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## ***Oedipus Tyrannus*: Evolution of Free Will**

The myth of Oedipus is one of humanity's oldest stories. It existed as a folktale in ancient times passed along in great oral tradition; it was written down by classic poets, including, perhaps most famously, Sophocles; it formed the basis for Shakespeare's *Hamlet*; it spawned a tradition of psychological introspection led by Sigmund Freud. Claimed by some to represent a universal human drive, the Oedipus story is one that is known by everyone in one form or another.

The definitive Oedipus story, *Oedipus Tyrannus*, was written by Sophocles, and is heralded as his greatest work. Sophocles's Oedipus leaves his home after an oracle from Apollo foretells of the murder of his father by Oedipus, and of Oedipus's marriage to his mother. Arriving at Thebes, Oedipus defeats the Sphinx, who has been terrorizing the village, and is crowned king. He takes Jocasta for his wife, the widow of the former king Laius, who was killed while traveling abroad. After years of peace, a new plague besets Thebes, and to save his people, Oedipus must drive from the city Laius's murderer. During his investigation, he learns that *he* was the murderer, and worse, that he is Laius and Jocasta's son. He has fulfilled the

prophecy he had tried so hard to run from, and in punishment, he gouges out his own eyes and banishes himself from Thebes.

In studying this version of the Oedipus myth, we ask why Sophocles represents the events above in the manner in which he did. More directly, to what can we attribute Oedipus's downfall? Given a cursory reading, we may claim that Oedipus is given what he deserves—he is blinded and cast out from his kingdom because of his transgressions against his parents and his hubristic actions trying to escape Apollo's oracle. This explanation, however, is not backed by fact: Oedipus blinds *himself* (in literature we have never seen a god act directly through a person to cause that person to act upon himself), an act that is not present in other Oedipus myths. Furthermore, his removal from his throne was purely due to the overzealous promise he made to his subjects to stop at nothing to find Laius's murderer, and to his keeping of that promise. Surely, as king, he could have gone back on his word once he discovered the horrible truth. His subjects (the Chorus) gave him many chances to do so: "I would be mad, / a reckless fool / to turn away my king." (ll. 693-695) He cast himself out, not his subject nor the gods.

Clearly, a more careful examination of Sophocles's story is needed. Sophocles begins *Oedipus Tyrannus* long after the events prophesized by Apollo have already taken place. In the end, there are only two intentional characters, Oedipus and Jocasta, who act on their own. Gods are not present in the story at all, except

through reference. Each of these aspects of Sophocles's version point to a deeper meaning encoded in the story. The style, events, and context of the story force us to conclude that our original question was misleading. Assuming the gods inflicted Oedipus's suffering leads us to an incorrect and perhaps unanswerable question.

If we view Oedipus's blinding and banishment not as punishments by the gods but as the logical and moral conclusions to his actions, we can see an alternative structure to the story. Oedipus, and in fact all of Thebes, is tested by the gods for a moral structure and an ability to self-rule. Sophocles asks, in essence, can humanity (as represented by the Thebans), without intervention from the gods, survive on its own, developing a moral and ethical structure that is necessary for a society to survive? Sophocles claims the answer to this question is yes. He presents, at least in part, a character, Oedipus, who behaves morally and ethically, without the need for input from the gods.

Sophocles's presentation of Oedipus's story is important. He begins where other versions of the myth end—after Apollo's prophecy has already come true. There must be some reason for this departure. Sophocles's intention is to get the Oedipus story out of the way. While he could start at the end of the myth and present the events looking into the past, which would be merely a retelling of the story, he doesn't. Sophocles is more interested in exploring Oedipus after he has

already committed his outrageous acts. The story is about what Oedipus does once he is in that situation.

By beginning the story after Oedipus has already killed his father and married his mother, Sophocles gets around a major limitation of the Oedipus myth: Apollo's prophecies. Apollo foretells that Oedipus will commit certain heinous acts, which, try as he might, Oedipus is unable to escape. However, once those acts are completed, Oedipus is a free man; there are no further prophecies made by the gods about his future. By beginning where he did, Sophocles no longer must present the entire story, which was already known by most of his audience (Oedipus was one of the popular characters around which many Greek poems and plays were based). He is free to take the story further, and to use Oedipus's situation to present his own message.

The characters in *Oedipus Tyrannus* are of two kinds: those who act intentionally and those who act involuntarily. Oedipus and Jocasta are of the former category; they act of their own volition, they alone exhibit free will. Everyone else, most notably Creon, is of the latter category; they cannot function without being told what to do.

Jocasta does not exhibit her own free will until the end of the story. Learning the truth about Laius's death and Oedipus's heritage frees her to remove her life from

the gods' hands and to take action on her own. She hanged herself "by her own hand." (ll. 1239)

Oedipus's free will is evident from the beginning, when he chooses to follow Apollo's and Creon's proclamation to find the assassin: "Then I—I shall begin again. I shall not cease until I bring the truth to light." (ll. 134-135) Although he slowly discovers that Apollo's prophecy did come true, Oedipus does not let go of his drive to control his own life: "Why should we even look to oracles, the prophetic words delivered at their shrines or the birds that scream above us?" (ll. 965-967) In the end, when the truth is fully uncovered, Oedipus takes his punishment upon himself: "Her gold brooches, her pins—he tore them from her gown and plunged them into his eyes again and again and again and screamed, 'No longer shall you see the suffering you have known and caused!'" (ll. 1266-1268) Gods did not prophesy Oedipus's blinding; it was an action he undertook on his own. His banishment was also self-inflicted: "He cries out that he will banish himself from the land to free this house of the curse that he has uttered." (ll. 1289-1291)

While it is clear that Oedipus acts on his own throughout the story, his capacity for free thought does grow. He is limited, in the beginning, to choosing to comply with or oppose the bidding of the gods. When told of Apollo's decree to find and banish Laius's murderer or "pay for blood with blood" (ll. 99-100) (Oedipus is

presented a choice), he chooses to go along with the god (although he could easily have decided to ignore the god's rule). He is unable, however, to arrive at the decision independently; it must be placed in front of him, and he must be forced to choose. By the end, he has gained this important capacity. Oedipus presents *himself* with the option to gouge out his eyes and to banish himself. "It was my own hand that struck the blow. Not his." (ll. 1247-1248)

Oedipus's maiming and banishment are punishments self-inflicted because he feels guilt for the horrendous acts he committed. Jocasta hangs herself because of her similar feelings of guilt. Their self-intentionality allows them to act honorably and ethically, without intervention from the gods. As a fair king who will protect and help his, Oedipus has the capacity to act nobly subjects: "I have heard your prayers and answer with relief and help...I will leave nothing untried to expose the murderer of Laius." (ll. 220-221, 249-250) In the end, he shows that he can do so on his own.

The chorus, on the other hand, follows the words of the gods: "I obey the laws / the heavens have begotten / and prescribed. / Those laws created by Olympus. / laws pure, immortal, / forever lasting, essence of the god / who lives in them." (ll. 866-872) Creon acts similarly. At the start, he implores Oedipus to comply with Apollo's wishes: "The god's command is clear: we must find the assassin and destroy him." (ll. 106-107) In the end, Creon does not change. He is still as

dependent upon the gods as he was at the beginning: “But I must wait and do the will of the god.” (ll. 1437-1438). He does not grow: he exhibits no capacity to govern himself and he cannot make a moral and ethical decision without first asking the gods for guidance. *He* is the pitiable character.

We never see the gods directly in *Oedipus Tyrannus*. Only through messages brought by other characters do the gods make their will known. By the beginning of the story, the gods have already handed down the oracles of which the messengers speak. Moreover, most of the oracles that are spoken of are not from the gods directly, but rather from the priests of their temples: “An oracle came to Laius once from the Pythian priests—I’ll not say from Apollo himself.” (ll. 711-713) This serves to distance the gods from the story, a technique Sophocles uses to drive his point home: In the absence of divine intervention, humans have the capacity to rule themselves in a moral and ethical manner.

Through these devices, Sophocles presents a society that, at least in part, can act responsibly and ethically without the need to look to the gods for guidance.

Oedipus is presented not as someone who should be pitied because of the terrible acts he has committed, since these acts were already complete when the story begins. Rather, he represents a better society, one which, given a situation that is

deemed immoral (and in this case heinous), can respond in a socially responsible fashion, without depending on the gods.

The society's transformation is not complete in Sophocles's *Oedipus Tyrannus*.

There are still those who cannot make this leap from theocracy to democracy.

Creon, we see at the end of the story, still cannot act on his own, and must ask the gods for help. The society, however, is a far cry from those presented in previous Greek dramas, where everything that happens is by the will of the gods—it is more moderate. Sophocles provides a stepping stone between a society completely ruled by the gods and one ruled by the people, in order that his contemporaries could understand the transition their society was undergoing.