TRAGIC CHOICES: FATE, OEDIPUS, AND BEYOND

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You, you’ll see no more the pain I suffered, all the pain I caused! Too long you looked on the ones you never should have seen, blind to the ones you longed to see, to know! Blind from this hour on! Blind in the darkness—blind!

Sophocles, *Oedipus the King*

This lamentation is one of the most famous verses of Sophocles’s tragedy. At the climax of the play, Oedipus uncovers the truth about his past and realizes how blind he has been to his own destiny. After he discovers the suicide of his mother and wife Jocasta, Oedipus blinds himself by plunging the spikes of her golden brooches into his eyes, unable to look at what he has done. He had been blind to his own truth as it was revealed by the oracle of Apollo. He thought he could transcend his own destiny. Rather than being able to choose his own existence freely, it appears that Oedipus “has to endure his destiny like a curse that makes him other than himself.”

It is as if Oedipus’s life is not entirely his, as if he is confronted with mysterious forces that he cannot face, but that nevertheless act through him. These are the forces Freud tries to explain in order to gain insight into the mystery of the human condition.

The Freudian reading of Oedipus’s vicissitudes can be seen as emblematic of the psychoanalytic enterprise more generally. Like Oedipus, the human subject is blind to the motives that move him in his own life. It is being blind to who he is that makes Oedipus the prototype of the tragic man who suffers from the pain of having been blind to his own fate and to himself. In fact, since Freud, the figure of Oedipus has become paradigmatic for the tragic dimension of human existence. According to Jean Starobinsky, “as [an] ancient hero, Oedipus symbolizes the universality of the unconscious disguised as

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Freud’s Oedipus reveals something of the tragedy of man’s encounter with himself, fighting against himself in a battle he cannot win. In a certain sense, through its specific focus on the inner conflicts of the human psyche, psychoanalysis discovered this tragic possibility as an inherent capability of human nature and destiny. In this way, the opening quotation from Oedipus the King reveals something of the tragic element of human existence as such. Oedipus’s destiny is not tragic only due to external circumstances. Rather, the situation is more tragic because Oedipus is the victim of the actualization of his own nature, despite whatever the circumstances may be. The tragic hero of Freud’s key narrative functions as the mirror in which the human tragedy of our singular subjectivity is reflected. Oedipus, thus, discloses the locus of tragedy in the everyman’s life: “Mutato nomine, de te fabula narratur” (“Change the name, and the story would be yours”).

This paper will argue that psychoanalysis can be seen as a worthy inheritor of the Greek attempt to give an account of the tragic vicissitudes of the human psyche. One of the most interesting contributions to psychoanalysis is the Schicksalsanalysis of the Hungarian psychiatrist-psychoanalyst Lipót Szondi (1893–1986). I will try to show that the tragic destiny of the human subject is both the point of departure and the leitmotiv of Szondi’s thinking. Finally, I will suggest that, in line with Freudian psychoanalysis, Szondi’s Schicksalsanalysis can be characterized as a ‘tragic humanism’.

**Human tragedy and psychoanalysis**

No one would disagree with the view that psychoanalysis’ most radical claim is the assumption that an “unconscious” exists. It was Freud’s conviction that psychoanalysis had offended humanity even more violently than Copernicus and Darwin by showing that—in principle and fundamentally—we cannot know ourselves. Still, the existence of an unconscious, consisting of powerful, hidden, and uncontrollable forces that drive the individual, seems to have a history prior to psychology and psychiatry. In Greek mythology and tragedy, for example, the unconscious is interpreted in terms of man as a passive victim of superhuman outside forces, destiny-spinning gods or daemons. However,