

# Class Eight - Oedipus Rex (Beginning to 862)

Philosophical Perspectives - Ryan Simonelli

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## 1 The “Tragedy” of Socrates and the Tragedy of Oedipus

- **Is the Death of Socrates Really Tragic?:** At the end of the *Phaedo*, Socrates compares himself to a tragic character, saying “my fated day calls me now, as a tragic character might say.” Clearly, however, Socrates does not actually regard his fate as tragic at all. The wisdom he achieves through philosophy *saves him* from true tragedy.
- **Saved by Wisdom:** Socrates is saved from true tragedy by philosophical wisdom in two ways, as spelled out in the *Phaedo*.
  - **Understanding Immortality:** Though the understanding of the soul he achieves philosophically, he is able to establish that the soul is immortal, and so he does not fear death.
  - **Purifying the Soul:** His quest for philosophical wisdom has actually prepared him for death, purifying the soul so that it will transition peacefully into the underworld, unhindered by the body.
- **Knowledge as Always to be Pursued over Self-Interest:** Socrates tells Simmias not take any regard for his own well-being in arguing against him, but to simply seek the truth:

“If you will take my advice, you will give but little thought to Socrates but much more to the truth. If you think that what I say is true, agree with me; if not, oppose it with every argument and take care that in my eagerness I do not deceive myself and you,” (91b-c).

  - **Question:** Suppose Simmias or Cebes really had a knock-down refutation of Socrates’s arguments for the immortality of the soul, such that, if they gave it, Socrates would lose all hope that a “good future” awaits him after death (63c). Should they give it? Should Socrates really want them to give it?
- **Oedipus as a Tragic Counterpoint:** The fate of Oedipus is genuinely tragic. Unlike Socrates, who is saved by knowledge, Oedipus is destroyed by knowledge. It seems, at various points in the play, that Oedipus could avoid his tragic fate if only stopped seeking the truth. Despite receiving several warnings, he seeks the truth anyway, and it is ultimately his downfall. The play makes us question whether it *is* always good to pursue knowledge or self-knowledge, whether it can be good to remain in ignorance.

## 2 Historical Context of *Oedipus Rex*

- **Ancient Greek Theatre and Tragedy:**
  - Plays were performed at festivals in which different playwrights competed against one another.
  - Tragic competitions generally had three playwrights who competed, presenting three tragedies and one *saytr* (a lighter play, more in the spirit of a comedy).
  - Tragedies had a *chorus*, a group of performers who sang, dance, and gave a sort of running commentary on the play.

- The main character of a tragedy is generally a *tragic hero*, a generally virtuous character with whom the audience is sympathetic, who faces a terrible fate.
  - \* Often the downfall of the tragic hero is directly tied to their virtue. The tragic hero *errs*, but their erring is not a moral failing. Rather, it is often a direct product of their attempt to exercise moral virtue.
- **Sophocles:**
  - Born 496BC, died 406 (once again, for reference, 7 years before the trial and death of Socrates).
  - One of the most prolific and celebrated playwrights in ancient Athens, writing over a 120 plays and winning 24 of the 30 competitions he entered.
- **Oedipus Rex:**
  - One of three plays in the Oedipus Trilogy.
    - \* In chronological order it is the first play, followed by *Oedipus at Colonus*, where Oedipus dies, and *Antigone*, which takes place after Oedipus dies whose main character is Oedipus and Jocosta's daughter, Antigone.
    - \* In order of writing and appearance, however, Antigone was the first written and performed in 441BC, Oedipus Rex was first performed around 429BC, and Oedipus at Colonus was written shortly before Sophocles's death in 406BC and first performed in 401BC.
  - Aristotle's favorite play, discussed by him in the *Poetics*, thought of as an exemplar of the tragic genre.
  - In Greek, the name is *Oedipus Tyrannus*, or "Oedipus the Tyrant"
  - The name "Oedipus" is a play on the Greek word "oida," which means "I know."

### 3 Setting and Background

- **A Greek Mythical Legend:** Sophocles didn't invent the character Oedipus; he was a figure in Greek mythology that was spoken of centuries before Sophocles's plays. Sophocles presumes some knowledge of the mythology.
- **The Sphinx:** Thebes had been guarded by the Sphinx, a creature with the head of a woman, the body of a lion, and the wings of a bird. The Sphinx would eat anyone who was coming or going into Thebes who could not solve her riddle.
- **How Oedipus Became King:** Creon, the brother of Jocosta, and king of Thebes after the death of king Laius, offered the kingdom to anyone who could free it from the hold of the Sphinx by solving its riddle. Oedipus, who had left Corinth after hearing the prophecy (to avoid killing his father and marrying his mother), went to Thebes and was able to solve the riddle of Sphinx.
  - The riddle that Oedipus purportedly solved is the following:
 

Which is the creature that has one voice, but has four feet in the morning, two feet in the afternoon, and three feet at night?

After solving the riddle, Oedipus became king and took Jocosta (the former wife of Laius) as his wife.
- **The Opening Scene:** At the start of the play, a plague has descended upon Thebes. Oedipus sends Creon to the oracle at Delphi to see what the gods want him to do to save the city. Creon comes back and tells Oedipus that the plague will end only when the murderer of Laius, who is said to be in Thebes, is brought to justice.
- **Some Funny Forshadowing:** Oedipus says that he will fight for Laius "as if he were my very own father and stop at nothing to find the one who has this man's blood on his hands," (264-266).

## 4 Tiresias: The Blind Prophet

- **Tiresias:** Creon advises Oedipus to bring a prophet “with the gift of sight” (284) named Tiresias who will be able to tell them who killed Laius.
- **The Metaphor of Blindness:** There is clearly some symbolism at play with the notion of blindness here.
  - Recall Socrates’s claim that true knowledge is not of the visible at all, at least, not that which is visible with human eyes. That which can be seen with human eyes is really illusory.
  - A similar thought seems to be symbolized here (and this symbolism will come back at the end of the play): the real truth is hidden behind what is visible, what is apparent.
  - There is, however, an important contrast. In the case of Socrates, the truth that lies behind the visible appearances is *good*. In the case of Oedipus, the truth that lies behind the visible appearances is very very bad.
- **The Potential Perils of Knowledge:** Tiresias pleads with Oedipus that he not force him to provide him with the knowledge he has—the truth is better kept unknown:
  - “It is a hateful thing to know when nothing can be gained from knowledge,” (316-217).
  - “Please let me go home. It’s for the best,” (320).
  - “[I]t’s best I say nothing,” (325).
- **Question:** Oedipus has just said that Tiresias is a “great visionary, mystic teacher,” (300). He seems to put quite a bit of faith in the understanding of Tiresias, and yet he doesn’t trust this understanding enough to heed the warning that it is best he not know. Is he being inconsistent here? Why wouldn’t he
- **A Solver of Riddles:** It’s worth noting again here that Oedipus is “the greatest solver of riddles,” having solved that of the Sphinx:

OEDIPUS: Is everything you say shrouded in dark riddles?  
TIRESIAS: Are you not the greatest solver of riddles?  
OEDIPUS: Insult me there and you’ll discover just how great I am.  
TIRESIAS: Yet your blessing proves to be your curse. (439-442)
- **Though, Honestly, Not a Very Good Riddle-Solver:** When we read the play, we get the sense that Oedipus is *really bad* at piecing together the evidence. He gets *a lot* of hints, and, about half way through, we’re like *come on, it’s not that hard to figure out*. This adds to drama of the play, because *we*, the audience, are able to discern the underlying truth before Oedipus, and we know that Oedipus, in his quest for the truth, will find it. So, we get a sense of the very fate that is foretold by the oracle.

## 5 Paranoia and Road Rage

- **Turns on Creon:** Oedipus suspects that Creon conspired with Tiresias to slander him and usurp him as king, and so wants to exile him or put him to death.
  - Creon explains why Oedipus’s theory makes no sense. The chorus says that anyone who thinks about it for a minute will agree. Yet Oedipus says he must act quickly, so doesn’t have time to really consider the reasoning.
  - Here again, Oedipus has claimed that he really wants to seek the truth, and yet not only doesn’t listen to the prophet but jumps to a conspiracy theory in order to discount what the prophet said.
- **Jocasta’s Revelation:** Jocasta tells Oedipus that he shouldn’t put much credence in oracles or soothsayers, since she was told that Laius would be killed by his son, but instead was “killed by strangers at a place where three roads meet,” (716).

- At this point Oedipus finally pauses for a moment and thinks “Uh oh . . . that might have been me.”
- Oedipus reveals that before coming to Thebes, he killed a man (and the several people he traveled with) at a place where three roads met after he attacked them when they ordered him out of their way.
- **Question:** What do we think of Oedipus as a tragic hero? Recall, tragic heroes are generally supposed to be, on the whole, virtuous, and we’re supposed to pity them as they fall into their tragic fate. What do we feel about Oedipus as a character at this point in the play?

## 6 How Blind Is Oedipus, Really?

- **Evidence:** Here’s Oedipus’s evidence, by the end of what we read:
  - Told by the oracle at Delphi that he would kill his father and marry his mother. (790-794)
  - A drunken dinner guest shouted that he was not Polybus’s son. (779-780)
  - Killed an older man who would have been about his father’s age (and who looked kind of like him) at a place where three roads meet, matching the rough timeline for the death of Laius.
  - Learns that the killer of Laius is in Thebes (110).
  - Tiresias (a by all reports credible soothsayer) says that he killed Laius (362), indicates that he doesn’t know his actual parents (415), and also repeats the prophecy that he killed his father and married his mother.
  - Learns that an independent oracle prophesized to Jocasta that Laius would be killed by the son of he and Jocasta. Moreover, that Jocasta and Laius had their son “thrown away—by other people—into a wilderness of mountains” when he was three days old. (711-719).
  - Learns that Laius was killed “at a place where three roads meet” and, moreover, that Laius fits the description of the old guy he killed (about his size, just starting to gray).
- **Counter-Evidence:** Here’s his counterevidence:
  - The reports of Laius’s death, which are said to be “meaningless old rumors” (291) is that he was killed by multiple travelers, whereas Oedipus was traveling solo.
- **Conclusion:** Here’s his conclusion at the end of what we read:
  - When Jocasta says that he has nothing to worry about he agrees, saying “You are right, of course” (859), though proceeds to investigate the matter further.
- **Question:** What are we to make of Oedipus’s apparent pursuit for the truth in light of this? Is he just really bad at piecing together the evidence? Or do we think that there must be some sense in which Oedipus really already knows, and he’s just refusing to admit it to himself?