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Tragedy, the Reflections of the Case of Oedipus and Mainstream International Relations Theories in the Context of Simon Critchley's *Tragedy, the Greeks and Us*

Simon Critchley, *Tragedy, the Greeks and Us*, First Edition, New York,
Pantheon Books, 2019, 336 pages.

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What are the implications of ancient Greek tragedies in the context of morality,
politics and the gap between theory and practice? In *Tragedy, the Greeks and Us*, Simon

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Critchley examines this question by focusing on the reinvention of tragedy in a world that has been characterized by uncertainty, ambiguity, illusion, dependency and limited individual autonomy. The book reveals that ancient tragedies are quintessentially modern and intertwined with international politics, which has been framed in terms of conflicts and fragile reasonability. In this regard, the author allows us to interpret Greek tragedies as the representation of politics, revolutionary shifts, different human possibilities and political praxis.

Tragedy, the Greeks and Us consists of six parts and sixty-one chapters. In the first part, the book reveals the reasons to engage with tragedies. It is argued that tragedies contribute to moral awareness about the relationship between the self and others and guide us to work with various emotions, including suffering, grieving, anger and mourning. In the second part, the book explains and discusses the definitions, interpretations, contradictory, morally ambivalent, interventionist, transgenerational etc. characteristics of tragedy in relation to philosophy. The author enriches this discussion by drawing on various ancient tragedies in which the limited autonomy of human beings is being demonstrated. But this limited autonomy should not imply non-resistance, self-victimization and passivity towards complex challenges, disorders and dysfunctional relations.

In the third part, critiques towards tragedy are explained in terms of the connection between sophistry and philosophy. The author discusses the role of relativism over universalism in relation to contextualism and idealism. Philosophical opposition towards sophistry and democracy is also addressed. In the fourth and fifth parts, the focus of the book is directed to dialogues and arguments of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle in close detail to dismantle the refutation of tragedy and to reconsider the relationship between philosophy, tragedy, drama and comedy.

In the last part, the dilemma between necessity and freedom of choice is emphasized with regard to the case of Oedipus¹. The author reveals how tragedies problematize the

¹ Oedipus, the King of Thebes, grieves for the devastating conditions of Theban citizens due to a plague in the city. For this reason, he tries to detect the source of the plague to resolve the crisis in the city and to strengthen his status as a former savior figure. He discovers that the source of plague is connected with the murder of the former king of Thebes, which remained unknown. He thus investigates the mysterious murder of the former king and decides to impose death or exile as punishment for the crime, described as a betrayal. The feelings of anger and revenge obstruct Oedipus from discovering his complicity in the plague, which

genealogy of sovereign political power and the identification of sovereignty with an idealized human being while discussing the role of rage and ignorance on tyranny. The case of Oedipus demonstrates the idea that human beings, whether actively or partially, may be the source of the challenges, obstacles and hopeless conditions, regardless of their intentions, and therefore, it is important to develop a critical self-awareness.

To give an overview, the Greek tragedy thus allows us to problematize the oversimplifications concerning myths, heroic and tyrannic attributions. Tragedies also provide us critical lenses to accept our roles, to focus on the journey from ignorance to knowledge or truth, as in the case of Oedipus, to critically evaluate the connection between external restrictions and freedom of human choice, in which the former might be represented by the prophecy in the case of Oedipus, and to dismantle pacifism, despite being partial agencies, and to accept tragedy as a starting point for change in politics.

The Reflections of the Case of Oedipus through the Mainstream Approaches in International Relations

Tragedies provide different structures of seeing as theories to appreciate the complexity in human affairs. Therefore, the idea is that the case of Oedipus, as explained and interpreted in *Tragedy, the Greeks and Us* of Critchley (2019) might allow us to revisit the interactions between the extent of the external restrictions and interventions, such as prophecy, and freedom of choice, which might also be approached through the debate between the system, state and human-centric perspectives in major mainstream International Relations (IR) theories,² which will be limited to realist and liberal perspectives.

From a classical realist perspective, for instance, describing Oedipus as a victim of the human nature may be emphasized for the indispensability of the fulfillment of the prophecy. But this kind of a justification may obstruct human beings from discovering

produced destructive impacts at the city-state, family and individualistic levels. The power of truth outweighs the power of tyranny in the end. For the experiences of Oedipus, please see: Sophocles, *The Three Theban Plays: Antigone; Oedipus the King; Oedipus at Colonus*, (Trans. by Robert Fagles; Introductions and Notes by Bernard Knox), Penguin Publishing Group, 1984.

² For the illustration of this debate, please see: Daniel Jacobi, and Annette, Freyberg-Inan (Eds.), *Human Beings in International Relations*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2015.; See also, Atila Eralp (Comp.), *Devlet, Sistem ve Kimlik: Uluslararası İlişkilerde Temel Yaklaşımlar*, İstanbul, İletişim Publishing, 1996.

the truth and the inner self and may justify tyrannic and unjust characteristics. A classical realist perspective, which demonstrates the selfishness and evil roots of human beings that have given rise to state- centrism and state egoism (see Morgenthau, 1948), also fails to explain the final actions of Oedipus framed in punishing and exiling himself. In line with the assumptions of classical realism, pessimistic reading about the conditions of human beings thus might be problematized through the journey of Oedipus.³

The interactions between the degree of the freedom of choice and functionality of the prophecy, as mutually complex and dynamic processes, might also be connected with the debate whether the individual is the source of the problem or the solution of the problem. Leading on from the assumptions of classical realist perspective, human beings might be evaluated as the source of the problem or the problem itself. From a liberal perspective, on the other hand, human beings might be evaluated as the solution to the problem through the application of reason (Humphrey, 1955: 422).⁴ But from a neo-realist perspective, for instance, this debate is irrelevant. Because both national and human-centric perspectives are reductionist (Waltz, 1979: 18). As emphasized by Waltz (1979: 40, 93), it is the anarchic international system that dominates the behaviors of all actors and it is more than the mere collection or aggregation of all of the states that flourish within the system.⁵

In this regard, prophecy, as the representation of the complex international system or as a structural constraint, dominates the intentions and choices of Oedipus. The prophecy as the representation of the international system is indifferent to individualistic characteristics. But this kind of a perspective is capable of neglecting both human beings and city-state-related insights. Hence, it is capable of providing a passive configuration not just for the human beings, but also for the city-states and political communities. In essence, a neo-realist perspective ignores the motives and emotions of Oedipus, his perceptions and the physical environment.

³ For the assumptions of classical realism, please see: Hans Joachim Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1948.

⁴ For the assumptions of liberal approaches and liberal international theory, please see: Stephen J. Rosow, “‘Human nature’ and the paradoxical order of liberalism”, Daniel Jacobi, and Annette Freyberg-Inan (Eds.), *Human Beings in International Relations*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2015, pp. 54-73.

⁵ For the assumptions of neo-realism, please see: Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, California, Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1979.

The emphasis on the case of Oedipus in *Tragedy, the Greeks and Us* also challenges the liberal understanding and its optimistic reading of human nature. Liberal understanding of human nature demonstrates that human beings have self-regarding, self-interested, coherent and purposeful identity (Rosow, 2015: 55). The limitless potentialities of human beings, the importance of reason for the solution of problems and a linear conception of progress were thus emphasized (Humphrey, 1955: 422). In this understanding, progressive or linear conceptions of history and time are employed.⁶

But in tragedy, the weaknesses of rational argumentation and the abandonment of the linear conceptualization of time from the past to the future are observable. The author of this book explains that time flexes and twists in tragedy. In this regard, the conditions might not be that progressive and linear. And human beings may not produce rational and reasonable decisions. In this regard, liberal perspectives may contribute to narcissistic and Anthropocentric⁷ justifications of the self and may disregard the role of the physical environment and law, which have actually been prioritized over the role of human beings in tragedies.

The journey of Oedipus from ignorance and self-delusion to knowledge, *Anagnorisis*, is both a tragedy and a precondition for the elimination of the pollution in the city. But as a tyrant, he refuses to develop critical self-awareness in trying to repair the political order. He refuses to see the truth and to listen what has been told to him by the messengers. He obsessively chooses to look into the external conditions/dynamics and avoids the inner self and adopts a self-denying attitude until discovering his role for the emergence of the pollution in the city.

Leading on from the assumptions of neo-classical realist perspective (see Rose, 1998), it might be contended that the tyrannic characteristics of Oedipus affected the course of the prophecy. In this spirit, mutually interactive perspective may be emphasized in the context of the fulfillment of prophecy. Neo-classical realism may also be demonstrated in emphasizing the complicity of leaders for the emergence of tragedies, as

⁶ See, Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, Harper Perennial, 1993.; For a critical analysis concerning the linear conceptualization of time in politics, please see: Samuel A. Chambers, *Untimely Politics*, Edinburgh University Press, 2003.

⁷ For the limitations and illustrations of the Anthropocentric sovereignty, please see the following publication: Alexander Wendt, and Raymond Duvall, "Sovereignty and the UFO", *Political Theory*, Vol. 36, Issue 4, August 2008, pp. 607-633.

exemplified in the case of Oedipus.⁸ Drawing from all of these, it might be contended that realist approaches, framed in classical realism and structural realism, and liberal approaches towards human nature might be challenged and a neo-classical realist approach might be demonstrated in relation to interpretation of the case of Oedipus.⁹

Concluding Remarks on the *Tragedy, the Greeks and Us*

Overall, this book reveals the disorientation and disintegration of the self in an enigmatic and insecure world by illustrating the vulnerability of the self to both foreign and familial patterns. In this regard, little-knowing or lack of awareness about the self, confronting with morally ambiguous experiences, exploring political complexities and thrusting into identity crises have been described as critical virtues in the context of tragedy.

This book adopts historical, interpretive, textual and comparative perspectives in engaging with tragedies. The intervention of the ancient tragedy and drama into the present and the prioritization of tragedy's philosophy over the non-contradictory commitment of philosophy have been emphasized with the interpretations of Greek tragedies. The author demonstrates the importance of tragedy in examining human actions and praxis. The implications of linguistic connection among spectator, theory and theater also indicate the connection between theory and practice in tragedies.

The author explains how tragedy problematizes the linear and progressive conceptualization of time and the search for a hero. Tragedy disrupts the distinction between the past and present, death and living, ancient and modern, divine and humane, spectators and participants. After explaining the prioritization of the city-state, *polis* and law over the tragic hero and discussing various forms of tragedy, the limited autonomy of heroes and tyrants in tragedies is explained. It is also discussed how disintegrated and

⁸ For the assumptions of neo-classical perspective, please see this review article: Gideon Rose, "Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy", *World Politics*, Vol. 51, No. 1, Oct., 1998, pp. 144-172.

⁹ Apart from the emphasis on realist and liberal perspectives, the case of Oedipus, as highlighted in this book, might be examined with the inclusion of constructivism, which asserts a mutually dynamic relationship between the material world and human consciousness. See: Emanuel Adler, "Seizing the Middle Ground: Constructivism in World Politics", *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 3, Issue 3, 1997, pp. 319-363.

inconsistent self, restrictions upon the political figures and *polis* itself in tragedies allow us to appreciate both the complexity and our complicity in political situations.

The conflictual life of tragedy is defined as the process of revealing that the tragic hero, both as a subject and an object (or as a symptom), is a problem, rather than a solution in the given political context. On this view, the adventurous, aesthetic and political processes of tragedy might deepen the involvement of citizens and may contribute to active engagement, skepticism and responsibility in societies. Refutation of heroism and liberation from a savior figure is critical for the engagement of human beings as citizens in relation to law, democracy and city state, which is another strength of this book.

This book focuses on the role of tragedy and theatre in disrupting patriarchal norms and family relations, which is critical in blurring the distinction between what is private and what is public. The author examines the sophists and the sophistry in demonstrating morally ambiguous and non-deterministic aspects of tragedy. The sophistic thought, which is dominated by non-divine, too-human and relative considerations, has thus been explained in relation to tragedy. The author contends that the sophistic emphasis needs to be defended compared to the absolute, universalist and divine emphasis.

The author argues that self-mastery and the orientation of the soul to divine good and truth may be contested and actually obsessive concepts. The philosophical critiques towards the political impacts of grief, plurality of the self and city, as the representation of a democratic political formation, have also been addressed with the democratic and tyrannic implications of tragedy. In this regard, morally problematic struggles of figures in tragedies are discussed.

The book presents textual evidence and doctrines, both from the Sophists and their opponents, in discussing the restrictive role of rational argumentation and intelligence for the amelioration of destruction and violence. Escaping from universalist idealism does not entail adopting a passive attitude towards human affairs and conflicts. Rather, accepting the fragility of the complete wisdom, freedom, democracy and rationality is necessary for a change and new determinations of the self at large, as exemplified by the case of Oedipus. Therefore, a realist reading does not necessarily imply passivity and pessimism, which is one of the prominent strengths of this book.

It might be argued that a realist reading of human relations is the starting point for scepticism and true shame in politics. A realist critique is conducted through the acceptance of a certain level of realism. In this spirit, both realist and critical reading of human relations might be conducted through the interpretation of tragedies. This book thus might be interpreted as important to dismantle the exclusion of the mainstream approaches from critical and sceptical assessments as well.

Realist perspectives intend to read the conditions of human beings in tragedy, whereas liberal perspectives envisage progressive and harmonic conditions. This book problematizes both pessimistic and optimistic readings regarding the characteristics of human beings. But it does not elaborate theories concerning the role of human beings in politics. The dilemma between the degree of human freedom and other external restraints, including prophecy, as supported by the case of Oedipus, might have been examined through system, state and human-centric perspectives in IR theories. Political forms of tragedy are staged in terms of tyranny and deficiencies of democracy. With these remarks, the converge towards politics might have been elucidated through the lenses of IR theories.

Overall, this book favors contextual and skeptical realism by reinterpreting the world of tragedies, which has been defined by moral ambiguity, unknowability and conflicts. The author avoids establishing a mutually exclusive relationship between the mainstream and critical perspectives. This book reveals how tragedies might function as a political experience and moral guidance for human beings while emphasizing the utmost importance of emotions, memories and past traumas.

Political philosophy begins with the acceptance of the disappointment and tragedy in the world politics and the development of self-awareness and empathy in recognizing our duties, which accentuates a greater degree of role and responsibility in world politics and acknowledges the idea that the world and reality are not that indifferent towards our thoughts, emotions, ideas and behaviors. We have more power and responsibility, than we think, and we may consciously or more importantly, unconsciously improve and/or obstruct the notions of justice, well-being, ethics and critical awareness.

Tragedy as the rejection of unity and wholeness is accompanied by relativity, doubleness, two-sided values and by the ontological weaknesses of human beings. In this

regard, the author interprets tragedies as the representation of the decay, complexity and corruption in politics. Accepting our roles, both as a perpetrator and as a victim, regardless of our intentions, is critical in problematizing the gap between theory and praxis and in challenging the identification of sovereign power with heroes and/or tyrants. *Tragedy, the Greeks and Us* might enrich the discussions regarding the IR theories in terms of human nature and international system. Despite the acceptance of disappointment, tragedy, scepticism and realism in the existing political order, it might help us to develop a critical perspective.

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