin of humanity, and the human in us cries out with the feeling of common guilt. The Greeks adumbrated these same facts in their doctrine of *Νέμεσις* and *Ἄτη*; and the task of the greater Greek tragedians was to face them boldly, and justify the ways of God to men—to exhibit, like St. Paul, the *δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ*.

Thus Oedipus can say that Apollo is the author of his suffering,² and almost in the next breath that

*κακὸς τ' ὢν κακὰ κακῶν εὐρίσκομαι.*³

¹ *Aristotle's Theory of Poetry and Fine Art*. By S. H. Butcher. Second edition, p. 314.

² Soph., *Oedipus Tyrannus*, 1330.

³ *Ib.*, l. 1397.

The deed is one and indivisible; he makes no attempt to distribute the responsibility between the god, his parents and himself; the prevailing cry is that he is altogether accursed; he is in more senses than one *φύς ἀφ' ὧν οὐ χρεῖν*. He was born in sin, though, at the time of birth, that sin which above all tainted his birth was not yet committed. If, then, the analysis which has been attempted here of the conception of sin and the associations of that term is correct, and the character of the Sophoclean Oedipus has not been misrepresented, the term would seem peculiarly well adapted to cover that blend of venial and culpable wrong-

doing which we find in the Sophoclean Oedipus. We must conclude that, far from being wrong in his rendering of the passage at issue, Professor Murray has hit upon the one word which could adequately sum up the position. If he has departed from the original, it is only to make clear what Sophocles left vague; but the Hellenic mind would no doubt read into the *οὐ χρεῖν* of the tragedian that conception of sin which Professor Murray, with his right apprehension of the import of the drama, has made explicit for the guidance of the English reader.

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NIC. ETH. IV. III. 15. 1123^b 31.

PROF. COOK WILSON'S article in the August number of this Review clears up certain confusions that had arisen regarding his interpretation of this passage, and especially of the words *φεύγειν παρασεΐσαντι*, given in a previous article (*Cl. Rev.*, August, 1910). He may be congratulated on having removed what seemed an almost comic incongruity in this notable piece of characterisation by finally establishing the following points: (1) That *παρασεΐν* may stand for *παρασεΐν τὰς χεῖρας*; (2) that what is denied of the *μεγαλόφυχος* is the whole content of the phrase quoted, *i.e.* it is not meant that, if he ran away, he would avoid swinging his arms like other people, but that he would not 'run away swinging his arms.' He is too dignified, and has too much contempt for danger, to do that. But this, again, does not mean that he would not in any circumstances retreat. May I point out that there is a *locus classicus* showing how a 'great-souled' man (though not exactly a *μεγαλόφυχος* in the Aristotelian sense) did and should, according to the Greek conception, 'retreat' without 'running away'? It is the well-known description of Socrates' behaviour in the retreat from Delium *ap. Plat. Symp.* 221 a ff. Alcibiades, who gives the account, was serving in the cavalry, and Socrates as a hoplite (*ὅπλα ἔχων*). In the general rout

Socrates was observed retiring (*ἀνεχώρει*) in company with Laches, and Alcibiades, who rode up to offer his assistance, had an excellent opportunity of watching him and noting his superior self-possession, as he marched along, in the familiar fashion, rolling his eyes from side to side, and 'making it clear to everyone, far or near, that whoso laid hands on him would meet with a stout resistance. The result was that both he and his companion escaped in safety. For it generally happens in war that, when men bear themselves so, the enemy take good care to leave them alone, and only pursue those who fly helter-skelter (*τοὺς προτροπάδην φεύγοντας*).' The advantage in respect of security gained by keeping cool in a retreat is not in Aristotle's mind, but the whole passage fairly illustrates his meaning, and the words just quoted from the Greek paraphrase the particular expression he uses. Further, it is clearly implied that Socrates kept his armour throughout the retreat. Now, although *παρασεΐν* does not actually mean 'to throw away one's shield,' as has sometimes been supposed, it might in the given context be taken to imply it, thus bringing in the idea so constantly associated in the ancient mind with a disgraceful flight.

With regard to the use of the aorist participle there seems to be still some confusion. It is hardly possible to bring