

Existential Psychotherapy: Taking the lead from Sophocles' Oedipus

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The heart of what we call psychotherapy is inspired by the question 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 question 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”, was etched in the frontispiece of the Delphic Oracle, “learn and become yourself” repeats Pindar¹. 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 the above mentioned desire appears as a demand for individualization. I call individualization man's comprehension of himself as separate from any unified entirety –in reference and relation to anything appearing to him as otherness.

In Modern age, the individualized communication with the great questions that man faces is attempted through the doubt of the authority of tradition. In order to form his own answer, the modern man, had to distance himself from the stereotypes and see with his own eyes. The truth stops surrendering to 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 suspension 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 esoteric of a subject, an Ego demanding to reassure its control and its domination of everything; or its independence of everything. This is how Ego is born with Descartes, Lock, Kant and many others, this very creature that looks inside itself, is endoscoped, self-acknowledged and self-deter-

¹ In Pythian 2 (L.72)

mined 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.

In the present speech, on the basis of the interpretative regard of Ilias Papagiannopoulos² (professor of Philosophy in the University of Piraeus), we will argue that the Daseinsanalysis appears on a 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 incidence of the beginning? Can it be at the same time the beginning of a new age? To what degree does the Daseinsanalysis move 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 Freudian theory. Freudian theory interests us because, as Boss and Condrau (the founders of our school) have variously shown, it constitutes one of the places of our origin. Even if we do not represent its theoretical structure, it continues to be not only a source of inspiration but also the underlying basis 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 to close these questions by giving answers in a typically Modern way.

We shall remind that in the Freudian theory, human individualization begins with a founding separation from the undifferentiated intrauterine life. Human identity originates from the "*birth trauma*" which gives the possibility for a gradual appearance of the other, through the breach, through absence. Nevertheless, at that particular moment the other appears, its rejection takes place, as the child weans itself in a place that has just created, the place of "*fantasy*". According to Freud, the upcoming fantasy (such as the fantasy of the breast) covers the breach, and maintains in an illusory way the continuity of the unity. That rejection of the relation might be the first event of the relation. In that interpretative light, we could see what Freud named "*primary narcissism*"³, 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 illusory 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.

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's role (the "*castration*" in the Freudian terminology) retains me in the limits of the self-

² Greek essay «Beyond absence» editions Indiktos (2005), *Psychanemismata* journal, 4th issue.

³ Freud (1969)

preservation of the biological unit. The father's role stops the way back and prevents the "incest" fantasy by activating the founding separation of existence, which means the birth trauma.

At that point, in the context of psychoanalytic thought, Ego is born from the heart of the "psychic apparatus". It has to do with a birth, that originates from what Freud calls "principle of reality", which is the need for self-preservation. Ego is born as a support to the isolated being, that has to survive biologically as an individual organism. That survival cannot be based on the fantasy. Ego has to ensure and serve the biological unit.

It would be important, however, to notice that the movement of Ego towards the other, is dictated by the needs of self-preservation, and originates from a closed unit. The movement towards the otherness is nothing but my choice, a "cathexis", as an investment. Otherness is a simple mean by which Ego achieves its final self-referring aim, and nothing else. As the other is only the object of my investment, the other's truth does not exist, it has already been dodged – murdered.

The Freudian theory remains, finally, in the context of the anthropological tradition of Modernity. In this tradition, the border limit of individualization consists of Ego's development. 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 Daseinsanalysis appears on a border line, which is the end of an era. Modernity crashes onto impasses that are innate with its own particular characteristics, something that may be the sign of the transition to another (post-modern) civilization.

In this case what happens with individualization? What will be its destiny? In the 20th 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 an indifferent, mass homogenization.

Is it, however, necessary to abandon the demand of individualization, which, as we claim, inspires our civilization even from its early beginning? Instead of choosing to escape from what we are, isn't it preferable to stop and ask ourselves, who we are? Heidegger guided us in that direction and it is enough to remember his return to the very beginning of our civilization and the special care with which he related to the ancient Greek thought. Now, we, here, in that speech, following the steps of Oedipus, taking the lead from Oedipus, could we detect other chances of individualization?

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.

Before that, I would like to remind you, that Oedipus was born from Laius and Jocasta, the royal couple of Thebes. After Apollona's oracle, prophesied that this child will bring the death to the king, a shepherd undertakes to kill it, 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. This shepherd will deliver the child to Polybus and Merope, the royal couple of Corinth, who will bring 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 crucial act of Oedipus's adventure, long before his interference with Thebes, when he was still in Corinth, in the world of ignorance: a precocious, "*accidental*" meeting of Oedipus with the truth of his existence. 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 Polybus⁴."

One way or another, reality penetrates and breaks into his first, secure and arranged, world. 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 [...]"⁵.

So, Oedipus departs for Delphi secretly from his mother and father. This very event suggests his rupture with certainty and the beginning of his diversification. A new Ego is dawning. Oedipus comes out of his confusion, based on his Ego's will. He wants the solution and he will find it with his strength and determination.

We therefore arrive at the next crucial point, where the initial vague and fleeting sensation acquires a more explicit and certain character: "[...] *but Phoebus did not*

⁴ The Oedipus Tragedy, Gutenberg Text.

⁵ Ibid.

*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"*⁶. 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? When does a murder occur? Does it not occur at the very moment of the disappearance, the killing of otherness, which hurts my 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. This entrance is peculiar, as it is finally identified with the denial of the father's role to whom, lets remember Freud, Ego owes its emergence. Therefore, the moment of the murder is not an isolated moment, an instant event, but the symbolic condensation of a constant lethality. The Delphic speech reveals the very "essence" of Oedipus's Ego and will, and at the same time, enlightens the existence of all of us. 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 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 to glory! On the way to Thebes he meets at a crossroad an old man. Oedipus scuffled with him and in a fit of rage and arrogance he killed him 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. 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 for him by fate.

Thebes, on the other hand, seems to have resolved its problems. Isn't this often the initial demand for therapy? We want to resolve a problem, to get it over with, to unravel, to become functional and productive. This is of central importance for modern man. Well, Oedipus achieves this and offers it to Thebes. It's just that the therapy that he is offering is rather destructive –he offers a 'sick health'.

The plague which occurs sets in motion a change in perspective. The smooth flow having been achieved against any nuisance and perturbation becomes the ultimate perturbation. The seer Teiresias describes this entire situation by saying: "*this tri-*

⁶ Ibid.

umph was your downfall"⁷. A victory which was a defeat – a strength which destroyed the mighty. The plague with which begins the drama is the emergence of the repressed cornerstone of collective life, the emergence of lethality, that is the denial of the other. As the treatment of Oedipus was the solution to the problem by the denial of the other, then this treatment was rather devastating, it was an ill health. Loss of the other, means loss of self. Teiresias is the one who will make Oedipus face his 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 vagrant, he will search for his way relying on his stick*"⁸. Oedipus blinds himself. This blinding is an act of Oedipus himself, 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*"⁹.

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, a blind man inviting to the same darkness – the same lack of knowledge, (if you call knowledge the supervisory control of the Ego on things, the control which would render someone the master of his own destiny and that Oedipus was asking for, so as to be "*cured*"). In the speech of Oedipus, who leaves behind riddles, gaps, and illnesses, Teiresias makes a different speech guiding us outside the things we possess, beyond that which is familiar to us, in a radical relationship with otherness. 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.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

The following words by Heidegger sound paradoxically, today, as well 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"*¹⁰.

What is being said in these amazing lines? The primary transcendence, the primary existence is in Nothing. Without this, there can be no self, there can be no freedom! It is a vision which is able to see things precisely because it cannot see them, – under the significance that it does not make them objects as subjects of its will and knowledge- but it welcomes them with surprise. Such a vision, saves and respects in what is revealed, what is retained and concealed.

The course of Oedipus does not stop at his Ego's total collapse, 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 otherness with our eyes closed! - ... and he arrives at Athens. It is very important to note the point from which Oedipus comes inside the city, into the field of common life, again since his exile: 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?"*. Oedipus, to this tremendous question to be asked to any human, replies: *"Behold myself!"* Oedipus can now be traced in openness, not in efigies, but in true individualization. All this, will reach its climax upon the arrival of Theseus, king of Athens. Two men, who have known solitude, meet each other in the epicentre of the city and process this solitude into a city, the silence into speech, the past into a future. Oedipus's course gains the character of a course towards authentic existence, which means authentic individualization.

Through such paths, ancient Greek thought was able to view individualization in a different manner from those that have dominated in the Modern age. Individualization as a deeper form of wandering itself. It's part of our legacy. A great, a vital, but, as well as a forgotten legacy. The degree of this oblivion 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

¹⁰ Heidegger (2006: 33–34)

and closed identity, a given before and beyond any openness, or a wandering with no end, a weak existence which finally cannot rest anywhere, but only plunge into confusion and perish in an indissociate whole. Placed before such a dilemma, Modern age concludes in over-investing in a closed and self-sufficient interiority of a subject, an Ego. This thought, finally, arrives in the modern-day narcissist person living outside time, in a frozen present with no time. The retreat in his imaginary inland produces a deeply indifferent person. His apathy and sentimental disconnection coincide with the transformation of the world in a game, offered for the pure sake of hallucination and spectacle.

The urge of Phenomenology towards the priority of the phenomena, stands far away from the representations in terms of models. Such a road forces us to wander in the realm of the unfamiliar, in the realm of death so that, eventually, to come out and assume our real face, that, which 'becomes' within the other person's affirmation and the individualized communication with him. But it is not simple. 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 to the truth of existence. It is not simple! Have we ears to hear the unfamiliar speaking, that speaking that is addressed to us personally? Is it possible to be familiarized with the unfamiliar, the mystery? These questions, as mentioned in a text by Mr. Gemenetzis¹¹, aren't able to be posed by the sciences, not by psychology, anthropology or theology. They cannot even pose it. If they honestly asked the question, if there was a real question for this, which we call "human existence", for the abyss, which the word ex-istence opens up, then they would be shaken radically.

The psychotherapist meets a live person, (an old word of Greek language for a live person is "Θνητός" mortal), which is structured by all these mysteries – even when he doesn't want to conceive it, nailed in the illusion that he keeps his fate in his hands. The psychotherapist, to be able to unfold Phenomenology to the field of psychotherapy, it is not enough that he acquires knowledge but he needs to be open and familiarized with the first and final questions. This is not a subject of knowledge. The openness comes, if it comes, when it comes. However this arrival needs preparation. This preparation comes through roads that are offered to us, to the degree in which it becomes possible for us to walk on them. Perhaps, such a road is the great ancient Greek thought, like that of Sophocles.

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¹¹ Gemenetzis, from a training seminar of the Greek Daseinsanalytic Society.

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