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Fate or Free Will? The Reception of Greek Religion in Jean Cocteau's *La Machine Infernale* (1934)

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Abstract

In the present article we propose to analyse the link between Greek religion and philosophical concepts of the human condition as a problem of reconciling determinism and at the same time free will, with its existential and moral implications. This issue has remained a matter of revision and discussion throughout the ages and latitudes within philosophy, but also in the literature, where through myths, these questions reappear, although in very different historical and religious contexts. We propose to approach these themes through the myth of Oedipus, immortalised by Sophocles in his tragedy *Oedipus Rex*, which Jean Cocteau, in the tragic interwar period, rereads and resemanticises, but without losing the essential question of whether there is an insurmountable destiny that imposes itself on free will.

Keywords: Cocteau; Sophocles; Oedipus; fate; free will; Greek religion

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1. Introduction

Within Western culture, there are certain recurring themes that always resurface and are revisited in the humanities and the arts, especially in philosophy and literature, which engage in dialogue with each other and with religion. In this sense, all of them address, in a more or less direct way, the theme of the human condition, in its natural and supernatural dimensions. In this sense, it is precisely Greek mythology that is the place of convergence par excellence for these three fields, where within a literary framework, but from a religious perspective, the deepest and most unfathomable themes of human existence are addressed, all of which become the subject of philosophical inquiry.

Myths are often associated with religious rituals and are considered to contain, implicitly or allegorically, a deeper truth about nature, human psychology, or the divine. This truth is transmitted in a coded language that needs to be deciphered, like allegories (Konstan 2021, p. 35). Myths tell sacred stories, which is equivalent to revealing a mystery and giving literary form to the irruptions of the sacred into the world since its creation (Eliade 1957, pp. 84–85).

And it is precisely the Greek tragedies, which are the dramatisation of myths, that always offer us reflection and analysis of a theme that is central to Greek religion and, in general, to Western culture: fate. From a Christian perspective, it is called providence, but both terms have in common the idea of a supernatural entity that guides and powerfully influences the lives of men. Particularly in view of the perception of evil in the world, the question arises as to what extent human freedom is independent of supernatural forces and whether man can change his destiny of his own free will or whether he can only accept it. This question also raises the issue of the evil that is suffered and of personal

moral responsibility in relation to numerous immanent and transcendent issues. Many of these were not initially formulated theoretically, but rather symbolically or allegorically, as Mircea Eliade asserts:

> Obviously, the metaphysical concepts of the archaic world were not always formulated in theoretical language; but the symbol, the myth, the rite, express, on different planes and through the means proper to them, a complex system of coherent affirmations about the ultimate reality of things, a system that can be regarded as constituting a metaphysics. (Eliade 1959, p. 3)

In Greek religion, also disseminated through tragedies, heroes are subjected to vicissitudes and suffering derived from an apparent determinism, while the inability of man to escape misfortune is emphasised, questioning the effectiveness of free will. However, Aeschylus' conservative approach is not the same as Sophocles' more moderate one or Euripides' questioning religiosity.

On the other hand, tragedies, with their moralising function, insist on showing that passion ungoverned by reason is devastating for those who suffer it and for society, which seems to indicate the existence and power of free will. In this sense, Kitto rightly asserts that the essence of classical poetry is extremely serious, since its salient quality is a sense of moral responsibility (Kitto 1961, p. 223). Likewise, Aristotle, in his Poetics (1453b), emphasises the fundamental importance of tragedies producing fear and commiseration in the audience,[1] that is, fear of suffering the punishment of the gods because of a *hamartia*, or personal fault, as the audience contemplates it on stage. Tragedies have a primary religious function in that they warn of the dangers of acting against the laws and designs of the gods.

On a supernatural level, tragedies also deal with man's relationship with the divine, prophecy and divine foreknowledge, destiny, and hereditary punishment. Greek tragedies are, in essence, literary expressions of Greek religion, which has profound psychological, historical, linguistic, artistic, and sociological dimensions, which often find resonance in modern interpretations (Eliade and Couliano 2023, p. 175), giving Greek religion and its literary manifestations an enduring relevance.

Therefore, the themes dealt with in the tragedies continue to be very present in contemporary philosophies of religion and literature, making it particularly useful to, on the one hand, explore how Sophocles addresses these issues in his *Oedipus Rex,* and to, on the other hand, with a view of highlighting the continuity and relevance of these issues throughout the history of thought, propose to bring into dialogue Jean Cocteau's play *La machine infernale* (1934)—a modern version of the tragedy of *Oedipus Rex*—with Greek religion and its philosophical components, mainly in relation to the exploration of the conflict between determinism and free will.

2. Greek Religion

Greek religion differed markedly from the Judeo-Christian conception, which is predominant in the Western world, so much so that there were those who rejected it as such, preferring to consider it a mere cult, that is, a set of ritual rules, and its myths as poetic fables (Vernant 1990, p. 8). This perspective constitutes a reductionist view of Greek religion, disqualifying it and separating it from the truly religious sphere it possessed. Furthermore, there are numerous analogies between Judeo-Christian monotheism and Greek religion, as concepts, such as fear of God, purity, and defilement, sacrifice, ceremonies in honour of the deity, and the direct influence of the divine on human life, underlie both.

Perhaps the most fundamental difference is the lack of a revelation as the basis for their beliefs. On the contrary, Greek religion is based on the customs or *nomoi* of ancestors that were inherited as a tradition, which legitimises them because they have always been practised (Vernant 1990, p. 12).

The conception of the gods is also very different, in that the Greek gods are also in the world, come from it, and did not create the world ex nihilo. The Olympian gods came into the world when it was already complete, thanks to the primitive power of Gaia ('the earth') and Chaos ('the dark abyss') (Kitto 2007, p. 228). The divine and the earthly are closely linked, with the divine having earthly elements and the earthly having divine elements. This is why Greek religion does not separate the natural realm from the supernatural as two opposing realms, but rather they remain linked. The same occurs with the religious and the social. Religion impregnates all areas of human life, the family, the professional, and the political—everything merges into the same melting pot. In fact, with regard to archaic and classical Greece, one speaks of a "religion civique" (Vernant 1990, p. 12), precisely because of how integrated it is in all social spheres, which are permeated at all levels by the religious sphere. The consequence of this type of religion is that the individual as such does not occupy a central place. When practising worship, they do not participate as individual beings, but rather fulfil a role assigned to them by society: king, magistrate, citizen, member of a lineage, etc. Greek religion legitimises a collective order, but believers do not build a personal relationship with the gods, as these manifest themselves more as forces than as persons (Vernant 1990, p. 13) and worship is based on recognising their immense superiority over men. The lineage of the gods does not represent the absolute, the infinite, as in monotheistic religions, but rather the full possession of the earthly values that make life valuable: beauty, strength, youth, wisdom, etc.

We stated above that the entire social world is impregnated by religion, including the political sphere. Every political position has a sacred character, and religious positions have political dependencies. This sphere will prevail in the myth of Oedipus, which we will discuss here.

In summary, the rules of collective life and the value system are underpinned by religious tradition, but as there is no fixed creed, variations can be observed, due to the existence of many versions and variants of the same thing. Each believer accepts a repertoire of stories that they have known since childhood, which offers a great deal of room for interpretation due to the different variants that circulate. Even the Greeks always reserved a space for a personal and sometimes critical view of their religion.

3. The Place of Myth in Greek Religion: Between Literature and Religion

All this traditional baggage, which made up the content of Greek religion, was transmitted through narrations about the gods, their lineages, their conflicts, and their adventures via oral tradition, initially within the family, where it was mainly women who recounted these *mythoi*. Secondly, it was transmitted through the tragic poets, heirs to the Dionysian religious festivals. In fact, the theatrical genre has its roots in the religious cult of Dionysus, the god of wine and fertility, whose life was represented in scenes performed during the festivals in his honour. Little by little, other mythological content, which was also represented in the Dionysian festivals, was incorporated into the performances. Gradually, these performances became independent of the context of the Dionysian festivals, becoming social institutions with a very marked didactic and religious meaning. Tragic poets constructed their dramas based on their own struggles with the religious, philosophical, and moral problems of their time, using myth as a vehicle. They always conveyed a clear moral message, such as the danger of disobeying divine laws, of being carried away by *hybris* or irrational passions, both for the individual and for society as a whole.

Written literary activity, based on oral tradition, had a very important social and spiritual function: it preserved social memory and transmitted knowledge. Literary activity in classical Greece was not intended to entertain the elites or the people, but was a central institution in Greek life, a means of transmitting Greek religiosity and social and family

order; in short, it transmitted Hellenic culture and identity. Vernant asserts that without these epic, lyrical, and dramatic works, one could speak of Greek cults but not of a Greek religion (Vernant 1990, p. 22). These works served as a social mirror, teaching people about their dependence on the divine, the difference that separated them, and what united them as a Hellenic community. The poets presented an encyclopaedia of religious knowledge that every Greek should know.

During the Renaissance and in the 19th century, these literary works were considered religious documents. From the mid-20th century onwards, however, some historians began to consider religion as the organisation of worship, the calendar of sacred festivals, and the specific liturgies of each god (Vernant 1990, p. 25). The rejection of mythology as a reflection of religion today is based on an anti-intellectual prejudice against Greek religion.

The presence of the divine in Greek religion is perceived with an emotional reaction, the *thambos*, a reverent fear of the divine. In addition to this fear, religion manifests itself as a broad, complex, and coherent symbolic edifice that grants space to thought, feeling, and worship at all levels and in all aspects. Within this framework, myth fulfils a function similar to that of ritual practices and configurations of the divine: myth, ritual, and plastic representation are the three forms of expression in which the Greek religious experience manifests itself verbally, gesturally, and graphically, each with its own language and specific needs (Vernant 1990, p. 29).

The literary adaptation of myths in Greek Antiquity could not be completely free, as writers knew that they were part of a tradition that they had to respect, beyond their personal vision. As Aristotle states in his *Poetics* (1453b7-25), they could do so with considerable creative freedom, but without undoing traditional plots or arguments.[2] The public expected to see their religious tradition represented.

The educational value of myth is greater than that of ritual, since myth is even more explicit, carrying knowledge within itself, which philosophy draws upon, absorbs, and translates using vocabulary and concepts that are unrelated to the world of the gods.

4. Greek Religion in Sophocles' *Oedipus*

Let us now see how Sophocles' *Oedipus* reflects all these characteristics of Greek religion that we have just described in general terms in Section 2. In Sophocles' Oedipus, which begins in medias res, plague and infertility are rampant, flora and fauna are affected, people are dying, and everyone is aware that these calamities are divine punishment.

The civil and political authority, King Oedipus, who defeated the sphinx in the past, is seen by the priestly power as the saviour of the city. As a first measure, Creon, Oedipus' brother-in-law, has been sent to the Oracle of Delphi, the centre of the world (Eliade and Couliano 2023, p. 183), to find out how to satisfy the god Apollo, who is scourging the city. As we can see, in the tragedy, the entire society is marked by the intervention of the gods in their lives, and it is only through them that health and social balance can be restored.

Creon is forcefully shown that the cause of the evils is moral in nature, that is, someone in the kingdom bears a stain, an impurity, for having murdered the former king and predecessor of Oedipus, Laius. This unexpiated murder affects the whole of society until justice is achieved and the murderer is banished from the kingdom. Oedipus, unaware that he is the murderer, curses the murderer and decrees his banishment, thus creating intense dramatic irony, as the audience knows what the hero does not and the tragic consequences that this will bring. In Sophocles' tragedies, "it is inappropriate thinking on the part of leaders which generates communal miasma" (Petrovic and Petrovic 2016, p. 176).

Teiresias, the kingdom's soothsayer, does not want to harm Oedipus, but after Oedipus' insistence, he ends up confessing what he knows about the incest and death of Laius and what awaits Oedipus for being the "impure scourge of that land". Oedipus recalls that a

drunkard revealed to him that he was not the son of the kings of Corinth and that is why he went to the oracle. Instead of answering him, the oracle prophesies incest and patricide, so Oedipus flees, trying to overcome the divine prophecies, that is, his *fate*. Already in the midst of the plague, after years of marriage and reign, Tiresias prophesies his curses and the horrific fate that awaits him. Oedipus, talking to Creon, realises that he killed Laius, and so he claims that it was his destiny to be united with his mother. The recognition and change in fortune of the *Oedipus Tyrannus* represent not only Oedipus' discovery of his own and his parents' tragic ignorance, but also the recognition of the prescience and the mysterious agency of Apollo (Halliwell 1998, p. 214).

The chorus, for its part, constantly speaks of piety towards the gods, also fulfilling a moralising function and expressing great commiseration for Oedipus' misfortune. In Cocteau's work, the chorus is replaced by a voice.

Oedipus finally learns that Jocasta gave him up to death because of the oracle and fully acknowledges his misfortune. Jocasta immediately commits suicide. Upon seeing her, Oedipus blinds himself because he does not want to see reality anymore and thus attempts to purge his mistakes and the misfortunes he has caused.

The royal family of Thebes makes the mistake of believing that they can defeat the will of the gods through personal strategies: Oedipus' parents, in order to escape the prophecy that their son would kill his father, try to kill him. Oedipus himself, to escape the prophecy of patricide and incest, flees Corinth, confirming the famous statement that we often find our destiny on the paths we choose to avoid it. After divine punishment, order is finally restored through the imposition of the will of the gods.

Determinism, destiny, and a certain moral innocence are apparent at first glance in the work in Oedipus, who is a victim of divine plans and whose desire to be virtuous and avoid evil is thwarted by his relentless fate.

The task of transmitting religiosity, fear of the gods, and belief in the inexorability of their prophecies is fulfilled in *Oedipus Rex*. Oedipus' *hamartia*[3] that is, his "fault", "crime", "sin", or even "mental error", a miscalculation that can be as serious and culpable as a moral error (Kitto 2007, p. 196), lies in believing that he can evade the oracle's designs by fleeing his city. However, when we mention the misfortunes that Oedipus has caused, we are faced with a dilemma: has Oedipus caused the misfortunes attributed to him?

As we mentioned, at first glance, Oedipus is a work where determinism—caused by fate, by divine judgments about the lives of men—permeates and imposes itself on everything. However, numerous scholars of Greek literature and culture do not see it quite so categorically.

Albin Lesky acknowledges the influence of supernatural powers on decisions, but attempts to rescue the autonomy of human beings, who form part of the decision through their voluntary initiative. This is the case with the theory of double motivation proposed by Lesky (1961). A higher need is imposed on the tragic hero, which drives him, but through his own character, he appropriates this need to the point of passionately desiring it. Thus, within this necessary decision, a margin of free will is introduced, without which the hero could not be held responsible. This theory would explain why tragic heroes are punished, because their free will participated in their decision, rather than being mere puppets of fate.

The same view is held in *Le génie grec dans la religion*, where religious solidarity within the family and the fatal inheritance of crime, while not expressly denied, are no longer accepted as the sole cause of misfortune, unlike in the work of Aeschylus. In Sophocles' work, only the gods and men remain in their absolute individuality. In no other tragic writer are personalities better drawn than in Sophocles. However, man is a plaything in the hands of the gods, and the poet professes both great faith and agnosticism in the face of a providence that sacrifices the individual to unintelligible designs (Gernet and Boulanger

1970, p. 312). In Sophocles, the hero—raised to divine dignity because of a free choice—is condemned to terrible tribulations, and in the end, man is great in his failure because, although evil came from his mistake, a voluntary acceptance of punishment translates into moral greatness and piety. Not only is he a hero for accepting his punishment, but "Oedipus is the hero because he wants to know the truth. His heroism is expressed not as his killing of Creon but by his insistence on carrying on the investigation" (Koper 2006, p. 95).

Likewise, for Kitto, the play *Oedipus Rex* should not be interpreted as a sombre determinism, nor should its characters be seen as puppets of higher powers; they act of their own accord. Sophocles is not trying to make us feel that an inexorable destiny or a malignant god is guiding the events. Kitto mentions specific actions carried out by Oedipus and other characters that are characteristic of their nature, such as defeating the sphinx through his intelligence, marrying the queen, killing his father because of his bad character, the shepherds deciding to come and tell him that he is now king of Corinth, or Jocasta committing suicide. These are natural consequences of people's character and decisions, not divine actions. What Sophocles wants to show is that the human condition involves suffering and that is why not only Oedipus suffers, but everyone around him. Oedipus suffers more to a degree, but everyone suffers (Kitto 1961, pp. 137–38).

On the other hand, there are authors, such as Bruno Snell, who recognise that, although there is deliberation within these tragic characters, in the end it is also *Ananké* or Μοῖρα, that is, the expression of the will of the gods (Kitto 2007, p. 226), which translates into the fate of men, that is at work in their decision. The tragic man does not choose between two options, but rather "realises"' that there is only one path. He does not decide according to his free will, but rather through the recognition of a religious necessity, from which the character cannot escape, and is therefore in himself a person forced to make that "decision". There is a will, but not in the Thomistic sense, rather linked to a reverential fear of the divine and sacred powers that influence him internally. In short, there would be a decision sans choix, a responsibility independent of intentions (Vernant and Vidal-Naquet 2001, pp. 46–48).

As we can see, critics have attempted to explain or "resolve" this conflict, which arises from the dynamics of free will and belief in fate. We consider it quite complex and risky to define this issue, given that there is a certain ambiguity in the treatment of this theme in tragedies. If we reflect, for example, on hereditary family curses, such as that of the Labdacids—the family to which Oedipus belongs—we can find examples that demonstrate that the behaviour of their descendants can be guided by free will, despite the curses. In Sophocles' *Antigone*, Oedipus' two daughters, Antigone and Ismene, are faced with a moral dilemma: to bury their brother Polynices—and thus fulfil their religious duties of piety—or to obey the human laws of their other brother and king, Eteocles, who has forbidden it. Antigone decides to be faithful to the will of the gods, which will cost her her life, while Ismene, moved by fear of death, obeys her brother Eteocles and thus preserves her life. This reverential fear of the divine, which Vernant presents as invincible, is not so in the case of Ismene.

5. Myths of Greek Religion in the Interwar Period

The 20th century saw a resurgence and widespread dissemination of literary works based on myths, given that these are open to multiple interpretations, including socio-political readings. Cocteau stands between tradition and modernity. In the 1930s, a new Classicism emerged in France alongside Boulevard theatre. Jean Cocteau emerged in this context, first with *Antigone* (1922) and *Oedipus Rex* (1927) and later with *La machine infernale*

(1934). These are works of rather moderate experimentation that offer us a new perspective on ancient myths (Grimm and Hartwig 2014, p. 333).

Myths are timeless stories that are retold and can be shaped to reveal internal tensions within a culture or to promote a particular vision (Konstan 2021, p. 49). For example, the fratricidal conflict in Sophocles' *Antigone* became a symbol of the confrontation between European nations in the First World War. As early as 1916, the pacifist article "À l'Antigone éternelle" (1916) was published, in which Romain Rolland used the figure of Antigone to appeal to European women, calling on them to exercise female resistance in pursuit of peace, as images of humanity and hope (Hertrampf 2024, p. 26). Marguerite Yourcenar also published her "Antigone ou le choix" in 1917, in which she portrayed Antigone as a Christian martyr. In the midst of the Second World War, Jean Anouilh (1942) published his own version of Sophocles' classic. Sartre, Giraudoux, and Gide, among others, joined the ranks of authors who rewrote classical myths, breathing new life into the most emblematic characters of tragedies: Antigone, Oedipus, and Electra, among others.

Now, we might ask ourselves why there was this 'literary boom' of myths. There are several hypotheses, which Niyonzima (2024, p. 56) summarises as follows: writers rewrote myths to reflect, from a distance, on the tragic situation at the front and its direct consequences in the immediate post-war period. Another hypothesis is that writers acted out of identification, that is, because of the feeling of experiencing a 'national tragedy' during the post-war period. The third hypothesis is based on the fact that writers wanted to avoid censorship and political persecution if their works were read as political and ideological resistance. The mythical disguise would act in this case as a smokescreen for political enemies, both national and foreign. It is likely that all three hypotheses are correct and that all factors influenced the writers when they decided to rewrite the myths. What is certain is that the interwar period inspired literary works that were deeply concerned with the historical moment, particularly with the unease about a probable future tragedy, which in fact came to pass with the Second World War.

5.1. Jean Cocteau's La Machine Infernale (1934)

In this context, Jean Cocteau (1889–1963) expressed his tragic vision of the historical reality of his time through the reworking of classical myths, such as that of Antigone (1922) or Oedipus, which he would deal with in *La machine infernale* (1934), whose title alludes to fate as an infernal machine designed to destroy man, who is the victim of decisions and higher powers. In 1927, he had already written the libretto for Stravinsky's opera-oratorio, *Oedipus Rex*.

We have already mentioned that the horror of World War I led many writers of the interwar period to express their disappointment with reality and convey a sense of absurdity about life. Jean Cocteau chose to draw on ancient myths to experiment, introducing elements of psychoanalysis into his work and returning to one of the most fundamental philosophical questions of humanity: whether we have free will or whether destiny completely determines our lives. In 1962, the author wrote to the composer of the music for his *Oedipus Rex*, Maurice Thiriet, that "les mythes ne vivent que si on les recharge de sang neuf. Il est dangereux de les croire intouchables" (Cocteau 2003, p. 1673). With this quote, the author reveals his conception of myth, its capacity and need to be subjected to reinterpretation and recontextualisation, which keeps it productive, timeless and in continuous dialogue with the existential questions of mankind throughout the ages.

In the work in question, the author seems to give us a priori answer to the problem in the speech by *La voix* (a character who replaces the Greek chorus) that precedes Act I: "une de plus parfaites machines contruites par les dieux infernaux pour l'anéanstissement mathématique d'un mortel" (Cocteau 2023, p. 35). At first glance, Cocteau places the

responsibility for the fate of men on forces external to him. In this sense, he seems to agree with the Greek view of fate, which no one can oppose. Below, we will delve deeper into the work to gain a better understanding of Cocteau's approach to this issue.

In Cocteau's version, the basic plot of *Oedipus* is retained, but certain modifications have been made, starting with the title of the work, *La machine infernale*, which gives prominence to the will of the gods and the determinism that afflicts the human condition. The infernal machine is Μοῖρα, that is, divine decisions, which control destiny and sometimes condemn man to suffering and misfortune.

Cocteau adds scenes that were not present in Sophocles' work, but only as analepic narratives, for example, the encounter and triumph over the sphinx and the psychological details about the incestuous wedding with his mother. In *La machine infernale*, he does not respect Aristotle's unity of time, and 17 years pass before reaching the point where the classical tragedy begins. Cocteau creates details of a prehistory that is only implied in Sophocles' version. These scenes are, in contrast, represented in the French play and are heavily laden with Freudian analysis. In Cocteau's version, there is a notable influence of psychoanalysis, especially in the exploration of the female psyche, in the figures of the sphinx, and, above all, Jocasta, in her relationship with her son, in her attraction to young men, and also through the interpretation of dreams, as she dreams of her carnal union and the incestuous procreation that will take place. The Cocteau plays also introduce elements into the Oedipus story which seem inappropriate to the stature of Sophocles' play as well as the vulgar vernacular language of *La machine infernale* used by its self-centred characters (Bauschatz 1991, p. 165). In the play, from the very first act, we witness numerous scenes and symbols that foreshadow both Oedipus' patricide and Jocasta's incest and suicide.

The figure of the sphinx is also represented with a very marked female psychological profile. It is worth noting the importance of myths in the thinking of Jung and Freud, whose theories were at their height during those years. Furthermore, there was already a long tradition of reinterpreting myths in France, in the nineteenth-century art schools of Parnassianism and Symbolism. However, the publication of *L'interprétation des rêves* (1900) enriched it even further and linked psychological analysis of childhood with the legend of Oedipus. This aspect greatly increased the interest and popularity of this myth.

Let us return to the figure of the sphinx. Instead of the relentless being presented by Sophocles, Cocteau's version is a very feminine deity who wants to stop killing and instead love and be loved, and who refuses to kill Oedipus. She also suffers from jealousy of Jocasta when she learns that Oedipus wants to marry her. The sphinx reveals the riddle to him so that she does not have to kill him, but Cocteau's cynical Oedipus does not thank her and abandons her victorious. A drastic change can already be seen in the figure of the sphinx in relation to the deterministic conception, as she overcomes her own nature, goes beyond the role entrusted to her by the gods, and refuses to kill.

The characters Oedipus, Jocasta, and the Sphinx share weakness and a lack of heroic initiative. Oedipus is also childish and lacking in intellectual talent (Lieber 2023, p. 16).

5.2. Free Will in Jean Cocteau's Oedipus

One of the most notable changes introduced in Cocteau's rewriting is the personality of Oedipus, who bears little resemblance to the hero of the Greek tragedy. He does retain his titanism and strong will, but these lead him to failure. At this point, it is worth asking whether Oedipus' downfall in this version is due, as the title seems to suggest, to the inevitable fulfilment of the gods' plans, to the unforgiving nature of the "infernal machine", or to the free will of the characters.

Cocteau's Oedipus is a figure who builds his destiny through his decisions, many of which are reprehensible. The development of Oedipus' actions shows a freedom and a

will to achieve certain goals and, consequently, a responsibility in the figure of Oedipus. Although the character does not consciously wish to commit incest and patricide, it is the free will guided by the protagonist's hubris—laden with ambition and pride—that will lead him to the fulfilment of his destiny. His unscrupulous and reckless decision-making will bring numerous misfortunes upon himself, his family, and society as a whole, because evil has cosmic effects, not just personal ones. Oedipus is foolish, he does not accept advice or warnings, and he bears clear guilt for despising the wise and wanting to defeat the gods in their oracles. He is an opportunist, a cheat. He is ungrateful to the sphinx, who loves him and saves his life, a liar to his wife Jocasta, and rebellious, disrespectful, and ambitious for power. This Oedipus does not unravel the mystery of the sphinx through his intelligence, but through seduction, through the attraction he arouses in the goddess.

Furthermore, he is to some extent responsible for the incest, as he disregards warnings about the age difference between him and Jocasta and is repeatedly told that she could well be his mother, at least in terms of her age. But Oedipus presses on to seize the kingdom. He is the Oedipus of *hybris*, of excess, of arrogance. He is driven by three goals: to reign, to marry the queen, not out of love, but out of ambition, and an excessive thirst for adventure. Piety towards the gods and the advice of Tiresias are of no importance to this modern Oedipus.

This Oedipus has little in common with Sophocles' character, who is impetuous but noble and prudent and who is not clearly guilty of the crimes he is accused of due to a lack of intent, which for many exempts him from moral responsibility. Cocteau's Oedipus is a multidimensional figure with more complex psychological characteristics, more human, but less exemplary. Cocteau highlights the numerous possibilities available to Oedipus to avoid incest and its tragic consequences, such as Jocasta's suicide and his own self-inflicted blindness. This is not presented as part of the punishment of the gods, but as an act of personal pride, as Teiresias states: "Son orgueil ne le trompe pas. Il a voulu être le plus heureux des hommes, maintenant il veut être le plus malheureux" (Cocteau 2023, p. 151).

Jocasta also bears much of the responsibility for all the misfortunes that will befall her for ordering the murder of her son and for allowing herself to be erotically attracted to young men, not only Oedipus, but others as well. There is a voice inside her that tells her she should not be with such a young man, a voice she tries to silence, but which the soothsayer Tiresias and society remind her of with warnings and mockery because of the age difference. "Jocaste is [. . .] so dominated by her physical drives that she does not see any of the implications of her actions beyond the immediate" (Bauschatz 1991, p. 166).

In Act III, "La nuit de noces", in the dialogue between Tiresias and Oedipus, the problem of evil is raised: why do the gods allow evil if they abhor and punish it? When Tiresias warns Oedipus that his marriage to Jocasta is accompanied only by dire omens, that the gods do not support this union, the mystery of the coexistence of free will and divine foreknowledge is raised, which allows evil even though it rejects it:

> Œdipe: Parbleu! Je m'y attendais. Le contraire m'eût étonné. Ce n'est pas la première fois que les oracles s'acharnent contre moi et que mon audace les déjoue.
>
> Tiresias: Croyez-vous qu'on puisse les déjouer?
>
> Œdipe: J'en suis la preuve. Et même si mon marriage dérange les dieux, que faites-vous de vos promesses, de votre délivrance, de la mort du Sphinx! Et pourquoi les dieux m'ont-ils poussé jusqu'à cette chambre, si ces noces leur déplaisent?
>
> Tiresias: Prétendez-vous résoudre en une minute le problème du libre arbitre ? Hélas! Hélas! Le pouvoir vous grise.
>
> (Cocteau 2023, p. 116)

Oedipus maintains that it is possible to defeat fate, while we look on with pity at his foolishness and the abyss into which he is falling, and Tiresias warns him that he is blinded by power. Cocteau's approach goes beyond the problem of determinism, focusing more on why the divine realm allows evil to exist when it could prevent it, thanks to its foreknowledge.

The play begins and ends symmetrically, with two ghostly apparitions. Cocteau writes a prologue in which the ghost of his father appears before the wedding, warning of the incest that Jocasta and Oedipus are about to commit without knowing it. The play ends with Oedipus going into exile with his daughter Antigone, and the maternal figure of Jocasta's ghost is added, who seems to redeem herself, renouncing her role as lover and wife and devoting herself solely to caring for her blind son in exile as a loving mother (Cestier 2013, p. 71). These parents, who had their son killed out of fear of the oracles, will be the ones who, from beyond the grave, will try to save or protect him, assuming their share of personal responsibility in the tragedy of their son Oedipus.

6. Conclusions

In Sophocles' tragedy, there is divine causality and human causality; the origin of actions lies both within and outside of man. The character is the agent, cause, and source of his actions, while at the same time being immersed in a force that surpasses him. Both causalities are mixed in tragedy but are not confused (Vernant and Vidal-Naquet 2001, p. 68). There is constant ambiguity and tension between action and suffering, the intentional and the forced, the hero's inner spontaneity and the destiny set by the gods.

Sophocles' Oedipus stoically accepts the truth and his punishment, and his greatness is highlighted at the end of the play because he suffered greatly without being entirely at fault. The balance tips towards the idea that if his suffering had been the consequence of his sins, Oedipus would never have achieved the martyr's aura that mythology bestows upon him (Vara 1988, p. 338). Tragedy shows the weakness of man and the power of the gods, who in the end can accomplish what they desire through fate, which influences human actions. Thus, true tragedy arises from the tension between the dark and unsuspected powers to which man is exposed and his will, which combatively opposes them (Lesky 1984, p. 149).

In his rewriting of the myth, Cocteau chooses to change the image of Antiquity. The classicist image of Antiquity, dominated by harmony and proportion, is replaced by a modernised Antiquity, with numerous psychoanalytic allusions, oriented towards a neo-romanticism, which is reflected in its titanism, the search for freedom, and the sentimental inquiry of the characters. As for the possible determinism imposed by fate, Cocteau seems to reflect more of a Christian philosophy—in those years greatly influenced by Jacques Maritain—where man cries out in the midst of his anguish over the trials he is subjected to and over divine designs, yet accepting the part of responsibility that human free will implies.

In both works, Tiresias, perhaps representing the author's voice, rescues the figure of Oedipus at the end of the tragedy, in Sophocles because he is a victim of the fate imposed by the gods, but also because he fought to try to exercise his individual will and accepted his destiny with dignity. In Cocteau, Tiresias announces Oedipus' immortality through poetry and popular tradition, for whom Oedipus represents not Sophocles' exemplary man, the ideal of conduct, but the paradigm of modern man, who must accept, within the divine plan, his moral responsibility and his fallible condition.

As a final thought, we would like to point out that in the early days of Greek culture, there was no relationship between theology and morality. This was originally a human and social issue, but little by little, it was placed under the protection of the gods. In this way,

religion and morality began to coincide, when the gods became not only natural, social, and psychological powers, but also moral powers. Thus, myth became imbued with a profound religious and philosophical meaning and ceased to serve only as an explanation for inexplicable elements.

Since then, the myth, in the hands of classical and modern playwrights, has continued to be an attempt to scrutinise and respond to the mysteries of thought about human life and human soul.

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Notes

[1] Ac licet quidem terribile et miserabile ex apparatu fieri, licet vero etiam ex ipsa constitutione; id quod prius est et poetae melioris. oportet enim etiam sine visu fabulam sic constitutam esse, ut audiens res quae fiunt, et horreat et misereatur ex iis quae contingunt. in quas perturbationes cadet ille qui Oedipodis fabulam audiat. efficere autem hoc per apparatum est magis artificii expers, et sumptus requirit (Aristotelis 1974, pp. 173–75).

[2] Ac receptas quidem fabulas solvere non licet: dico autem ut Clytaemnestram occisam ab Oreste et Eriphylen ab Alcmaeone. ipsum vero invenire ac traditis recte uti oportet. idque quod dicimus se recte habere, apertius exponamus (Aristotelis 1974, pp. 175–77).

[3] Reliquus igitur est inter hos interiectus. est autem talis, qui neque virtute praestat et iustitia, neque propter vitium et pravitatem mutatur in adversam fortunam, sed propter errorem aliquem, eorum qui sunt in magna existimatione et fortunae prosperitate, cuiusmodi Oedipus et Thyestes, et qui ex talibus familiis illustres viri sunt (Aristotelis 1974, p. 171).

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