Damn The Fates Essay, Research Paper

D.T. Suzuki, a renowned expert on Zen Buddhism, called attention to the topic of free will in one of his lectures by stating that it was the battle of “God versus Man, Man versus God, God versus Nature, Nature versus God, Man versus Nature, Nature versus Man1.” These six battles constitute an ultimately greater battle: the battle of free will versus determinism. Free will is that ability for a human being to make decisions as to what life he or she would like to lead and have the freedom to live according to their own means and thus choose their own destiny; determinism is the circumstance of a higher being ordaining a man’s life from the day he was born until the day he dies. Free will is in itself a far-reaching ideal that exemplifies the essence of what mankind could be when he determines his own fate. But with determinism, a man has a predetermined destiny and fate that absolutely cannot be altered by the man himself. Yet, it has been the desire of man to avoid the perils that his fate holds and thus he unceasingly attempts to thwart fate and the will of the divine.. Within the principle of determinism, this outright contention to divine mandate is blasphemous and considered sin. This ideal itself, and the whole concept of determinism, is quite common in the workings of Greek and Classical literature. A manifest example of this was the infamous Oedipus of The Theban Plays, a man who tried to defy fate, and therefore sinned.

The logic of Oedipus’ transgression is actually quite obvious, and Oedipus’ father, King Laius, also has an analogous methodology and transgression. They both had unfortunate destinies: Laius was destined to be killed by his own son, and Oedipus was destined to kill his father and marry his mother. This was the ominous decree from the divinatory Oracle at Delphi. King Laius feared the Oracle’s proclamation and had his son, the one and only Oedipus, abandoned on a mountain with iron spikes as nails so that he would remain there to eventually die. And yet, his attempt to obstruct fate was a failure, for a kindly shepherd happened to come upon the young Oedipus and released him from the grips of death. The shepherd then gave the young boy to a nearby king who raised him as his own, and consequently named him Oedipus, which meant “swollen feet.”

Upon Oedipus’ ascension to manhood, the Oracle at Delphi once again spewed its prophecy forth, this time, with the foretelling that Oedipus shall kill his father, whom he thought to be the king that had raised him as his own, and marry his mother. Oedipus, like Laius, was indeed frightened of such a dire fate, and thus resolved to leave his land and never return, so that the prophesy may not be fulfilled. Oedipus tried to travel as far away from home as he possibly could, and along his journey, he crossed paths with a man who infuriated him with his rudeness. Oedipus killed the man without the knowledge that that man was indeed his father Laius and ultimately, half of the prophecy had been fulfilled.

And when he came to Thebes, the remaining portion of the prophecy was fulfilled as he became the champion of the city with his warding off the Sphinx, hence winning the hand of his own mother Jocasta in marriage. Together they bore four children, and Oedipus’ dire fate had been fulfilled, all without his knowledge. The Theban Plays begin with a plague that ravages the city of Thebes, and Oedipus sets out to find the cause. At length, he discovers that he himself is the cause for he was guilty of both patricide and incest. When that realization is manifested, the utter shock and disgust of the horrific situation causes the tormented and disillusioned Oedipus to blind himself of a self-inflicted wound2.

According to some scholars, this was the retribution he paid for his crime, but others would argue that Oedipus had no choice in the matter and simply had fulfilled his destiny. The latter argument seems to be more convincing because Oedipus does not consciously know of what he was doing at the time, and thus, his crime was not entirely premeditated. And one cannot condemn ignorance no more than one can realistically condemn good intentions, for Oedipus was both truly unaware of what he had done and of no desire to harm whom he had thought to be his parents.

In the aspect of ignorance, Oedipus purely lacked a consciousness of his actions. This particular consciousness is described as a “sensory element3 “-that which affects one’s decisions. The senses are what pull people to make the choices they do, e.g. the sensing of danger causes a fearful retreat into hiding. At times, these sensory elements can constrict the true inhibitions of humans, as they tend to alter the decisions that humans make and pull them from doing what they truly want, i.e. Oedipus sensed from the Oracle that he was to commit a grave sin and thus went against his inherent desire to remain with his parents. According to St. Thomas Aquinas, free will is the acting without interference of sensory elements in total regard to one’s own inner psyche4. Oedipus and Laius both had sensory elements, namely a fear of their fate, and they acted in accordance to their sense of fear, thus they did not have free will,.

In consideration of good intentions, Oedipus meant well in his leaving his country and defeating the Sphinx; but as it turned out, in his departure he killed his father, and in his conquest of the Sphinx he won Jocasta’s hand. In fact, it seems as if he was, shall we say, “in the wrong place at the wrong time,” for obviously, had he known that the man he was about to kill was his father, and the woman he was about to marry was his mother, the events that followed would most likely never have taken place. With this in mind, free will in Oedipus’ case is altogether unlikely as he would have never willed to commit those crimes. Determinism again scores a victory with proof that one simply cannot run from nor thwart fate.

If one can imagine the unbelievable agony and fear that consumed Oedipus upon his hearing of his own fate, of how he was to kill his own beloved father and have bear children with the very woman that bore him, perhaps the sin of running from fate may seem somewhat understandable. His fate was not one that can either be swallowed or simply pushed aside, for even the mere thought of such a thing causes a neurotic shudder.

This is the reason why he ran from fate. But ultimately his attempt was an disastrous one, and he suffered severe consequences. His town suffered the punishment for his physical crime, and he himself was the incarnate sufferer for the spiritual crime. Determinism maintains that Oedipus, as a man subject to the will of the gods, whether it be right or wrong, should not have attempted to outwit them for he cannot. But perhaps the premise of free will managed to unearth a tiny, though dramatically enticing piece of itself to Oedipus. With such a thing as free will, “no matter how strait the gate, or charged with punishments the scroll,” he was the ultimately the “master of his fate, and the captain of his soul.” 5 That proposition seemed entirely the more attractive to Oedipus than what he had been offered, and so he took it. He went against the gods for he willed his own end and the means by which to achieve it6. His suffering is a portent to any man who would try to do things beyond his own means for he is doomed to fail in the attempt and will consequently suffer some type of repercussion for it. A nice little analogy would be an attempt to escape from prison. The situation at hand is this: if the escape is successful, a life of freedom awaits, but if it is a failure, additional punishment shall be added to the current one. The question is whether or not a life of freedom is worth the risk, and most men answer this as “no.” Oedipus, unlike most people, answered “yes”, and because he his escape failed, he suffered much more greatly than most people.

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