

**Thanasis Georgas**

## **Taking the lead from Sophocles' Oedipus**

The heart of what we call psychotherapy is inspired by the demand that also inspires and characterizes the heart of our age, the age of Modernity. And it couldn't be otherwise. Psychotherapy is a product of its age and it can only take place, be formed and have meaning only in its specific cultural frame. The demand that inspires psychotherapy and at the same time characterizes our age has to do with one of the most ancient of man's desires, the desire *to become himself* - «know thyself», (learn yourself) was etched in the frontispiece of Delphi Oracle, «learn and become yourself» repeats Pindar[i][1]. We don't really know what was the exact meaning of that thought in other ages but we can assume that it was connected each time with the way things generally appeared in different "*Ages of Being*". In our age - and at the same time in psychotherapy - the above mentioned demand appears as a demand for individualization. I call individualization man's comprehension of himself as a separate individuality - far from any unified entirety -in reference and relation with anything appearing to him as otherness.

In Modern age, the individualized communication with the great questions that man faces was attempted through the doubt of the authority of tradition. In order to form his own answer, the modern man, had to take a distance from the stereotypes and see with his own eyes. The truth stops surrendering in the authority of any entirety (faith, tradition, group) and the more human life becomes more personal, the more the truth has to do with the individual comprehension and the primary meditation. Individualized existence means separation from the entirety, division of the entirety, an event that takes place at the same time with a double appearance: my personal hypostasis on the one hand and the otherness on the other. Division's field as well as the meteorism in it, is the nothing which - paradoxically- constitutes my being.

Modernity is born when the individualized existence stands up against the divine omnipotence and order, and contests to be its self its point of reference and its foundation. Nevertheless, Modernity, finally, considered the individualization through the closed and self-sufficient interiority of a subject, an Ego demanding to reassure its control and its domination of everything; or its independence of everything. This is how the individual is born with Descartes, Lock, Kant and many others, this very creature that looks inside itself, is endoscoped, self-acknowledged and self-determined as it wants, it is autonomous. A great dynamism is released, as a result and of course, there are the conditions for an omnipotent will, which acts as if there was nothing beyond it, nothing that could influence or define its decision. It's the comprehension of the individualization of the subject in the modern period, in particular in 18<sup>th</sup> century or even a little bit earlier.

In the present speech, on the basis of the interpretative regard of a friend and collaborator of our society, Ilias Papagiannopoulos[ii][2] (professor of Philosophy in

the University of Piraeus), we will focus on the subject of individualization and we will argue that the Existential-Phenomenological psychotherapy appears in a very border line, which is the end of an era. But, does the end give the possibility for activation of something more radical that already exists in the incident of the beginning? Can it be at the same time the beginning of a new age? To what degree does the Existential-Phenomenological psychotherapy moves in the horizon of a new beginning, which means a new comprehension of man and his individualization? Would Sophocles have something to say regarding this?

Before discussing that question, let's see how the subject of individualization appears in the Freudian theory. Freudian theory interests us because, as Boss and Godrau (the founders of our school) have variously shown, it constitutes one of the places of our origin, as existential psychotherapists. Even if we do not represent its theoretical structure, it continues to be not only a source of inspiration but the underground of our ordinary therapeutic practice as well. Furthermore, the Freudian theory interests us because it constitutes a border line in the history of Modern age: it erases questions which doubt and may threaten its own foundations and at the same time it seems, however, as if it hurries up to close these questions by giving answers with a typically Modern way.

We shall remind that in the Freudian theory, human individualization begins with a founding separation from the undifferentiated entity of intrauterine life. Human identity originates from a metaphorical "*birth trauma*" which is the first appearance of otherness, through the breach, through the absence. Nevertheless, at that particular moment the otherness appears, its rejection takes place, as the child weans itself in a place that has just created, that is the place of "*fantasy*". According to Freud, the upcoming fantasy covers the breach, (such as the absence of the breast) and maintains with an illusionary way the continuity of the unity. That rejection of the relation might be the first event of the relation. In that light, we could see what Freud named "*primary narcissism*", which is nothing more than a primary rejection of otherness. At the time the other appears, the individual rejects him by setting inside itself, in the place of its illusionary fantasy, where - for example, the mother - doesn't exist as a different person from the child, as a separate being. It seems like the infant tries to prolong and maintain the intrauterine embryonic state in the extra uterine environment as well.

At that point, in the context of psychoanalytic thought, Ego is born. It has to do with a birth that originates from what Freud calls "*life order*", which is the need for self-preservation. Ego is born as a support to the isolated biological being that has to survive biologically as an individual organism. That survival cannot be based on the fantasy of unity with a holon (*word that comes from the greek holos - which means whole, entire, complete in all its parts - and describes something that has integrity*) that no uncontinuity threatens or disturbs.

The significance of the father's role lies exactly in the fact that he prevents the expansion of "*primary narcissism*". The threat that originates from the father (the "*castration*" in the Freudian terminology) retains me in the limits of the self-preservation of the biological unit. The father stops the way back and - metaphorically

speaking - prevents the "*incest*" fantasy by activating the founding separation of life which means the birth trauma.

So, Ego, according to Freud, is born from the heart of the "*psychic apparatus*" in order to ensure the stable distinction of fantasy from reality and be able, in that way, to serve the biological unit. It would be important, however, to notice that the movement of Ego towards the environment, towards the other, is dictated by the needs of self-preservation that means that it originates from an individual and closed unit. The movement towards the otherness is nothing but my choice and that's why Freud was referring to "*cathexis*" as an investment. This is where we meet the place of the "*secondary narcissism*" of this perfectly ego - centric narcissism that aims at the maximization of the power and the omnipotence. Otherness is a simple mean by which Ego achieves its final self-referring aim, the maintenance of its individuality and nothing else. The other is only the object of my investment. The other's truth does not exist because it has already been dodged - murdered. The Freudian theory remains, finally, in the context of the modern model, as its aim is the individualization having as a mean the individual-centric anthropological tradition of Modernity. In this tradition, the border limit of individualization consists of Ego's development. In the field of human existence, everything preexists, at bottom, inside a self-reference, closure or entirety. Freud, faithful to the spirit of Modernity, cannot escape from its limits and so, finally, he also confirms the closure of existence as an unsolicited subject.

We argued, above, that the Existential-Phenomenological psychotherapy appears in a border line, which is the end of an era. The age of Modernity comes to a point where on the one hand there is the culmination and the completion and on the other hand there is the crash on impasses that are innate with its own particular characteristics, something that may be the sign of the transition to another (postmodern) civilization.

In this case what happens with the individualization? What will be its destiny?

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century the retreat of individuality was attempted in the absolute community spirit of the collective or through the de-individualisation of a Zen-Buddhism view of life. We also attend in our days - days of globalization - its gradual absorption in front of an indifferent, massified homogenization.

Is it, however, necessary to abandon the demand of individualization, which, as we claim, inspires our civilization yet from his early beginning? Is it necessary - if it's even possible - to adopt a way of existence and a life style so different from our tradition? Instead of choosing the escape from what we are, isn't it more preferable to stop and ask ourselves from the beginning who we are? Do the return to the very beginning of Modernity and the new self-demanding give the chance for activation of something more radical that already exists in the event of beginning? Heidegger showed to that direction and it is enough to remember the special care with which he

discussed with the pre-Socratic philosophers (Heraclitus, Parmenides, Anaximander) and with the ancient tragic dramatists as well.

Now, we, here, in that speech, following the steps of Oedipus, taking the lead from Oedipus, could we detect other chances of individualization far from those that have prevailed and dominated until today in the European-western civilization?

The story that we will treat is one of the most important stories and has the excellent taste that only an ancient tragedy can offer. It is a strange story and of course, we shall always keep in mind that it is not just a story. Ancient tragedies are not simply stories. They are not made for fun. They are not made in order to pass the time. They mean something, they show something, they catch our attention on something. They are fingers, forefingers that show. They say what cannot be said and they try to express what cannot be expressed. If we pay the necessary attention, at the time something is said at first sight, in another level, something else will start being revealed. This story can open a door.

Let's take things from the very beginning of our hero's course, long before his interference with Thebes. As such a beginning we will consider a precocious, "accidental" meeting of Oedipus with the truth of his existence when he was still in Corinth, in the world of ignorance.

Previously, we shall remind that Oedipus was born by Laius and Jocasta, the royal couple of Thebes. After Apollona's oracle, according to which this child will bring death to the king, a shepherd undertakes to kill the child, in order to avoid the realization of the prophecy. The shepherd, however, will take pity on the newborn child and will abandon it alive on the mountain, in a place where later another shepherd from Corinth will find it. The shepherd will deliver the child to Polybus and Merope, the royal couple of Corinth, who will grow up Oedipus as if it was their own child, because they didn't have another one. The only sign witnessing all those events will remain a mark on the body, his limping, as his feet were tied and wounded when he was left on the mountain and of course his name, which literally means "swollen foot".

Let's come now to the first critical act of Oedipus' adventure. Oedipus will remember it a little late in the evolution of drama, when he will be about to reach the center of nothing: "*At feast it was and someone flushed with wine cried out at me that I was no true son of Polybus.*" One way or another, reality penetrates and breaks into the first, secure and arranged world of Oedipus. Oedipus goes on: "*Oh I was wroth! That one day I kept silence, but the morrow morn I sought my parents told that tale of scorn and claimed the truth; and they rose in their pride and smote the mocker. They satisfied all my desire; yet still the cavil gnawed at my heart and still the story creepy abroad. At last I rose my father knew not, nor my mother and went forth to Pytho's floor to ask [.]*" [iii][3].

At this point, it is interesting to note that the people who wanted to be the parents to Oedipus are trying to protect him by hiding the truth from him, by keeping him in a

false perception of the world, outside reality. But these parents, manifesting a love which cannot or will not create the truth of separation, cannot be true parents to Oedipus as a separate and individual existence. This is not parental love. Being someone's parent means before anything else, facilitating him to come out of the state of non-existence. That is, I allow him to experience the birth separation from that feeling of indissociable unity with the environment which he experiences in the first place, I allow him to develop his individuality and find himself. To develop his own, special, individual existence.

So, Oedipus departs for Delphi secretly from his mother and father. This very event suggests his rupture with certainty, the beginning of his diversification and therefore implies that it is no longer possible to fully return to his prior situation. A new Ego is dawning. Oedipus comes out of his confusion based on his Ego's will (or so he thinks.). He wants the solution and he will find it with his strength and determination. He takes it on himself! We therefore arrive to the next crucial point, where the initial vague and fleeting sensation acquires a more explicit and certain character: «[...] *but Phoebus did not accept to respond and predicted more terrible, black evils, that I will become my mother's husband, that I will seed a race terrible for men to look upon and my own father's murderer*». The secret exit from the parental residence appears to be completed at this point.

But which is the character of the divine speech here? By saying that Oedipus will kill, does it make a prediction in the sense of a neutral announcement of a fortuitous event, for instance a car crash, which can happen to me independently of my identity?

What is the meaning of murder? Is it not the disappearance, the killing of the otherness which hurts me? When does the murder occur? Does it not occur at the very moment of the otherness and is threatened by the Ego? This is the symbolic moment of the patricide and it is not of course a circumstantial event! In this sense, the patricide is any form of violence and symbolizes the incident of coming into this world as an Ego, an entrance which is surely peculiar, as it is finally identified with the denial of existence. Therefore, the moment of the murder is not an isolated moment of murder, an instant event, but the symbolic condensation of a constant lethality.

It is therefore possible that the Delphic speech is at this point a prediction, in the sense that it reveals the very «essence» of Oedipus's Ego and will. Oedipus is not of course an isolated «character» but a deeper synopsis and culmination of the entire human species. In other words, the divination enlightens the existence of all of us and this existence is in principle lethal, in the degree to which it renounces, as an Ego, the otherness's natal calling.

Oedipus listens to the oracle and decides to personally invent his image and to take fate into his own hands. He is making a decision! With his strong will and the power of his intellect, he proceeds unrestrainedly from triumph to triumph and from glory from glory! On the way to Thebes he meets at a crossroad an old man accompanied by five servants. Oedipus scuffled with him and in a fit of rage and arrogance he killed the old man and four of his servants. It is only much later that he

will discover that the man was Laius, his father. He defeated the Sphinx through the power of his mind and saved the city from the menace of death. Oedipus is called by the Thebans as the first among mortals, as the most illustrious citizen, through the very criterion that he solved the riddle of the Sphinx, he exterminated it and he delivered Thebes. He becomes king! He has power, authority, intelligence and absolute certainty of himself. He is rewarded by taking the widow queen Jocasta as his wife. Much later he will also discover that she was his mother. Oedipus becomes the wise, happy and loved king of Thebes. Although in moments of tension he becomes short-tempered, impatient and arrogant, he generally appears to be relishing the happiness reserved to him by fate.

Thebes, on the other hand, seems to have resolved its problems. Isn't this often the most important object in therapy, to solve our problems? Isn't this the structure of the initial demand for therapy? We want to resolve a problem, to get it over with, to unwind, to become whole and functional. Well, Oedipus achieves this and offers it to Thebes. It's just that the therapy that he is offering is rather destructive - it offers a 'sick health'. In Freudian terms, we would say that what he offers to Thebes is finally 'incest'. It is strange: in order to find himself, to come out of the confusion-merger situation through being an invariable whole ('incest' situation), Oedipus resorts to the establishment of an Ego, that is to his self-invention and to the self-creation of an existence based on self-sufficiency and omnipotence ('patricide') but this brings him back to what he wanted to avoid, back to 'incest'!

The plague which occurs sets to motion a change in perspective. The unimpeded flow having been achieved against any nuisance and perturbation becomes the ultimate perturbation. The seer Teiresias describes this entire situation by saying: «*this triumph was your downfall*». A victory which was a defeat - a strength which destroyed the mighty. The plague with which begins the drama is the emergence of the expelled cornerstone of collective life, the emergence of lethality, that is the revelation of denial of the other. The seer Teiresias is the one who will make Oedipus face his expelled disease, the disease of a «*false self*». An imaginary reflection of a self that Oedipus *would like to be*, that Oedipus tried to become, not Oedipus himself. From that moment on, Oedipus comes into the field of wandering. The seer Teiresias comments this de-structurization: «*Light will turn into darkness, his belongings will wither, and in foreign lands, a wanderer, he will search for his way relying on his stick*». Oedipus blinds himself. This blinding is not but the first free act of Oedipus himself and not of the reflection of his father, of a self who starts to exist as he is born in the vital darkness of a wandering. To the question bringing back the issue of his birth «*whose mortal am I son?*» Teiresias replies: «*You will be born and perish tonight*». .

Oedipus, who seems to be lifting the weight of his father's legacy and fate, is redeemed and with him is redeemed the paternal fate, as if it should also be redeemed for Laius. Without being aware of it, Oedipus is from the outset a reflection of his father, of whom he has been the victim. Let us remember that Laius, as a strong Ego, denies the omen revealing the son - the face of the future - to be the father's death. He is unable to open up to the death that would allow him to assume his fatherhood, to give life, and he decides to kill. He kills so as not to die, that is, so that he cannot be

apprehended by time as the future. Laius denies being exposed to time and asks to be riveted to an eternal present, in an eternal here. He is unable to wonder in the realm of the unknown, in the realm of death so as to eventually come out of it and assume his own person through the affirmation of the other.

The tragic irony, the ancient irony, is finally the actual face of the seer Teiresias, and it is a therapeutic irony. It is a different version of therapy. A paradoxical therapy deriving from an ill and crippled man who in reality causes his own impairment. A blind man inviting to the same darkness - the same lack of knowledge, at least if you call knowledge the supervisory control of the Ego on things, the control who would render someone the master of his destiny and that Oedipus was asking for so as to be «cured». To the speech of Oedipus who renders obsolete and leaves behind riddles, gaps, illnesses, the seer Teiresias expresses a different speech guiding us outside the things we possess, like a gesture beyond that which is known to us, in a radical relationship with otherness. An existence, ex-istence, existing purely in reference. He is one to realize that his darkness is his very possibility to be underway and, in that manner, to co-exist with persons and things, with friendship and openness.

The following words by **Heidegger** sound as singular today, as those uttered by the seer Teiresias: " *Only on the ground of the original revelation of the nothing can human existence approach and penetrate beings.[.] If in the ground of its essence Dasein were not transcending, which now means, if it were not in advance holding itself out into the nothing, then it could never be related to beings nor even to itself. Without the original revelation of the nothing, no selfhood and no freedom*"[iv][4]. What is being said in these amazing lines? The primary transcendence, the primary existence is in **Nothing**. Without it there can be no self, there can be no freedom! It is a vision of things precisely because it cannot see them, it does not make them objects as subjects of its will and knowledge, but it welcomes them with surprise. It could be that the prophet is always a blind or, better still, a dead man: because, as the Greek poet Seferis says, it is only the dead that can truly speak.

The course of Oedipus does not stop at his Ego's total collapse and at his self-blinding, but it is completed through a different kind of individualization. We see this in «*Oedipus at Colonus*», the play that Sophocles wrote at a late age, several years after «*Oedipus Rex*». In «*Oedipus at Colonus*», Oedipus encounters places and cities as a blind wanderer - it seems like Sophocles is telling us that we can only meet the other person with our eyes closed! - and he arrives at Athens. It is very important to note the point from which Oedipus comes inside the city again since his exile, that is, into the field of common life: it is the sanctuary of the Eumenides, the divinities directly linked to the Sirens and the Ocean, to the underworld, to blindness and human self-awareness. This sanctuary demonstrates that the city of Athens has room to remember of Nothing. This memory is the threshold itself of the city - the threshold of the world of the dead towards the world of the living, of death towards life, of solitude towards the community. There, in the space of the sanctuary, the entire course of Oedipus is to be symbolically repeated. Upon the arrival of the Athenian chorus, emerges the question «*who are you?*». And Oedipus, to this tremendous question to be asked to any human, replies: «*Behold myself!*» Oedipus can now be traced in

openness, not in effigies, but in true individualization. All this will reach its climax upon the arrival of Theseus, king of Athens. Oedipus asks for his hospitality. Two men, who have known solitude, meet in the epicentre of the city and process this solitude into a city, the silence into speech, the past into a future. Therefore, Oedipus will be finally recognized as a protector of Athens, as his charismatic death indicates the grace of the gods. Oedipus's course gains the character of a course towards true existence.

Through such paths, ancient Greek thought was able to view individualization in a different manner from that of Modern age. Individualization as a deeper form of wandering itself. It is a great, a vital, as well as a forgotten legacy. The degree of this legacy is impressed in the dilemma initially set before Modern thinking. This dilemma dissociates instead of associating individualization and wandering: either, or. Either a strong Ego, a static personal individual identity, a given before and beyond any openness, imaginative and closed, or a wandering with no end, a weak existence which finally cannot rest anywhere, but only plunge in confusion and perish in an indissociate whole. Placed before such a dilemma, Modern age concludes in over-investing in the Ego, and finally arrives in the modern-day narcissist person living outside time, in a frozen present with no time. The retreat in his imaginative inland produces a deeply indifferent person. His apathy and sentimental disconnection coincide with the transformation of the world in a clear game, offered for the pure sake of *trompe l'oeil* and spectacle.

As previously mentioned, the road towards a true individualization passes through the meeting with time in the form of the future, denying the riveting in the fantasy of an eternal present, an eternal here. We are forced to wander in the realm of the unfamiliar, in the realm of death so that, eventually, we come out and assume our real face, that which 'becomes' within the other person's affirmation. Perhaps, as happened with Oedipus and as all of us dealing with psychotherapy know very well, only a crucial borderline situation has the ability to break the hard exterior of the Ego and force us to surrender in the truth of existence. A borderline situation occurring when, through a disaster, a great upheaval, a great loss or an intense pain, our whole world comes crumbling down. But, through the total acceptance of what is, the total acceptance of the Being, through reconciliation, begins the real communication, that is, the true individualization. The speaking of things (as phenomena) comes to find me, and I can come to it, to take note of its presence, to take note of the presence itself, the Being itself (ontological difference), to respond and exist.

The sphere of existence obscured by the Ego opens and radiates. Surprise and admiration so declare!

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