

## **DETERMINISM: AN ARGUMENT FROM MYTHS AND TRAGEDIES**

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Bertrand Russell writes “one of the defects of all philosophers since Plato is that their inquiries into ethics proceed on the assumption that they already know the conclusion to be reached”.<sup>1</sup> May be Russell uses the word “know” in a very strict sense of the term. But to write philosophy or to speak philosophy is something different from to think philosophy, at least at some points. A philosopher puts questions to himself (or herself). He may find his answer, not necessarily in the form of knowledge, but often in the shape of a hunch or that of a strong feeling. He may ask the same question later that in order to gather evidences to turn the hunch into a true belief or to find support in favour of his feeling. The Socratic questions can be understood in this light. The Socratic method of examining men’s everyday opinions by means of a carefully elaborated system of questions was not aimed at imparting knowledge, but extracting the principles of good life which are concealed under a sheath of everyday opinions. A systematic philosophical quest cannot proceed without having an idea of the end. But if one is honest, the quest may lead to a different answer altogether.

As a humble student of philosophy, I would not pretend of being totally unaware, or ignorant of the problem I pose before me. My problem is that, when we speak about the moral decline of society, how should we react, what should be our understanding of the state of affairs? We find that people try to evade the problem laying the burden either on the failure of administration, or laxity of the legal authority, or lack of education. The issue is not seen as a moral one, of our ability to exercise our free will, but as the mundane one of some defect or aberration in the situation in which we act. To state the more primary question: If we are to look for a minimum morality from human beings, where should we appeal? To the conscience of human beings or to the legal or some other social institutions? There is hardly any way out if freedom of the will is embedded in deontology of the Kantian type. In spite of the Moral Law, Kant mentioned many cases of pathological actions. When the

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<sup>1</sup> *History of Western Philosophy*, London: Routledge, 1974, p. 95.

'Kantian home' is shaken, the quest may begin for a teleological mooring for the freedom of will.

The problem seems to be the more basic one, that of the meaning of morality. Despite the similarities, morality is often looked upon as a matter of conscience and law as that of enforcement. Many things which are morally reprehensible cannot be brought to book through a legal process. On the other hand, legal codes and decisions may outrage our moral sensitivity.\* One can disobey the laws of the state on conscientious grounds, on the ground that they are unjust. Socrates is the luminous example of a civil disobedient, so is Gandhi in our part of the globe. "... [P]olitical laws and laws generally, can commend or forbid external actions, they can do little or nothing to ensure that the action is done or refrained from in the right spirit, and the 'right spirit' is very important for morality at the level of conscience."<sup>2</sup> Moreover, physical force and prudential considerations do not belong to the idea of a moral institution of life. Morality has also been contrasted with convention or with prudence. "Thus morality is distinguished from convention by certain features that it shares with law; similarly, it is also distinguished from law by certain features that it shares with convention ..."<sup>3</sup> But whether it is a law or it is a convention, prudential considerations are there behind. This is how morality and law are sought to be contrasted. The moral and legal are two different domains having only some points of contact between them. "Certain acts may be judged both legally and morally wrong - robbery or murder, for instance, other acts that break no law may be judged morally wrong. Still others may be illegal but not immoral.... violation of the law entails sanctions, for example, formal punishments like fine or imprisonment. Moral failure does not entail statutory penalties ... moral obligations, in many, if not most cases are left to individual consciences or to the approval or disapproval of the society."<sup>4</sup> I should not say that I am in a position to understand clearly the qualitative difference between what makes an act legal and what makes an act moral. This is made more obscure by the fact that the laws of the state have a tendency to speak in the voice of morality in order to establish its authority and strengthen its grip. The society has

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<sup>2</sup> William Lillie, *An Introduction to Ethics*, London: Mathuen and Co. Ltd., p. 155.

<sup>3</sup> William Frankana, *Ethics*, New Delhi: Prentice Hall of India, 1982, p. 7.

<sup>4</sup> J. G. Brennan, *Ethics and Morals*, New York: Harper and Row, 1973, p. 6.

gained an unwanted ability to justify the immoral as legal and illegal as moral. For instance, given the condition that there are politically independent and sovereign Nations, the question of moral dilemma that could possibly arise in a person who has got the aspiration of being the political head of the country in which he or she is not born is overshadowed by the constitutional shade. It seems that Demon parts the God-made moral into moral and legal for this purpose.

But should not what is not moral would also be not legal? Should not the illegal also be immoral? Is really the history of the laws of state and that of moral laws two different histories? Is the non-teleological Kantian-will behind the morality distinguishes moral laws from the purposive laws of state? Or only the political laws have a history and the moral laws don't? What I mean to ask is, are the moral laws *a priori* in contrast with the *a posteriori* political laws? For, the *a priori* cannot have a history. It is Aristotle who explains freewill as a precondition for both ethics and politics, and politics as nothing but community ethics. But that is a different story. Let us look into the history of laws in the early Western thought. We have Greek literature in our hand.

The primitive people discovered themselves to be governed by the forces of nature to be at their mercy. Of such forces those that wrought death and diseases were the most powerful and inevitable and most acutely felt. With any primitive people, their mythologies, subterranean layers of their attitude to nature, destiny and God is a manifestation of their deterministic life-worlds. Dialogues with spirits, i.e. those invisible agencies which are supposed to determine the good and evil in human life, are central to day-to-day behaviour of primitive people. The use of spells, charms and rituals and the things which they wear during performance of rituals are means of appeasing the spirits as well as the forces of nature to stall diseases and death. In Greek mythology, the natural forces are operative as natural laws. They gave the name 'fate' to these laws. One of the laws of nature, the instinct of survival, kept men always in fighting with fate. Fate is not to be thought as an instrument in the hands of gods, nor is gods the authors of these laws. Though it may seem so as the mythical men are found several times to seek help from gods with the hope of victory over fate, and also because fate sometimes revealed itself in the form of oracle. The real nature of fate as "the laws of the nature" is revealed in the myths and plays of the

great Greek tragedians. Nature, once declares that a future-son of Metis the Titaness and Zeus would depose Zeus. Hearing this, Zeus immediately swallowed Metis and made the oracle impotent.<sup>5</sup> The concept of God is nothing but the expression of man's ambition to conquer fate. But could any moral device be proof against destiny? One part of the mythical man always had the belief in the prophetic verse "what will be, will be ..."<sup>6</sup> and the other had shown a great assertion of his will to say "No" to the laws that determine his existence. The tragedy is that his hope for freedom from the deterministic world was a hope without a belief. The working of destiny or more precisely, fate as the determinant of human life has been stated in its full-fledged form in the great dramas of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides.

Sophocles' (495-405 BC) *Oedipus the King* is such a story of a man who failed in conquering his destiny. Tragedy begins with Oedipus even before his birth when he was destined by Apollo's oracle to kill his father and become his own mother's husband. Lians, the King of Thebes and who would be Oedipus's father at once put Jocasta, his wife away. But they failed to avoid sex and Oedipus was born. The child's feet were pierced with an iron pin and he was exposed on Mount Citheron. A Corinthian shepherd found him and handed him to childless Polybus, the king of Corinth. Thus, none of Lians's devices could prevent the birth and survival of the unwanted child. Later, Oedipus mourned his survival "... I was not snatched from death/ That once, unless to be preserved / For some more awful destiny ..."<sup>7</sup>

So many times destiny made mockery of human striving to frustrate fate. Young Oedipus, after becoming aware of the fact that he had been destined to kill his father and marry his own mother, sought to give lie to the oracle and fled from Corinth because he knew Polybus and his wife Periboea as his parents. But the "demon of the destiny" brought Lians on Oedipus' way. Oedipus killed his father unknowingly in an encounter. He then moved towards the city of Thebes and set the city free from the grip of Sphinx by answering her cunning riddles. He became the King of Thebes and married Jocasta, his mother. Thus happened what had to happen. The Sophoclean Oedipus says of himself :

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<sup>5</sup> Robert Graves, *Greek Myths*, New York: Harper and Row, 1973, 9(d).

<sup>6</sup> Sophocles, *The Theban Plays* trans. E. F. Watling, London: Penguin Books, 1974, p. 35.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, p. 66.

“.... Shedder of father’s blood  
 Husband of mother is my name  
 Godless and child of shame,  
 Begetter of the brother-sons;  
 What infamy remains  
 That is not spoken of Oedipus?”<sup>8</sup>

But why such a cursed life has been chosen as a central character of the drama? The drama is a tribute to a man who fought against his destiny but did not succeed. It is a tribute to a man who always wanted to go to other way, but demon of destiny puts him on the way to sin in spite of his good will (but not a free one) and noble heart, God once cried against him “Away from my shrine, wretch!”<sup>9</sup> But why? He was not responsible for what he had to do. Such a life rouses pity and fear in us. We begin to utter with the citizens of Thebes:

He was our bastion against disaster, our honoured king;  
 All Thebes was proud of the majesty of his name  
 And now, where is a more heart rendering story of affection?  
 Where a more awful swerve into the arms of torment?  
 O Oedipus, that proud head!<sup>10</sup>

It would be difficult to interpret *Oedipus the King* as a story of the punishment for pride. The deeds for which the hero would be ‘punished’ were preordained before he was even conceived. But it is true that the endowments which make him grand - his impulsive intellect, his passion for truth, his great physical strength, his integrity and his pride - are all necessarily used to work out and highlight the pattern of his fate down to its final fulfilment in the realisation of what that fate had been “Through the conflict between individuals who remain sharply characterised is written the eternal conflict between private conscience and public authority”.<sup>11</sup>

Thus, king Oedipus is not morally responsible for what he did. His innocence and helplessness in the face of fate was at least recognised by his fellow humans. There are only a few subtle references to moral or family laws in the drama such as: ‘it is wrong to marry one’s own mother’, ‘it is wrong to kill one’s own father’ etc.

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<sup>8</sup> Sophocles, *The Theban Plays* (Trans. by E. F. Watling), London: Penguin Books, 1974, p.63

<sup>9</sup> Robert Graves, *The Greek Myths*: 105(c).

<sup>10</sup> Sophocles, *The Theban Plays*, p. 59.

<sup>11</sup> G. Grene and R. Lattimore (edit), *Greek Tragedies*, Vol-I, Phoenix Books, The University of Chicago Press, 1960, p.179.

In *Antigone* of Sophocles, the presence and the conflict of moral laws is more prominent. It is said that the “classical instance” of moral conflict “... is found in *Antigone* of Sophocles, where the definite law of the state comes into collision with customary principles of family affection.”<sup>12</sup> “Antigone” is the story of a conflict between Creon, the King of Thebes and Antigone, daughter of the former king Oedipus:

“A king, in full and sincere consciousness of his responsibility for the integrity of the state, has, for an example against treason, made an order of ruthless punishment upon a traitor and rebel - an order denying the barest rites of sepulture to his body, and therefore of solace to his soul. A woman, for whom political expediency takes second place, by a long way, to compassion and piety, has defied the order and is condemned to death. Here is a conflict between two passionately held principles of right ...”<sup>13</sup>

Now what kinds of laws are they of which we are made conscious of in *Antigone*? Is there really a conflict between two totally different sorts of law, one is the moral law defended by “the woman ruled by conscience”<sup>14</sup> and the other the law of the state? It appears that in *Antigone* we are made conscious of three different kinds of laws that demand obedience from us.

### **(1) Destiny or the Law of Nature:**

Earthquake knows no children, no sick or no saintly person. Likewise, it is futile to pray before destiny. It came to the noble hearted Oedipus in the form of an oracle. And Creon was no villain. He was a man of reason who understood Oedipus; whatever he did, he thought at his heart, that he had done for his country. He was honest when he was saying “No man who is his country’s enemy/ Shall call himself my friend. Of this I am sure - / Our country is our life; ...”<sup>15</sup>. He speaks like a true king when he says “... How, if I tolerate/ A traitor at home, shall I rule those abroad?”<sup>16</sup> It does not sound immoral that the king has no sympathy for a person, who invaded his country and was shedder of bloods of his people, even though he was his nephew. Nevertheless, if we take it for granted that all Creon did was wrong, the king gave up his own law with a changed heart and decided to set Antigone free.

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<sup>12</sup> Mackenzie, *Manual of Ethics*, India: Oxford University Press, 1950, p.99.

<sup>13</sup> *Introduction to The Theban Plays* by E. F. Watling, p. 13.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, p.14

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, p.131.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, p. 144.

But Creon was not forgiven. Gods of the myths in fact had no power to stop misfortune. All the Creon's dear ones committed suicide one after another. "What is to be, no mortal can escape."<sup>17</sup> Thus, although fate has been spoken sometimes by the myths as coming from the hands of Gods, in true sense, it was no power of Gods. The mythical god was only an ambition of man to conquer destiny. That is why I call destiny, the unavoidable as law of nature. Hobbes also sometimes equates law of God and law of nature.<sup>18</sup>

### **(II) Law of the State:**

These are laws by which a king rules the country. "Your will is law", said the citizen of Thebes to their king Creon.<sup>19</sup>

**(III)** There are "**the unwritten and unalterable laws of God and heaven ...**"<sup>20</sup> which are said to be the moral laws as distinguished from laws of state. And Antigone prefers the former, because "... it is of immemorial antiquity and its origin cannot be traced, whereas the law of the state has been made and may be unmade again."<sup>21</sup>

Now, the difference between (II) and (III), as it is suggested to my mind, is not such that they are named differently. Or if they could be named differently, the difference between the legal and the moral is not a qualitative one, at least as far we are concerned with Greek literature. Their difference does not lie in the fact that the laws of the state are manmade and moral laws are God's laws. Both Creon and Antigone, for the sake of their arguments, called up the name of God. Creon's law has: "... he who puts a friend/ above his country; I have no good word for him." Further "... God above is my witness, who sees all ..."<sup>22</sup>. On the other hand, Antigone's objection against Creon's law is, "That order did not come from God. Justice/ That dwells with the gods below, knows no such law."<sup>23</sup>. Thus, God seems to be a double agent here. It is very much interesting to note that Antigone is defending the laws of "family affection" the breaking of which invites horrible consequences like those came in her father Oedipus's way. And it is the same God whose laws are

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<sup>17</sup> *Introduction to The Theban Plays* by E. F. Watling, p. 161

<sup>18</sup> *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (Vol.8), London : Encyclopaedia Britannica Ltd., 1958, p. 770.

<sup>19</sup> *Introduction to The Theban Plays* by E. F. Watling, p.132.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, p.138.

<sup>21</sup> Mackenzie, *A Manual of Ethics*: p. 99.

<sup>22</sup> *Introduction to The Theban Plays* by E. F. Watling p.131.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, p.138.

being defended by Antigone, has, as she said, brought much suffering to innocent and noble hearted Oedipus who in fact broke the laws of the family at God's will.

If the myths and ancient Greek literature reveal any difference between the moral and the legal, their difference is contained in one of the features uttered by Antigone herself, and that is, the former is of immemorial antiquity and the later is not. About her law, she said that "...where they come from, none of us can tell."<sup>24</sup> It is true that political laws are datable but some rules and customs cannot be traced in this way. That only means, the one is more ancient than the other. And if Antigone is really defending moral law then she must be regarded as ungenerous and narrow minded. A family is a smaller unit than a state. Creon was concerned for more people than Antigone was. But not at all rules or laws to which people refer to as moral are family rules. Anyway, the imaginary distinction between moral and legal as two qualitatively separate category on the basis of some vague concepts had not taken shape at Sophocle's age. Thus, the laws by which Antigone and Creon were being guided by, differ only in their antiquity and the extent of their field of application. Family came into existence because there was the need of survival and security in hostile circumstances. A state is a complex system of families. A detailed history of evolution of the society is not within our scope. But what must be taken into account by us is that the basic force behind a family and a state is the same and that is the instinct of survival. Society emerged for our practical purpose of survival. Family and state are only two different units regarding their size and operations within society. Morality, being a social institution cannot be of more antiquity than society. Man, by nature is not social, so man cannot be moral by nature (However, one considers society as prior to man, one can hold the opposite). The only law we can see behind the formation of all these institutions is that of survival. I would like to quote a few words regarding the views of Hobbes in this context from the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*:

"... he speaks of human desires as directed to various specific objects of which the chief is self preservation. What is, however, continuously clear is his denial that human nature is social. All man's natural instincts and passions are self-regarding ... Hobbes appears to direct introspection in support of his views ... Bees and ants are social animals; they do not compete for honour and dignity and show envy any malice to one another

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<sup>24</sup> *Introduction to The Theban Plays* by E. F. Watling, p.138.

as men do; they do not set private above public good, criticize and malign each other as men do. ... "The object of every voluntary act is good to himself."<sup>25</sup>

One need not be an unqualified Hobbesian. Yet, as we have already pointed out, survival in a restricted sense, is a valuable norm. We can transcend the crude sense of self-love to a meaningful social life with others. Now what this has to do with the so-called conflict between the different kinds of laws or norms we are talking about? So far the moral laws and laws of state are concerned; both have a tendency to become habitual. Like well-worn clothes, they may dispose one to adapt, in well-practiced ways, to the situations one meets, upon which one spends little mental effort or normative reflection. And then there is very little to distinguish human actions from the arbitrary actions of brutes - the necessitation which characterises them. The human psyche, however, refuses to be necessitated in this way. It has the capacity of self-correction and this entails that laws - whether moral or legal - reflect the normative sensitivities of the agent. The moral is not reducible to the legal. But what is legal has moral overtones. In the Greek dramas, cited above, man's life was destined by laws over which he had no control, as he had none over laws of nature. This way of being is 'natural' and god is sometimes identified with nature. Yet, in the man-god conflicts and feuds, sometimes god's law wins and sometimes man's. God was not even thought of as the creator of human beings. It was Prometheus, the Titan who was the creator of mankind.<sup>26</sup> Sometimes the law of the nature as human law wins and sometimes the law of nature as god's law wins. Once a dispute took place at Sicyon, as to which portions of a sacrificed bull should be offered to the gods, and which should be reserved for man. Prometheus was invited to act as an arbiter. He formed two bags from the skin of the sacrificial bull and filled one with the flesh concealed under the stomach and the other with the bones hidden beneath a rich layer of fat. He then offered Zeus the choice of either. Zeus, easily deceived, chose the bag containing the bones. Prometheus was laughing at him behind his back. Zeus punished Prometheus by withholding fire from mankind and cried, "Let them eat their flesh raw."<sup>27</sup> Prometheus made a backstairs admittance to Olympus with the consent of Athena and stole fire in the form of glowing charcoal

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<sup>25</sup> *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (Vol. VIII), p.770

<sup>26</sup> Robert Graves, *The Greek Myths* : 39(a).

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid* , page 39 (f).

and gave it to mankind.<sup>28</sup> Thus, myth suggests a constant struggle for existence of mankind in the world of nature. But the man of the age of myths realised the tragedy. The human freedom of will was chained along with Prometheus who was bound naked to a pillar in the Caucasian mountains by Zeus forever!

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<sup>28</sup> Robert Graves, *The Greek Myths*: 39(g).