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“I See” Said the Blind Man; “I Know” Said Oedipus: An Analysis of Physical and Metaphysical Sight through Greek Tragedy and Philosophy

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“I See” Said the Blind Man; “I Know” Said Oedipus:
An Analysis of Physical and Metaphysical Sight through Greek Tragedy and Philosophy

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CLAS 399

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Introduction

The physical science of sight was understood by few ancients, with the metaphysical side of sight understood by equally as few ancients as well. Metaphysics and physics both give us a deeper understanding of sight itself through the use of tragedy and philosophy. The early scientists, such as Hero of Alexandria (1st cent. A.D.), Ptolemy (2nd cent. A.D.), Galen (2nd-3rd cent. A.D.), and Euclid (3rd cent. A.D.), all wrote works on the eyes and vision. Hero of Alexandria wrote on optics in his *The Diotropa* and his *Catoptrics*, which describe a rather elaborate sighting-device of the same name and illustrates Hero’s interest in the union of mathematics and the practical world.\(^1\) Ptolemy also wrote on optics, coincidentally naming his work *Optics* which attempts to explain visual perception in the most general sense, leading to its explanation of much broader issues than just those covered by physical optics. Although the last three books in his work focus on the experimental and geometrical implications of reflection and refraction, we do not see any direct accounts of light and the physical action of the eyes.\(^2\) In Galen’s *On Anatomical Procedures*, his fifth book is entirely on “The Face, Mouth and Pharynx” with detailed dissections of the eyeball and the contents of the orbital itself. This work is unlike those that we have previously seen, as it does not deal with the physics and mathematics behind vision, instead, Galen focuses on the anatomy of the eyeball and how it is made up. He provides a detailed account of how to dissect the eyeball and makes note of everything that he encounters inside the orbital.\(^3\) Finally, we come to Euclid, who wrote the *Catoptrics* which is very similar to Ptolemy’s *Optics*, but in Euclid’s *Catoptrics*, the work represents the early stage of evolution in optical analysis.\(^4\) The advancements made through the use of these four men’s works on optics

\(^1\) Coulton 2002:150.
\(^3\) Duckworth 1962:27.
\(^4\) Smith 1996:15.
and mathematics were incredibly useful to the advancement of technology throughout history. So although the ancients have research based in science and mathematics, I will be looking at early Greek philosophy and Greek tragedy to convey the sight correlation between the physical and metaphysical.

Today, advancements in technology make up for lack of sight, while the other senses overcome and become more capable. For instance, a blind man in modern society would most likely have a seeing-eye service dog or a cane, his ears would have sensitive hearing allowing him to take in the world around him which he cannot see, and he may even have heightened senses of smell, touch, and taste. In ancient Greece, however, he may only have heightened senses, which allow the man “to see” without his eyes. This concept of “sight” transcends the physical, making way for the metaphysical understanding seen best through Greek tragedy.

The earliest philosophers, such as Plato in his Republic, Apology, and Theaetetus and Aristotle in his Metaphysics provide the most concrete grasp on the metaphysical concept of sight. Plato first compares metaphysical and physical blindness in his Republic, describing physical blindness as not being able to see the world and not being able to make knowledgeable inferences about the world. He goes on to argue that being metaphysically blind is similar to being physically blind because one cannot sense what is around them or become enlightened visually by what is around them in the world. Plato states “Sight itself...[is] the most sunlike of the sense organs,” thus equating the sun’s light giving power to the eyes (Rep. 6.508a11-b4). The light that the sun sheds upon the world is perceived by the eyes, thus allowing the eyes to see information and experiences and eventually form wisdom through sight. When the eyes allow information in, the information is converted into knowledge, although the information allowed in relies on one’s own metaphysical capabilities (i.e. “sight”).

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In the *Republic*, Plato states that the “intelligible realm” relates to “understanding and intelligible things,” while the “visible realm” relates to “sight and visible things” (*Rep.* 6.508b13-c2). The intelligible realm is illuminated when our eyes focus on a subject illuminated by truth and they understand. Through this understanding, we are able to know, thus relating to the “intelligible realm.” But if the intelligible realm is obscured by darkness, belief and knowledge are reduced and understanding is never fully complete. Simply put, sight relies on light because in sufficient light, both physical and metaphysical sight can be obtained. Plato’s “Allegory of the Cave” in his *Republic* also provides a good example for light and sight’s dualism while also recalling the “intelligible realm.” He likens the cave to a “prison dwelling” with “the light of fire inside it” (*Rep.* 7.517b1-5). The light of fire is representative of the power of the sun. Thus the power of the sun allows the eyes to see and understand.

Plato gives his voice to the character Socrates in his *Apology of Socrates* in which Socrates questions whether “There is anyone wiser than [him]” (*Apol.* 21a6). He was aware that he was not the wisest being, but the Pythia told him that there was no one wiser. So, how could no one be wiser than a man who believes that he is not wise? He asks questions of wisdom to politicians, poets, and manual artisans and discovers that they are not the wisest humans. He turns back to himself and decides that it benefits him to stay just as he is in his wisdom. For if he can say that he himself is wise, he can see and therefore understand his own wisdom. His wisdom in the *Apology* comes from experiencing sight and turning that into knowledge and then wisdom.

Another view of knowledge and intellect that Plato explores is in his *Theaetetus* where Theaetetus presents the idea to Socrates that perceiving is knowing by stating the “one who knows something is perceiving the thing he knows, and, so far as I can see at present, knowledge...
is nothing but perception” (Th. 151D3-E3). We perceive things through the senses by the mind, thus the mind is its own instrument for thinking. However, Socrates refutes this argument by telling Theaetetus that knowledge comes from our mind’s reflection of the sensed things (Th. 186D2-5).

Aristotle provides us with the understanding that sight permits us to understand the world and thus gain knowledge and wisdom based on our experiences through sight. In his *Metaphysics* he describes how we are able to make differences evident and recognize patterns based on our sight, thus developing into reasoning and providing a path for memories to form. Reasoning is seen through recognizing patterns and “intelligible natures” of reason. The unified collection of intellect combine to form experiences and memories and finely tuned knowledge to create wisdom. (*Metaph.* 981a1-5).

Simultaneous to these philosophers, Greek tragedy also presented visual examples of sight that translated from metaphysical into physical and vice versa. Audiences were able to understand the stories, while noticing both the metaphysical and physical sight present in the plays themselves. Greek tragedy presents the most readily visible metaphysical and physical sight connection, specifically through *Heracles, Prometheus Bound,* and *Oedipus Tyrannus.* In Euripides’ *Heracles,* Heracles performs his labors and upon his return is possessed by the spirit of madness, Lyssa, who causes him to fall into a darkness which causes him not to be conscious of his actions. Heracles’ transformation into and out of madness show noticeable sight and vision language where he experiences a seizure in his eyes (*Heracles* 932). The description of Heracles’ eyesight and his rolling pupils (*Heracles* 868) is one of the most prominent signs that

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he is not mentally present. As his eyes were rolling about in their sockets, information and knowledge could not be collected, leaving Heracles confused when he awakens (*Heracles* 1090-1). He cries out for help when he awakens and does not recognize anything or realize anything that he has done (*Heracles* 1106). Amphitryon, Heracles’ father figure, urges Heracles to understand what he did by using sight language, thus illuminating Heracles’ mind of his terrible deeds and flooding it with now unwanted knowledge.

*Aeschylus’* *Prometheus Bound* is filled with sight and vision imagery along with prominent uses of knowledge and wisdom phrases as well. Prometheus’ wisdom is alluded to throughout the play, consistently hinting at the fact that if he were so wise, then how did he not see his punishment coming? His talk with the chorus about his deed for the mortals highlights the first sight imagery in the tragedy: “at first/[they were] mindless, [he] gave them mind and reason” in the form of fire (light) which brought them knowledge (*PB* 444). Although the mortals were given knowledge through the gift of fire, the complete knowledge and accuracy of vision is not possessed by anyone in the play, not even Prometheus or Zeus. We know this because Prometheus could not foresee his punishment and Zeus is not able to see his own fate. Thus, we establish that sight and knowledge “are not absolutes.”

*Sophocles’* *Oedipus Tyrannus* provides the clearest example of the correlation between physical and metaphysical sight. Oedipus is ironically focused on his quest for knowledge, which will inevitably lead to his destruction. Initially, he is shown as the knowledgeable man who solves the riddle of the Sphinx, and thus wins the queen of Thebes for his wife. The prophet Tiresias provides answers to all of Oedipus’ questions about the prophecy surrounding himself and Thebes, but Oedipus is metaphysically blind to the reality. It is not until Oedipus realizes

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6 Larmour 1992:34.
who he truly is and what he has done that he gains metaphysical sight along with his physical sight. This dualism of sight does not last long, as Oedipus physically blinds his eyes over the realization. One interpretation of this self-mutilation is symbolic because Oedipus has fully attained knowledge of who he is and what he has done and he wants to become metaphysically blind to the knowledge, and it is literal because Oedipus desires to become physically blind so as not to see what evils he has committed.

The oracles and prophets of Greek tragedies and epics provide audiences with the clearest examples of the comparisons and connections between sight and metaphysical sight. In Oedipus Tyrannus, the seer Tiresias was a physically blind man who had the metaphysical power of sight. The question of whether Oedipus himself becomes an oracle or seer once he has blinded himself arises, but for the time being, we will not discuss this question. There are more oracles, seers, and prophets just like him with the gift of metaphysical sight, not always contained in a body with the ability of physical sight. Thus, through this paper, I wish to show that within Greek tragedy, the ancient Greek concept of physical sight correlates to the ancient Greek understanding of metaphysical sight and metaphysical sight can be understood through the use of physical sight as well.
Chapter 1: Early Philosophy of Sight

The concept of sight in the ancient Greek world can be encapsulated into the metaphysical understanding that the earliest Greek philosophers taught. Plato in his *Republic*, *Apology*, and *Theaetetus*, and Aristotle in his *Metaphysics* seemed to have the most concrete grasp on the metaphysical concept of sight. The sight and blindness imagery in writings will be elaborated upon more in the second chapter of this thesis, but the use of these same terms is not to be ignored within early philosophy. For example, Plato writes, “Haven’t you noticed that beliefs without knowledge are all shameful and ugly things, since the best of them are blind?”

(οὐκ ἴσθησαι τὰς ἄνευ ἐπιστήμης δόξας, ἰσχυράσαι αἰσχραί; ὡν αἱ βέλτισται 

(Plato, *Rep.* 6.506c6-7)⁷. He makes the comparison between uneducated knowledge by calling uneducated things ugly and shameful when the truth and reality of lacking knowledge is blind and is not able to see anything. This blindness can be physical, such as if someone is blind they cannot see the world around them and cannot make knowledgeable inferences about the world. Having a metaphysical blindness, however, is similar to being physically blind because someone cannot sense or become enlightened visually to any new knowledge around them.

Plato continues on with this imagery, “Do you want to look at shameful, blind, and crooked things, then, when you might hear fine, illuminating ones from other people?”

(βούλει ὃν ἰσχυρὰ θεάσασθαι, τυφλά τε καὶ σκολιά, ἐξὸν παρ᾽ ἄλλων ἀκούειν 

(Rep. 6.506c11-d1). This is seen as a threat, meaning “would you rather hear something dumb that you’ve probably heard before, or hear something enlightening that has never before been revealed?” The use of sight and blindness imagery in written works supports

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⁷ All translations of *Plato’s Republic* are from Reeve.
the argument that metaphysical sight assists the understanding of physical sight in the ancient world. Sight and vision have two meanings here, and I wish to explore both. Aldrich states, “‘[v]ision’ is a bipolar concept. At one end it is simply seeing things; at the other it is consummated thought.” The bipolarity of the term and concept of vision is exactly what I want to convey – how physical sight, or simply seeing things, connects to metaphysical sight, or consummated thought.

Transitioning from sight and blindness imagery into language of illumination plays an important role in Plato’s Republic, as it will eventually be used with the famous “Allegory of the Cave.” But, for now, Plato uses sight to introduce light. He states that sight may be present in the eyes and that the person who has eyes may use them for perceiving color, if they have been properly utilized and adapted, but if not, they will see no colors and have no sight whatsoever.

Plato argues that light is important because without light, there is no possibility for sight, there is no perceiving of colors or shapes or bodies, there is simply darkness in which the eyes are useless (Plato, Rep. 6.507d11-e2, e4). Thus, as Plato states, “Sight itself… [is] the most sunlike of the sense organs,” (οὐκ ἔστιν ἥλιος ἢ ὄψις οὕτε αὐτή οὐτ[..] ὑπερεται, ὅ ἀρν ἐκχύσει ὅμοια,) and that “of the organs they first contrived the eyes to give light.” (τῶν δὲ ὀργάνων πρῶτον μὲν φωσφόρα συνετεκτήναυτο ὅμοια) (Rep. 6.508a11-b4; Tim. 45b). By calling the eyes the most “sunlike of sense-organs,” Plato is equating the sun’s rays and light-giving power to the eyes in that the light that the sun sheds upon the world, so the eyes allow us to shed light upon information and experiences and, eventually, wisdom. As the light of day floods the eyes, the images come together forming a perceivable image which causes

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9 All translations of Plato’s Timaeus are from Jowett.
the perception which we call sight (Tim. 45c-e). The eyes allow information in, that information is then processed and converted into knowledge (of course, depending on the sight or blindness of one’s own metaphysical capabilities as previously stated). With the eyes being the “most sunlike of the sense organs”, would it not make sense that the eyes “receive the power [they have] from the sun, just like an influx from an overflowing treasury?” (οὐκοῦν καὶ τὴν δύναμιν ἣν ἔχει ἐκ τούτου ταμιευμένην ὀσπερὲ ἐπίρρυτον κέκτηται) (Rep. 6.508b6-7).

Seeing, to Plato, is the most important sense and the “greatest benefit” to humans, because without sight, humans would not be able to see “the stars and the sun and the heaven” and that “none of the words spoken about the universe would ever have been uttered.” (Tim. 47b). And thus by investigating the universe, we have “derived philosophy,” which Plato believes is the greatest good that was/will be given to humans by the gods (Tim. 47c). Without the sun, there is darkness, and in darkness, the eyes are completely useless, so the eyes receive all of their power from the sun. With the sun’s power, eyes are capable of perceiving and making things visually intelligible. Plato proposes that when our eyes are not upon something illuminated by the sun or any light of day, the eyes seem blind, “as if clear sight were no longer in them” (ὡσπερ οὐκ ἐνούσης καθαρᾶς ὀψεως) (Rep. 6.508c4-6).

Let us refrain from making assumptions that once things are visually intelligible, they must be metaphysically understood, as this assumption is not yet valid. Plato states that the “intelligible realm” relates to “understanding and intelligible things,” while the “visible realm” relates to “sight and visible things” which simply further explains his teachings (Rep. 6.508b13-c2). The intelligible realm comes back into our minds when the eyes, and consequently mind, focus on a subject illuminated by truth, it thus understands. By understanding, it knows. On the
other hand, if the intelligible realm is obscured, the belief is dimmed and the understanding is lacking (*Rep.* 6.508d4-9). This relates well to sight and light, in that with sufficient light, both physical and metaphysical sight can be gained, but in darkness, there is no light allowing either physical or metaphysical sight.

Plato’s “Allegory of the Cave” pairs well with the analysis of light and sight’s dualism, along with revisiting the intelligible realm, while representing an “ascending mode of cognition” in humankind.\(^\text{10}\) The allegory begins by setting the stage, likening it to a “prison dwelling” with the “light of the fire inside it” representing the sun’s power (τὴν μὲν δὲ ὀψεως φανομένην ἔδραν τῇ τοῦ δεσμωτηρίου οἰκήσει ἄφωνοιοῦντα, τὸ δὲ τοῦ πυρὸς ἐν αὐτῇ φώς τῇ τοῦ ἥλιου δυνάμει) (*Rep.* 7.517b1-b5). He continues on by saying that “in the visible realm it produces both light and its source” and that “in the intelligible realm it controls and provides truth and understanding”. By the intelligible realm being seen through the visible realm, anyone who acts sensibly must have seen the intelligible through the visible (*Rep.* 7.517c1-c5). Plato elaborates further by stating “Do you think it is surprising that he behaves awkwardly and appears completely ridiculous, if – while his sight is still dim and he has not yet become accustomed to the darkness around him,” (θεωριῶν ἐπὶ τὰ ἀνθρώπεια τις ἐλθὼν κακὰ ἀσχημονεῖ τε καὶ φαίνεται σφόδρα γελοίος ἔτι ἀμβλυώττων καὶ πρὶν ίκανῶς συνήθης γενέσθαι τῷ παρόντι σκότῳ) (*Rep.* 7.517d4-6). One example that clarifies this teaching is of an elementary school child. Children in the age range of an elementary school child not to know much in the topics of school or life yet. Thus, they act in such a way that they do not ponder the consequences that their actions have or in a way that is not thought through

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\(^\text{10}\) Perl 1997:24.
completely. The classmates of the child act similarly, because none of them know better or know any differently. They have not yet experienced or been taught in the way of the intelligible realm. They are aware and can see the visible realm, but have not yet reached the intelligible realm in their lives.

To Plato, there are four different levels of cognition that can be achieved and experienced in the soul: “intellection for the highest, understanding for the second…belief for the third, and imagination for the last.” (νόησιν μὲν ἐπὶ τῷ ἄνωτάτῳ, διάνοιαν δὲ ἐπὶ τῷ δευτέρῳ, τῷ τρίτῳ δὲ πίστιν ἀπόδος καὶ τῷ τελευταίῳ εἰκασίαν) (Rep. 7.511de). An elementary school child would be at the fourth and lowest level, imagination, and maybe reach the third level, belief, around middle school. Understanding would come along further in schooling, such as in high school or college. One must go through each level of understanding in the appropriate order, starting with fourth – imagination – and working up towards the first – intellection. As one cannot imagine and jump straight to intellection. There must first be imagination, which then leads to belief through gained experience. Next would be understanding from belief, which is taught thoroughly in order to reach the highest level, intellection. If we were to compare a high school student with an elementary school child, there would be many differences especially in the ways of their experiences in the visual and intelligible realms. The elementary school child's sight is still dim to the world around him, making him not as perceptible to the visual realm or even the intelligible realm. A simple way of putting this, as Plato declares, “The unintellectual man literally does not know what he is missing” (Rep. 7.581c-586b). Because an unintellectual man cannot perceive or is not knowledgeable to an aspect of the world, he does not know about it at that moment, and will not be able to comprehend the aspect that he is missing.
Those with experience in the intelligible realm through the visible realm would remember that eyes physically and metaphysically change from light into darkness and from darkness into light, physically by the widening and narrowing of pupils, leaving us to determine whether this metaphysical interpretation applies to someone who, as Plato states, “had come from a brighter life and was dimmed through not having yet become accustomed to the dark, or from greater ignorance into greater light and was dazzled by the increased brilliance” (Rep. 7.517e3-518a1-2 & 7.518a6-9). The brightest thing that one is able to see with their eyes, Plato argues, is the good (Rep. 7.518c6-d1). We are not capable of turning our eyes from light to dark without physically turning our bodies, thus we take sight for granted, as it is there, but we may not be turned the right way, and we must work to redirect our sight (Rep. 7.518d5-7).

The virtue of wisdom is in all people, although it must be discovered in order to use it, but it can be used in different ways. It can be either “useful and beneficial or useless and harmful,” and is revealed which it is inclined to in specific people (Rep. 7.518e1-519a1-5). Notice how bad people are clever and possess sharp vision which can sharply distinguish the things it is turned towards. Because a bad person has sight does not mean that sight is bad, but here sight is being used to serve a vice. The more useful and sharper the eyes function, the more bad and evil can be accomplished for the bad person (Rep. 7.518e1-519a1-5). The same thing can be applied to a good person. Sight is not necessarily good, but can be used to serve a purpose. As eyes become more useful and sharp, more good can be accomplished for the good person.

As Plato previously stated and Aristotle also agrees, sight is the most important sense, as it allows us to know the world fully. Sight permits us to understand the world, gain knowledge, and eventual wisdom based on our experiences with sight. In Aristotle’s Metaphysics, he states
that “…we prefer seeing, one might say, as against everything else. And the cause is that, among the senses, this one most of all makes us discover things, and makes evident many differences,”

(τὸ ὃραν αἴρούμεθα ἀντίπαντων ὡς εἶπεῖν τῶν ἄλλων. αἵτων δ᾿ ὃτι μᾶλιστα ποιεῖ γνωρίζειν ἡμᾶς αὕτη τῶν αἰσθήσεων καὶ πολλὰς δηλοὶ διαφορὰς) (Metaph. 980a5-7). That making differences evident is one evolutionary development that makes sight so important, because if an animal or human is able to see a pattern and recognize things with their sight, their chances of survival increases. This recognition develops into reasoning, which provides a path for experiences to form in our memories. Reasoning consists of recognizing what is “one and the same in sense-experiences which are many and different.” By analyzing different experiences and finding the sameness in all of them, reason can recognize what the experiences are of. The sameness in experiences can be seen through patterns and the “intelligible natures” of reason. Thus, intellection was created to gather and comprehend what sense-perception cannot understand of reason. Sense-perception and intellection are directed towards separating types of objects and differ in the “mode in which the object is apprehended.” Where the intelligible nature which sense-perception recognizes in “differentiated multiplicity,” intellect understands “in unity.” The unified collection of intellect combine to form wisdom and the collection of experiences and memories and finely tuned knowledge culminate to also create wisdom (Metaph. 981a1-5).

Sight can lead to knowledge, which then can lead to wisdom which we have previously discussed. Wisdom is important to be discoursed in relationship to sight, as physical and then

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11 All translations of Aristotle’s Metaphysics are from Sachs.
13 Ibid:17.
14 Ibid:17.
15 Ibid:17.
metaphysical sight brings about wisdom. Plato’s problem with wisdom arises in his *Apology of Socrates*, where Socrates is questioned whether “there is anyone wiser than [him]” to which the Pythia replied that “no one is wiser,” (μηδένα σοφώτερον εἶναι) (Plato, *Apol.* 21a6-7). This puzzled Socrates, as he was “aware that [he was] not at all wise, either much or little,” (ἐγώ γὰρ δὴ οὔτε μέγα οὔτε σμικρὸν σύνοιδα ἐμαυτῷ σοφὸς ἔναι) (Pl. *21b*4-5). How can “no one be wiser” than a man who believes that he is not at all wise? This statement is expanded upon, through the analysis of the wisdom of politicians, poets, and manual artisans, in an effort to find a man who is wiser than himself. He begins with the examination of politicians, and he discovers that these men seem to be wise “both to many other human beings and most of all to himself, but he was not,” (ἄλλοις τε πολλοῖς ἀνθρώποις καὶ μᾶλιστα ἑαυτῷ, εἶναι δὲ οὖ) (Pl. 21c1-c3). Then when Socrates tried to show the politicians that he supposed that he himself was wise, but in reality was not, and through doing this made many politicians angry. (Pl. 21c4-d1). So, an initial conclusion is drawn up – that Socrates is wiser than politicians because that which he does not know, he does not suppose he knows (Pl. 21d6-7). He moves on to poets and compares them to oracles and diviners because they do not “make what they make by wisdom, but by a certain nature and while inspired,” (ὅτι οὐ σοφία ποιοῖς ἀ ποιοῖεν ἀλλὰ φύσει τινὶ καὶ ἐνθουσιαζοντες ἄσπερ οἳ θεομάντεις καὶ οἱ χρησμωθοῦσι) meaning that they do not know anything that they speak about (Pl. 22b10-c4). Their poetry gave away the thoughts of the poets, those that showed they supposed they were the wisest of all humans, but they really were not (Pl. 22c5-8). Finally, he analyzes manual artisans, and thinks of them as being the wisest of humankind. He realizes that craftsmen make

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16 All translations of Plato’s *Apology of Socrates* are from West.
the same mistakes as poets in that the crafts are beautifully made, but they think themselves wisest of all humans. This fundamental error shows their true mistake and proves that manual artisans are not the wisest (Apol. 22d5-9). Having gone round in circles through three different professions, he has not found the wisest humans and, thus, turns back to himself. He develops a question which he asks of himself: “whether [he] would prefer to be as [he is], being in no way wise in their wisdom nor ignorant in their ignorance, or to have both things which they have,” (πότερα δεξαίμην ἂν οὖτως ὁσπερ ἔχω ἔχειν, μήτε τι σοφὸς ὃν τὴν ἐκείνων σοφίαν μήτε ἀμαθὴς τὴν ἀμαθίαν, ἢ ἀμφότερα ὃ ἐκείνοι ἔχουσιν ἔχειν) (Apol. 22e1-3). After deliberating, he finally answers himself and the oracle by deciding that it benefits him to stay just as he is (Apol. 22e4-5). With further reflection, however, Socrates surmises another possible conclusion that the oracle simply meant that the gods are wise, and that human wisdom is “worth little or nothing” in comparison to the wisdom of the gods (Apol. 23a5-7).

However, the problem with tracing wisdom from experience and knowledge arises in Plato’s Theaetetus. Plato presents a dialogue between Theaetetus and Socrates where the two are discussing the theory of knowledge. Theaetetus presents his idea that perceiving is knowing by stating that “one who knows something is perceiving the thing he knows, and, so far as I can see at present, knowledge is nothing but perception” (δοκεῖ οὐν μοι ὁ ἐπιστάμενός τι αἰσθάνεσθαι τούτο ὃ ἐπιστάται, καὶ ὃς γε νυνὶ φαίνεται, οὐκ ἀλλο τί ἔστιν ἐπιστήμην ἢ αἰσθήσις) (Tht. 151D3-E3). He believes that simply perceiving is knowing, based on the senses with regards to the mind. To state this more simply, we perceive things

17 All translations of Plato’s Theaetetus are from Cornford.
through the senses by the mind. The mind, thus, is “its own instrument for contemplating the
common terms that apply to everything,” (ἀλλ’ αὐτὴ δι’ αὐτῆς ἢ ψυχή τὰ κοινά μοι
φαίνεται περὶ πάντων ἔπισκοπεῖν) (Thet. 185D9-E2). Socrates makes his objection known
by telling Theaetetus that knowledge does not come from what we initially think of the things we
sense, but in our mind’s reflection of the sensed things. Truth and existence are fully understood
through the mind’s contemplation of the sensed things (Thet. 186D2-5). In order to solidify and
prove his point to Theaetetus, Socrates completes his argument by asking what name Theaetetus
gives to seeing, hearing, smelling, feeling cold and feeling warm,” (τί οὖν δὴ ἐκείνῳ
ἀποδίδως ὑμοι, τῷ ὡς ἄκοινειν ὄσφραίνεσθαι ψύχεσθαι θερμαίνεσθαι) to which
Theaetetus answers with “perceiving” (αἰσθάνεσθαι) (Thet. 186D10-11;E1). Socrates
completes his argument with one final statement in which he states that perception has no part in
“apprehending truth, since it has none in apprehending existence,” (οὐ μέτεστιν ἀληθείας
ἀψαθαι: οὐδὲ γὰρ οὐσίας) (Thet. 186E4-5). Perception also has no part in apprehending
knowledge either, which means that “perception and knowledge cannot possibly be the same
thing,” (οὐκ ἄφο’ ἂν εἶπ τοτέ αἰσθησίς τε και ἐπιστήμη ταυτόν) (Thet. 186E11). Some
clarifications need to be made, as the perception of things around us in the world did not
immediately make us more knowledgeable.

Perception leads to knowledge, but is not a direct cause and effect relationship. The
specificity of Socrates is already implied, as perception needs to sit in a mind and ruminate, until
knowledge is formed. So, perception does not provide direct truth or knowledge, but provides
the opportunity to ponder the things and situations around us, and eventually, if at all, create
knowledge for ourselves.
Chapter 2: Sight in Greek Tragedy

Sight is a very specific theme, especially in the more well-known Greek tragedies, such as *Heracles, Prometheus Bound*, and *Oedipus Tyrannus*. The duality between physical and metaphysical sight arises most prominently in Sophocles’ *Oedipus Tyrannus*, which I will elaborate upon further. Greek tragedy presents metaphysical sight through the use of physical sight, but before we dive into sight, the basis of tragedy must be established. In Aristotle’s *Poetics*, he discusses Greek comedy and tragedy, of which we will be focusing on tragedy. He states that:

“[t]ragedy…is a process of imitating an action which has serious implications, is complete, and possesses magnitude; by means of language which has been made sensuously attractive, which each of its varieties found separately in the parts; enacted through narrative; through a course of pity and fear completing the purification of tragic acts which have those emotional characteristics” (Arist., *Poetics* 9.24-7).18

To state this simply, tragedy involves a fully formed story line that has an action that has severe consequences which are meaningful to the audience. Also, the story line and dialogue are made attractive through specific language and the utilization of differing emotions that result in an overall cathartic experience. Aristotle goes on to say that “…tragedy is an imitation not of men but of a life, an action, and they have moral quality in accordance with their actions” (*Poetics* 10.16-20). This allows the audience to see that tragedy is not just for one person’s life, but an entire people to keep morality of actions in mind. In order for a play to be called “tragic” and for

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18 All translations are by Gerald Else.
the tragic vision to be fulfilled, to use Maguire’s term, the “mechanism of tragedy”, or the “informing principle of the tragic vision,” must be involved.19

To reach the “mechanism of tragedy,” we must first analyze the tragic hero. Maguire states “[t]he tragic hero is one who succeeds in destroying life and happiness for himself and those around him through those very actions which seemed to him to ensure that happiness.”20 If any “tragic hero” comes to mind from that description, that of Oedipus stands at the forefront. Thus, Maguire’s main focus on the “mechanism of tragedy” is on “the limitations of human knowledge: [and] the source of tragedy seems, ultimately, to be misunderstanding.”21 This misunderstanding is elaborated upon and created through the entirety of the plot of the tragedy. The plot, to Aristotle, is the goal of tragedy (Poetics 10.21-3). The goal is the greatest thing in the tragedy, as everything that happens within the plot occurs for the benefit of the goal overall. In order for the experience of the audience to be the best, the plot must be designed in such a way that visual effects are not needed to enhance the storyline. Hearing the dialogue and what is happening in the story should provoke shudders of fear and the feeling of pity in the audience.

As Aristotle states, the best recognition “is one that happens at the same time as a peripety,”22 as is the case with the one in the Oedipus…For that kind of recognition combined with peripety will excite either pity or fear (and these are the kinds of action of which tragedy is an imitation according to our definition)” (Poetics 12.37-9). Recognition, peripety, and pathos are the three main elements of plot. Recognition is simply a “shift from ignorance to

19 Maguire 1962:49.
20 Ibid:49.
21 Ibid:49.
22 “‘Peripety’ is a shift of what is being undertaken to the opposite in the way previously stated, and that in accordance with probability or necessity as we have just been saying.” (Aristotle, Poetics 11.21-3)
awareness,” either with regards to kinship or of hostility or in those who have been marked by the state of happiness or unhappiness (Poetics 12.30-5). Recognition and peripety have previously been discussed, and suffering is simply a painful or destructive act such as fits of pain, deaths on stage, woundings, and other similar things (Poetics 12. 50-5). For recognition to be fully appreciated, the tragedy must be performed “in ignorance and recognize what one has done afterward; for the repulsive quality does not attach to the act, and the recognition has a shattering emotional effect” (Poetics 14.45-7). But, best overall is the recognition that rises out of the events of the play. The shock of emotions through surprising events are superior to the recognition discovered by reasoning.23

The shock of emotion that arises in Euripides’ Heracles presents a view of sight with regards to Lyssa, or the personified spirit of madness. Heracles performs his labors, and upon returning Iris and Lyssa possess him, causing him to fall under a darkness, in which he is not conscious of his actions. Sight and vision language are employed throughout the entirety of the play, but most noticeably in Heracles’ transformation, when he experiences a seizure in the “eyes” and “eyeballs” (Euripides, Heracles 932-3).24 Heracles suffers “ocular delusions” which are reinforced by the use of “Gorgonic imagery.”25 Previously, this imagery was used in reference to his children (Heracles 130-3) and now being Gorgon-eyed is ironic in the usage of how Lyssa makes Heracles’ “Gorgon-eyed pupils” begin to roll – “Rolling his distorted flashing eyes without speaking,” (διαστρόφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοφοphilous (Heracles 868).

The description of Heracles’ eyesight is one of the tell-tale signs that he is “not there.” When he is taken over by Lyssa, “He is already shaking his head at the start of his race, rolling his

23 Aristotle, Poetics 16.16-21
24 All translations of Heracles are by Shirley A. Barlow.
distorted flashing eyes without speaking. His breathing is uncontrolled like a bull ready to attack and he bellows terribly” (*Heracles* 867-9). The race mentioned here is his experience with madness, which caused his eyes to roll about, signifying that there is no knowledge or understanding taking place behind his eyes. At this moment, “He was no longer himself. His face contorted, he rolled his eyes so that their bloodshot roots protruded” (*ἀλλ’ ἐν στροφαῖσιν ὀμμάτων ἐφθαρμένος ὀίζας*) (*Heracles* 932-5). The eye imagery used here, although medically disturbing, implies that the beloved hero is no longer mentally present. He has been fully possessed by Lyssa and will only return when she has left his body.

The aforementioned peripety concludes with Heracles regaining his consciousness.26 Thus, the pity and fear brought about by the Lyssa-induced state of Heracles come to a natural close as Heracles himself is confused and fearing what just happened. When he awakens from his previous state, Heracles says that he “was swamped somehow by a terrible confusion of mind and my breath comes hot and unsteady from my lungs, not calm at all,” (*ὡς ἐν κλύδωνι καὶ φρενῶν ταφάγματι πέπτωκα δεινῷ καὶ πνοὰς θερμὰς πνέω μετάρσι’, οὐ βέβαια, πνευμόνων ἄπω*) (*Heracles* 1090-1). The confusion of his mind is seen through the previous description of the state of his eyes. They were rolling about in their sockets, thus not allowing knowledge or understanding to be let in and collected. He is alone and exclaims, “Help there! Is there some friend of mine anywhere who could cure my ignorance? For I do not recognize clearly anything I’m used to,” (*ὠή, τίς ἐγγὺς ἢ πρόσω φίλων ἐμῶν, δύσγνοιαν ὃστις τὴν ἐμὴν ἰάσεται; σαφῶς γὰρ οὐδὲν οἶδα τῶν εἰωθότων*) (*Heracles* 1106-7). He wants his lack of knowledge to be remedied so that he can understand and not be confused any longer.

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Heracles’ recognition is off as well, for while Lyssa possessed him, his facilities were also possessed, not allowing him to understand or know anything that he did. His father figure Amphitryon goes to Heracles and helps him understand. He says, “You can see for yourself, if you are now restored in mind,” (ὁρᾷς γὰρ αὐτός, εἰ φρονῶν ἢδη κυρείς) (Heracles 1117). The sight language here is indicative of understanding, urging Heracles to understand what he did, by allowing him to look with his eyes. Thus physical sight impacts understanding (or metaphysical sight) by means of allowing knowledge into the mind through the eyes. If the eyes are not capable of seeing and are rolling about, then knowledge and understanding are not possible, as we have seen through Lyssa’s impact on Heracles.

In Aeschylus’ Prometheus Bound, we see language similar to Heracles’ madness episode evident in Prometheus’ interaction with Io. She interrupts Prometheus with an exclamation due to gadflies following her, “the stroke of madness burns me again, / My brain is convulsed, the gadfly / Stings me with his immortal arrow. / My heart beats wildly in my body; / My eyeballs roll and turn; / Insanity falls on me like a raging storm / And drives me off course,” (ὑπό μ´ αὖ σφάκελος καὶ φρενοπληγείς μανίαι θάλπους, οίστρου δ´ ἀρδις χρέιε μ´ ἀπυρος: κραδία δὲ φόβῳ φρένα λακτίζει τροχοδίνειται δ´ ὀμμαθ´ ἑλίγδην, ἔξω δὲ δρόμου φέρομαι λύσσης πνεύματι μάργῳ) (Aeschylus, Prometheus Bound 876-882).27 She tells of how her eyeballs roll in her head and madness burns her again because of the stinging gadfly. However, what can we determine from the play based on sight words. For ‘to know’ (εἰδέναι) and ‘to see’ (ἰδεῖν) are connected in the Greek linguistic system by means of their shared root.28

27 All translations of Prometheus Bound are by Philip Vellacott.
At the opening of the play, when Strength and Violence (personified) drag Prometheus on stage with Hephaestus and are attaching him to the rocky-mountain top, Strength jabs at Prometheus by saying “you’re wrongly named, Prometheus, Wise-before-the-event!/Wisdom is just the thing you want, if you’ve a mind/To squirm your way out of this blacksmith’s masterpiece,” (ψευδωνύμως σε δαίμονες Προμηθέα καλούσιν: αὐτὸν γάρ σε δεὶ προμηθέως, ὅτω τρόπῳ τῆς᾽ ἐκκυλισθήση τέχνης) (Prometheus Bound 82-4). Prometheus’ name traditionally means fore-thought, as is slightly changed in the translation to “wise-before-the-event,” but the insult still remains. Strength jeers at the fact that Prometheus’ wisdom is not enough to release him from Hephaestus’ metal creations. This is the first observance of Prometheus’ wisdom of the play, hinting at the fact that if Prometheus was so wise, how did he not see his punishment coming?

When the chorus walks onto the stage, Prometheus begins his interaction with them in describing his intentions and providing backstory for the audience. Prometheus tells of the mortals and how they “at first/[were] Mindless, [he] gave them mind and reason” in the form of fire, which brought about other knowledge (Prometheus Bound 444). Before he brought them fire, “they had eyes, but sight was meaningless… [and] their every act was without knowledge, till I came,” (οἱ πρῶτα μὲν βλέποντες ἔβλεπον μάτην…ἄλλ᾽ ἀτερ γνώμης τὸ πᾶν ἐπρασοσον, ἔστε δὴ σφιν ἀντολάς ἐγὼ ἀστρων ἐδειξα τὰς τε δυσκόιτους δύσεις) meaning they had no understanding of the world around them (Prometheus Bound 447, 454). As the chorus and those who interact with Prometheus speak with him, they can see his sufferings which means they know that Zeus’ power cannot be fought.29 They try telling Prometheus this,
but he has other plans and views. He does not see as they do, because he can see in the future. Because of Prometheus’ foresight, he knows of Zeus’ eventual downfall, which causes him not to fear Zeus’ words, for he knows that Zeus is “not all-powerful,” the other characters just have “limited vision.” For, according to Prometheus, “not to know this is better for you than to know” (τὸ μὴ μαθεῖν σοι κρείσσον η μαθεῖν τάδε) which he addresses to Io, but can be applied to everyone he speaks with (Prometheus Bound 624).

The expansion of the vision terms starts with the mortal men who saw ‘in vain’ until Prometheus ‘cleared’ their vision and left them with “blind hopes” (“I planted firmly in their hearts blind hopefulness,” (τυφλὰς ἐν αὐτοῖς ἐλπίδας κατῴκισα) (Prometheus Bound 251)). Blind hopes are the hopes of the mortals after Prometheus gave them fire, and showed them how to live a better life through utilizing the skills and arts associated with fire. These blind hopes are founded upon wisdom, perception, and reason by Prometheus are not bad, as they provide grounds for trust and optimism of the future. By focusing on the ‘blind’ segment of ‘blind hopes’, we are able to surmise that because of the pain that comes from sight and knowledge, blind hopes are more optimistic and free from pain in the future. Completeness and accurateness of vision is not possessed by anyone in this play, not even by Prometheus and Zeus. We know that Prometheus does not have complete vision because he could not foresee his punishment, and we know that Zeus’s vision is not complete because Prometheus can see his fate. Thus, by coming to this conclusion, sight and knowledge “are not absolutes.” Two positions of vision are portrayed by the characters of Zeus and Prometheus. Zeus as a voyeur

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31 Ibid:33.
32 Ibid:34.
33 Tarkow 1986:89.
34 Ibid:95.
35 Larmour 1992:34.
and Prometheus as an exhibitionist.\textsuperscript{36} Zeus is a voyeur because he is trying to see without being seen, and his sight is attempting to control an object – Prometheus, and refusing to be seen as an object. Prometheus is an exhibitionist because he is concerned with being seen by others and his sight is an attempt to be showing, rather than be shown. His position in the play sets him up to be shown to the audience and his visitors in the play, but in talking with the other characters he shows them things that they did not know. The two positions of vision show a struggle for power – which god will control which. And thus, instead of fighting for power, vision is found to be a two-way process, “seeing and being-seen.”\textsuperscript{37} Zeus and Prometheus are imperfect in their vision and foolish in attempting to control the other.

Sophocles does not directly use the gods in his Oedipus Cycle, but the results are just as disastrous in his \textit{Oedipus Tyrannus}. Sophocles’ \textit{Oedipus Tyrannus} presents the main theme of physical sight compared to metaphysical sight in somewhat ironic terms. Maguire states the ironic discrepancy at the center of the play is between being and seeming, and between knowledge and reality.\textsuperscript{38} We will ignore the difference between being and seeming and, instead, focus on the disparity between knowledge and reality (and sight) for this chapter. \textit{Oedipus Tyrannus} is concerned with Oedipus’ quest for knowledge, the knowledge which he needs to come to peace, and the knowledge that will inevitably reveal and complete his destruction.\textsuperscript{39} He is initially shown as a man who solves the riddle of the Sphinx, and has knowledge on a more general level and is praised by a Priest of Zeus as the “mightiest man in the sight of all,”

\begin{quote}
(ὦ κράτιστον πᾶσιν Οἰδίπου κάρα) (Sophocles, \textit{Oedipus Tyrannus} 40).
\end{quote}

But he is provided

\begin{footnotes}
\item[36] Larmour 1992:34-5.
\item[37] Ibid:35.
\item[38] Maguire 1962:50.
\item[39] Ibid:50.
\item[40] All translations of \textit{Oedipus Tyrannus} are by G. P. Goold.
\end{footnotes}
with the knowledge that he is truly searching for by the prophet Tiresias, whom he ignores, but ultimately realizes that the prophet is correct, and he himself blind. This prophet is considered by Oedipus to be the man who will “reassure Oedipus, that is, relieve him of his fear with respect to his mother, by revealing who [Oedipus] once was” (*Poetics* 12.25-9). The major confusion that arises in the story of Oedipus is the problem of who Oedipus’ real parents are. By solving the riddle of the Sphinx, Oedipus wins Jocasta, the queen of Thebes, for his wife, but the queen is his biological mother, thus fulfilling the prophecy of Oedipus killing his father and marrying his mother (as he previously killed his father, who was a stranger to him, at a crossroads). The riddle of the Sphinx is meant to be shown as a contrast to his “failure to solve the riddle of his life.” Oedipus spends a majority of the play searching for the curse on the city of Thebes, when the man he was looking for was himself all along.

It is painful for the prophet Tiresias to behold the prophecy and to answer Oedipus’ questions when he is called. Oedipus demands that the old prophet tell him what he knows, and Tiresias exclaims “alas, alas, how dreadful it is to know when the knowledge/does not benefit the knower! I knew this well, but I/suppressed it; else I would not have come here” (*Oedipus Tyrannus* 316-8). He does not want to tell Oedipus the dreadful truth, because the knowledge is so painful to know. When Tiresias finally divulges the terrible knowledge, Oedipus becomes defensive by insulting the prophet’s sight capabilities: “[Truth has strength], except for you; you are without it, since you are blind in your ears, in your mind, and in your eyes,” (*ἄλλα ἔστι, πλὴν σοι: σοι δὲ τούτ’ οὐκ ἔστι ἔπει τυφλὸς τά τ´ ὑτα τόν τε νοούν τά τ´ ὀμματ´ εἰ*) (*Oedipus Tyrannus* 370-7). This is an obvious jab with a double meaning in both metaphysical and physical blindness. Oedipus does not want to believe what Tiresias provided

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41 Maguire 1962:50.
as truth, so proclaims that the old prophet is “blind” in his mind, meaning he does not understand the truth, and “blind” in his eyes, alluding to the fact that the prophet is, in fact, blind. Tiresias refutes Oedipus with a double meaning of his own, “and I say, since you have reproached me with my blindness, that you have sight, but cannot see what trouble you are in…now you have sight, then shall you look on darkness,”  

(λέγω δ’, ἐπειδὴ καὶ τυφλόν μ’ ὑνείδισας: σὺ καὶ δέδορκας κοῦ βλέπεις ἐν’ εἰ κακοῦ…βλέποντα νῦν μὲν ὀφθ’, ἐπείτα δὲ σκότον)

(Oedipus Tyrannus 413 & 419). The first argument points out that, although Oedipus has physical sight, he cannot “see” with his mind (i.e. understand) who he truly is and what trouble he is causing. Tiresias’ second argument is a sort of foreshadowing to the darkness that Oedipus will experience when he blinds himself.

In a fit of anger, brought on by Oedipus’ disrespect, Tiresias blurts out the entirety of what is wrong with Oedipus:

“And I say this to you: the
Man you have long been looking for, with threats and
Proclamations about the murder of Laius, that man is here! He
Is thought to be a stranger who has migrated here, but later
He shall be revealed to be a native Theban, and the finding
Will bring him no pleasure; for he shall travel blind instead
Of seeing, poor instead of rich, feeling his way with his
Stick. And he shall be revealed as being to his children
Whom he lives with both a brother and a father, and to his
Mother both a son and a husband, and to his father a sharer
In his wife and a killer.” (Oedipus Tyrannus 449-460)
Oedipus has been searching for the man who killed king Laius, when the man he is looking for is himself. He thought that he himself was a stranger to Thebes, but he was born in the city by the king and queen, and this shall be revealed to him later. The travelling blind phrase, refers to his eventual self-blinding when he will have to feel his way with a walking stick. Mentioning his family, alludes to the revelation of incest and his recognition of who he is. Jocasta, the queen of Thebes and Oedipus’ wife/mother, reveals her side of the story to Oedipus and he experiences a revelation in which he realizes that the prophet Tiresias “may have sight,” referring to his metaphysical sight and knowledge (Oedipus Tyrannus 747).

The realization comes to Oedipus in a “moment of blinding light” when he recognizes “who he is and what he has done.” Oedipus exclaims “oh, oh! All is now clear! O light, may I now look on you for the last time,” (ιοῦ ιοῦ: τὰ πάντ’ ἄν ἔξηκοι σαφῆ, ὦ φῶς, τελευταίον σε προσβλέψαμι νῦν) as he plans to blind himself upon “seeing the light” (i.e. understanding) (Oedipus Tyrannus 1182-3). The realization comes from “Oedipus’ will-to-know” and how it “cannot be suppressed.” His will-to-know led him to the tragic knowledge of his identity.

42 Maguire 1962:50.
Thus, his realization of reality and comprehension that leads to his knowledge leads to his self-mutilation which is both symbolic and literal. It is symbolic as he has fully attained knowledge of who he is and what he has done and he wants to become metaphorically blind to the knowledge, as he was before, meaning that he does not wish to know. The literal meaning comes from his desire to become physically blind so as he is not able to see what he has done, by fulfilling the prophecy.

Overall, the vision of tragedy has a pessimistic and optimistic side that are both easily visible in *Oedipus Tyrannus*. The pessimistic side focuses itself on the “crippling limitations on human knowing, the ironic discrepancy between being and seeing, [and] the unfathomable mystery of life.” In *Oedipus Tyrannus*, the limitations on human knowing are highlighted by Oedipus’ knowledge with regards to solving the riddle of the Sphinx, but his inability to know that the curse on the city of Thebes and the man he is looking for is himself. The discrepancy between being and seeing arise when Oedipus realizes who he is and what he has done, thus causing him to “see” truly for the first time. With the unfathomable mystery of life, Oedipus’ life journey and the prophecy seem to the audience to be unbelievable because of how far-fetched and tragic his life becomes. He grows up a regular man as royalty in Corinth and is told a prophecy of his life. He believes that the king and queen of Corinth are his real parents, and he sets off on a journey to prevent himself from fulfilling the prophecy. The mystery of his life is already present, as he does not know who he truly is. His story is tragic in its pessimism alone. The optimism of the tragedy is seen through Oedipus’ quest for truth, and, hopefully, his happiness. Initially, Oedipus’ journey is full of optimism, as he believes he is making a better

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life for himself. Then, his happiness never comes, as he fulfills the prophecy, which adds to the pessimism of the story.

The paradox of Oedipus is emphasized in the fact that eventually the blind see and vice versa. Oedipus really saw with his eyes, but then physically blinded himself, as the vision he would have seen would have been “too terrible for sight.” As physical sight is connected to knowledge and light and truth, so is darkness with their opposites. The physical blinding of Oedipus was his attempt to rid himself of the knowledge and truth that he realized of himself.

On philological grounds, Freud argues in his *Interpretation of Dreams* that the self-blinding of Oedipus is a “symbolic self-castration” for the crime of incest. But, in a metaphysical sense, as Helmbold states, Oedipus “puts out his eyes when he has finally been forced to see.” Oedipus’ self-blinding can be interpreted as the “annihilation of [his] identity.” In the moments before his blinding, Oedipus looks upon both metaphysical and physical light for the first and last time, respectively. Oedipus exclaims “that [his eyes] should not see his dread sufferings/ or his dread actions, but in the future they should see/in darkness those they never should have seen, and fail to/recognize those he wished to know.” (ὁθούνεκ ὁπὶ ὁψοίνινοι οἶνοι οὺθ᾽ οἰ᾽ ἔπασχεν οὐθ᾽ ὅποι᾽ ἐδρὰ κακά, ἀλλ᾽ ἐν σκότῳ τὸ λοιπὸν οὐς μὲν οὐκ ἔδει ὁψοίαθ᾽, οὐς δ᾽ ἔχοιεθεν οὐ γνῶσοιατο) (*Oedipus Tyrannus* 1271-4). He sees the metaphysical light for the first time, realizing who he is, and fully comprehending the knowledge for which he was searching. Thus, the realization leads to him seeing physical light for the last time upon blinding himself. So, as Helmbold states “the paradox of the *Oedipus* [is]: the blind see, yet those gifted with physical

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46 Helmbold 1951:293.
47 Freud 1973:36.
48 Helmbold 1951:293.
50 Helmbold 1951:297.
sight are, as it were, metaphysically blind.\textsuperscript{51} The recognition that Oedipus experiences is a “shift from ignorance to awareness,” either with regards to kinship or of hostility or in those who have been marked by the state of happiness or unhappiness (\textit{Poetics} 12.30-5). His recognition causes Oedipus to blind himself because of the change from unknowing to knowing and full comprehension.

\textsuperscript{51} Helmbold 1951:298.
Chapter 3: Seers and Sight

Greek tragedy presents those with other-worldly sight as oracles, seers, and prophets. They are ever-present in Greek tragedy, and all play pivotal roles in the stories as well. They present the past, present, and future to those who come to them by means of their specific talents. Prophets have a religious overtone, normally speaking a message directly from God. We will be focusing on oracles and seers as they are diviners, who interpret messages from the gods.

To start at the basic level, a seer (*mantis*) is professional diviner, or “an expert in the art of divination” and even “someone who can reveal the future, or things hidden from view.”52 The Greek word itself, *mantis*, has previously been translated as “prophet,” “diviner,” “sooth-sayer,” and “seer.” In modern times, there is no precise equivalent because seers acted as both confidant and personal adviser, while mixing in skills of psychics, fortune-tellers, and homeopathic healers. There is no one term or job for all of the skills that seers used to perform, but this distinction was important to make. However, by declaring that seers acted as a sort of fortune-teller, it needs to be stated that seers “did not presume to ‘tell the future,’ nor did they claim to possess a ‘paranormal’ power that was independent of a god’s inspiration or dispensation.”53 The Greek seer was not a messenger of the gods, rather the seer was an inspired interpreter of signs sent from gods.54 The word *mantis* is, however, “applied frequently to Apollo in tragedy, and also in comedy, oratory and philosophy, and to other gods and heroes or others to make prophecies.”55

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53 Flower 2008:22.
54 Ibid:30.
*Mantis* derives from the Indo-European root *men-* and means “one who is in a special mental state” or “one who speaks from an altered state.”\(^{56}\) This definition tells us that the *mantis* is someone who is in a special mental state of inspiration, and by using the etymology, a *mantis* was originally someone who “prophesied in an altered state of consciousness.”\(^{57}\) This altered state makes the *mantis* a specialist to whom a god grants prophetic insight, much like a singer who invokes and takes his inspiration from the Muses.

The competence of the seers was very broad, allowing them to know well the various forms of divination that are mentioned in literature. Although a *mantis* really had two primary areas of skill – reading the entrails of sacrificial victims and interpreting the flight of birds – they also had other divination practices.\(^{58}\) These forms of divination include “the interpretation of the movements, behavior, and cries of birds (augury) and the interpretation of dreams and of portents (such as lightning, thunder, earthquakes, eclipses, and any unusual occurrences).”\(^{59}\) Along with these methods, seers also examined entrails of sacrificial animals, looking for marks and deformities (called “extispicy”), while also interpreting the results of burning the entrails of the sacrificial animals (called “empyromancy”).\(^{60}\) Various types of divination, including “extispicy” and “empyromancy”, originated in the ancient Near East, probably arriving in Greece between the eighth and sixth centuries B.C. The competence of the seers was demonstrated in the practices of divination, but extended into healing and purification. A seer “could deal with any situation that fell under the broad rubric of things sent or caused by a supernatural power.”\(^{61}\)

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56 Flower 2008:23.
57 Ibid:23.
58 Bowden 2003:258.
60 Ibid:24.
61 Ibid:27.
However, the competence of the seers troubled some people, especially Euripides who made the comment “The best seer is the one who guesses well.” This statement implies how seers are not actually inspired or trained in many methods of interpretation of signs from gods, but merely guess the answer to a problem. I see this as seers who take in all the information they can either via word of mouth, or they do their research on whoever comes to them with a question, and they weigh their options and simply guess the answer that makes the most sense and is most likely to happen. This theory is supported by the successful seers in Greek history being called “migrant charismatic specialists.” This characterization can be broken down as follows: “migrant” applies to their traveling throughout the Greek world to South Italy and Asia Minor, “specialists” because of their claim to possess deep and mysterious knowledge, and “charismatic” because of their ability to inspire confidence in their extraordinary talents and because of their self-conscious awareness of their relationship with the supernatural. By this definition, common street magicians or psychics could claim to be seers just as easily. They also travel around, claim to possess special knowledge and talents that cannot (and will not) be shared, and are aware of their talents and gifts from the said supernatural. Through this combination of charisma, technical knowledge, and luck, seers were able to market their skills for high wages and make a considerable profit if their advice turned out to be helpful and correct. The reliability of the mantis was also an issue that occurred frequently, since a “pseudomantis threatens the whole relationship between gods and men” – mostly as someone doubting the powers and intent of the gods and of the people conveying the message.

62 Ibid:144.
63 Ibid:29.
64 Ibid:29.
65 Ibid:29.
reliability and the authenticity of the mantis can be called into question as well. Learning by observing the signs or omens (either consciously or unconsciously) can add to the ability of the mantis. Observing and learning come through physical sight and are turned into knowledge and intelligence. As humans, we are able to sort through external perceptive senses and distinguish what is a sign from the gods or what is pure coincidence. Some might say that because of this, “divination is nothing “divine” but rather an accumulation of experiences about the relevance and meanings of signs.”

Seers in the Greek world had much power, as previously discussed, and was not limited to only able-bodied people. Blindness was not a disqualifying defect, even though it sounds like seers needed to actually see with their eyes. In fact, Tiresias, a famous mythical seer was blind. Physical blindness seems to have been an advantage in Greek thought, since it heightened and promoted “inner vision.” This was true in many cultures, as they believed that blind people had special insight to situations that people with vision are not able to have. Blind seers were able to have a special “inner vision” and a more complete metaphysical sight because of their blindness.

The inner vision/metaphysical sight of seers can be seen throughout Aeschylus’ Prometheus Bound. I previously stated that responses of seers and oracles take into account the past, present, and future equally. Prometheus acts as a seer in the play foretelling the future and being able to foresee Zeus’ downfall, all while being able to show exact knowledge of the past. The cultural hero of the mortals is Prometheus who “was the originator of every skill (techne)

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68 Flower 2008:51.
69 Ibid:51.
70 Kamerbeek 1965:30.
and “who set in order the many ways of the art of divination (mantike).”\textsuperscript{71} He provided the mortals with a meaningful past, providing for them a means to become skilled in crafts, and allowing them a beginning in the crafty talent of divination. These various types of divination that Prometheus began are summarized in a passage in which Prometheus claims to have taught the mortals the art of divination and the details of the five significant methods that have “mantic significance; these are dreams, chance utterances, unexpected signs or omens, the flight of birds, the shape and color of entrails, and the flames from burnt sacrifice (484-99).”\textsuperscript{72}

Differing from \textit{Prometheus Bound}, Sophocles’ \textit{Oedipus Tyrannus} provides a better view of the blind seer Tiresias who, although treated poorly by Oedipus, gives Oedipus a correct prophecy showing the truth of his life and the answer to his search. It is tradition that in every tragic play the seers or oracles are validated in their correct prophecies, and that everyone who ridicules them are destroyed.\textsuperscript{73} This does not bode well for Oedipus already.

Tiresias is a “seer,” and not a “prophet” as some might think because, although he does claim to have divine inspiration in his interpretation of signs from the gods, he does not communicate directly with the gods without physical techniques.\textsuperscript{74} During the youth of the legendary Theban seer, he came across two snakes coupling on Mount Cithaeron and he struck them with his staff. He was immediately transformed into a woman. Seven years later, he came upon two snakes coupling and he struck them again, transforming back into a man. A short while later, while Zeus and Hera were disputing whether man or woman takes the greater pleasure from sex, they called Tiresias to settle the argument as he spent much time as both genders and had gained firsthand knowledge. Tiresias stated that women experienced more

\textsuperscript{71} Flower 2008:25.  
\textsuperscript{72} Ibid:90.  
\textsuperscript{73} Ibid:17.  
\textsuperscript{74} Ibid:30.
satisfaction. This angered Hera, who immediately blinded Tiresias. Zeus then gave him the gift of prophecy and the gift of a long life as a reward for his answer.\footnote{Tripp 1970:547.} Another story of the blinding of Tiresias is cited in Callimachus’ poem \textit{The Baths of Pallas}, that Tiresias had accidentally caught sight of Athena bathing and was instantly struck blind. As the son of Athena’s favorite nymph, she granted Tiresias second sight, long life, and “the unique boon of keeping his intelligence in Hades after death.”\footnote{Ibid:547.} One less exciting story is that Tiresias has revealed too many of the gods’ secrets to men, and so they punished him with blindness. In typical myths, the oracle or seer is often of elite status “(Tiresias descends from one of Thebes’ founding fathers), but his prophecies frequently set him against the ruling elite (Tiresias spars with both Oedipus and Creon).”\footnote{Johnston 2005:19}

Through the gods’ gift of seer craft, he enables mortals to share in the type of knowledge that the gods possess, just on a smaller scale. Sophocles made a problem of divination, however – “if the prediction made by Apollo at Delphi concerning the fate of Oedipus were to be falsified, if human manipulation were to prevail against the god’s oracle, the gods themselves would have failed, their power would have been abolished.”\footnote{Burkert 2005:36.} This gift of seer craft is why the chorus of \textit{Oedipus Tyrannus} refers to Tiresias as “the divine seer, in whom alone of mortals truth is implanted” (298-9).\footnote{Flower 2008:91.} Tiresias presents detailed descriptions of present and future events, and at our first meeting of Tiresias in the \textit{Oedipus Tyrannus}, Oedipus introduces him saying “Tiresias, you who observe all things, both things that can be taught and things that are unspeakable, things in heaven and things that tread upon the earth” (300-1).\footnote{Ibid:92.}
When Oedipus turns on Tiresias (385-96), he asserts that Tiresias is no mantis, but a magos (wizard) and agurtesi (beggar priest). This is the “harshest insult that one could pay a mantis.”\textsuperscript{81} By the convention of Greek myth, Tiresias was beyond criticism and anyone who doubted him was set for failure.\textsuperscript{82} Oedipus summons Tiresias so that the seer can tell him who the slayers of Laius were. However, the scene opens in a very problematic way. What kind of seer, when summoned in a crisis would say to his client “sorry, I know something important, but I just can’t tell you”?\textsuperscript{83} Tiresias surprisingly refuses to provide Oedipus with any information, and Oedipus loses his temper. Oedipus then forces Tiresias to reveal the truth that Oedipus himself is the murderer that he is searching for. As any supposed innocent accused person would do, Oedipus does not take this lightly and accuses Tiresias of being a fraud who had been sent by Creon and of accepting bribes. This scene ends with Tiresias both revealing the past (that Oedipus killed his father and married his mother) and the future (that he will be driven out of Thebes as a blind vagabond).\textsuperscript{84} In Oedipus’ attack on Tiresias (380-403), Oedipus called him a “wizard hatcher of plots” and a “deceitful beggar priest” who “only has sight for profit, but in his art is blind.”\textsuperscript{85} This accusation is especially meaningful in regards to it being directed at Tiresias because he actually is blind. His art allows him to have sight, however metaphysical, so for Oedipus to accuse him of being blind in his one art that gives him sight is extremely rude.

This consultation represents the inverse of the norm. A seer should not “be forced to read the signs, his interpretation should not be dismissed out of hand, his integrity should not be questioned, and he should not storm off while making dire predictions for the inquirer.”\textsuperscript{86}

\textsuperscript{81} Ibid:66.
\textsuperscript{82} Ibid:19.
\textsuperscript{83} Ibid:207-8.
\textsuperscript{84} Ibid:207-8.
\textsuperscript{85} Ibid:135.
\textsuperscript{86} Ibid:208.
However different from the norm the entire consultation was, the greeting and beginning of the meeting was entirely friendly, as Oedipus even addresses Tiresias as “lord” (anax) and “the only champion and savior whom we can find” (303-4). The attack on Tiresias’ credentials stems from Oedipus’ belief that Tiresias is a part of Creon’s plot to remove him from the throne. This prompts Oedipus to question Tiresias how it was that “if he truly was a true seer, [how he] could not help the Thebans with the riddle of the Sphinx, a task that required mantic art.” Here, Oedipus is equating knowledge and intellect with Tiresias’ seer-ability, and since the two are not related, Oedipus’ argument is faulty. Oedipus suggests that divination is useless based on the answer that he did not want to hear. He argues that his intelligence will help him to solve the puzzle of the murder of Laius, much like he solved the riddle of the Sphinx with his intelligence. At this moment, the visible facts that Oedipus presents obscure Tiresias’ wisdom, allowing Oedipus the space to prove that he is more intelligent than Tiresias. The only thing that Oedipus ends up proving is that intelligence is useless without all the facts. Yes, intelligence helped Oedipus solve the Sphinx’s riddle, but it did not help his metaphysical realization of his identity and that he killed his father and married his mother. Oedipus is not able to see the truth in Tiresias’ statements because they “reflect prophetic insight.” Human knowledge pales in comparison to that of prophetic insight that a seer provides. Thus, “both before and on his arrival he is spoken of and spoken to as the godlike depository of truth. At the end of the scene he is dismissed as a nuisance and a conspirator against the king.”

The insight that the blind seer Tiresias provides is more valuable than the intelligence that Oedipus possesses. Oedipus is unable to perceive the insight of the seer because he was

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88 Kane 1975:192.
89 Kamerbeek 1965:35
metaphysically blind to the truth. Blind seers, and those with sight, are able to see the truth and signs from the gods, whereas mere mortals are unable to even comprehend the complexities that are the full and meaningful truth that come from true sight.
Conclusion

As I have stated before, the concept of sight is best seen through the metaphysical understanding of Greek tragedy, while transcending the physical. Philosophy must first be argued to provide a background to metaphysical sight before delving into Greek tragedy. Plato argued this in his *Republic*, saying that being metaphysically blind is similar to being physically blind because one cannot sense what is around them or become enlightened visually by what is around them in the world. The eyes allow information from the world in, that information is converted into knowledge, but the information allowed in relies on one’s own metaphysical capabilities. So, if one does not have metaphysical capabilities (i.e. “sight”), then the information allowed in will have no effect on the person.

Wisdom is what is gained when the allowed in information turns for the better, as Socrates discovers in the *Apology*. By Socrates being aware that he is not the wisest being, he became the wisest being. He metaphysically sees and understands that he must not be wise because there are many things that he does not know. But by his being aware that he does not know everything, he becomes the wisest through his sight and understanding and self-awareness. This is what Plato and Aristotle focused on in some of their works, and I think it provides adequate background for the introduction of metaphysical sight as seen through Greek tragedy.

The first Greek tragedy that came to my mind in regards to containing the metaphysical and physical sight connection was Euripides’ *Heracles*. Upon Heracles’ completion of his labors, he returns home only to be possessed by the spirit of madness, Lyssa. This spirit causes him to fall into an unconscious darkness where he is not aware of his actions. The transformations that Heracles makes both into and out of madness contains sight and vision language. His transformation into madness tells of how he experiences a seizure in his eyes,
rolling pupils, and eyes rolling in their sockets (868, 932). This eye imagery is one of the most prominent signs that Heracles is not mentally present. Because he is not mentally present, he cannot have physical or metaphysical sight. His physical sight is restricted by his rolling pupils, not allowing information in, and therefore not allowing Heracles to be metaphysically aware of the actions he is committing. His transformation out of madness leaves Heracles confused when he awakens. Amphitryon, Heracles’ father figure, urges Heracles to understand by telling him the terrible deeds that Heracles committed while he was under the control of madness. By telling Heracles, he is flooded with information allowing him to see metaphysically what he did, and providing him with now unwanted knowledge.

Aeschylus’ Prometheus Bound contains sight and vision imagery that connects knowledge and wisdom to that sight. The titan that gave mortals fire, Prometheus, contains wisdom that is alluded to throughout the play. However, if Prometheus is so wise, how did he not see that his actions would have consequences? Complete knowledge is not possessed by Prometheus because of this fact, but it is important to also note that Zeus does not possess complete and accurate knowledge either. Prometheus is able to see Zeus’s fate, but Zeus is not able to see that. So, the sight and wisdom connection in the tragedy is a complicated one, as none of the characters possess accurate sight that allows them to have complete metaphysical sight, but that always leaves them short of complete knowledge.

The Greek tragedy that provides the clearest connection between physical and metaphysical sight is Sophocles’ Oedipus Tyrannus. Oedipus’ quest for knowledge (i.e. the killer of Laius) is a path that has a very dangerous end. By completing his knowledge journey, he will complete his own destruction also. At first, Oedipus is seen as an intelligent man who solves the riddle of the Sphinx and wins Jocasta, the queen of Thebes, for his wife. The blind
seer Tiresias provides answers to Oedipus, telling him the damning prophecy. Oedipus does not believe Tiresias’ prophecy and it is not until later when a messenger reveals the story that Oedipus fully realizes his mistakes. This realization gives Oedipus metaphysical sight along with his physical sight. Both of these sights do not last long, as Oedipus blinds his physical eyes because he had gained full knowledge of his past actions and how they have accumulated up to this point.

From what we have seen from Greek tragedies, seers provide audiences with the comparison between physical sight and metaphysical sight with knowledge and wisdom. The blind seer Tiresias in *Oedipus Tyrannus* showed us that although he was blind, he had more prophetic insight and metaphysical sight than any of his clients (especially Oedipus himself).

Physical and metaphysical sight work together, but to the unaware eye, this relationship is non-existent. The importance of the relationship between the two is immense, in that everything that we physically see can be transformed into metaphysical sight. With enough learning, both in and out of a formal learning environment, one may be able to attain metaphysical sight through physical sight. By only having physical sight, our perception is meaningless, as we cannot learn from the actions or mistakes that we or others make. On the other hand, by only having metaphysical sight, we are unable to observe the world around us and make knowledgeable inferences by means of our perception.

Thus, physical sight and metaphysical sight work hand-in-hand to allow in knowledge, thus allowing wisdom to form. The formation of wisdom in everyday life is very important, as we have seen in the three Greek tragedies. If wisdom were attained earlier in these three stories, there would most likely not be any treacherous repercussions. We have seen this take place in three Greek tragedies, all with differing story lines, but with a similar theme of metaphysical
sight and knowledge through that sight. Physical sight allows metaphysical sight to be formed and turn perceived knowledge into wisdom.
Bibliography


