

Class Nine - Oedipus Rex (863 to end) and Freud

Philosophical Perspectives - Ryan Simonelli

October 25, 2022

1 The Events in the Rest of *Oedipus Rex*

- Oedipus receives word from a Corinthian that Polybus, his (adopted) father, has died, and he's relieved that the prophecy isn't true.
 - Once again, it should be very clear to him at this point that if the prophecy is true, then it is not Polybus who's his father but Laius, but we already know he's pretty bad at piecing together evidence.
- The Corinthian then reveals to Oedipus that Polybus is not his biological father and he received Oedipus as a baby from another shepherd, who he says is the very same one that they have called for, who was supposed to throw Oedipus away.
- Jocasta begs Oedipus: "By all the gods, if you care for your for your life, Stop these questions," (1060-1061).
 - Oedipus replies "You'll never persuade me to give up the truth," (1065).
 - *Somehow* Oedipus still doesn't see the truth, and thinks that Jocasta is worried that they'll find out he's of lowly origins and that will hurt her claim to nobility as his wife.
 - Jocasta clearly recognizes the truth at this point and says "Your fate is dismal. I pray you never know the man you are," (1068).
- They bring in the other shepherd who, once again, urges Oedipus to stop asking questions, but they prepare to torture him and he starts to speak up.
 - Oedipus realizes he's on the edge of hearing terrible things, "But hear them I must" (1170), he says.
 - Oedipus *finally* realizes the truth. The light shines on him and he sees clearly for the first time.
- Jocasta hangs herself and Oedipus gouges his eyes out with the gold pins from her clothes.
 - Recall the blind prophet, Tiresias. Though blind, he saw the truth. Oedipus, while he could see, was blind to the truth; now that he sees the truth, he is blind.
 - Criticizing what Oedipus did, the Chorus says "Better to die than be blind," (1368). This is an interestingly and ironic expression of the principle that drove Oedipus to his own demise, his quest for truth, for clarity, for sight, even when he was told, again and again, that seeing the truth would be his own destruction.
- **The Closing Message:** "Never say a man is happy until he's crossed life's boundary free from grief," (1529-1530).
- **Question:** Suppose Oedipus had not sought answers and died without knowing the truth. Would we say he lived a happy life? Would we say he lived a good life?

2 The Inescapability of Fate

- **A Self-Fulfilling Prophecy:** The only reason the events depicted and discussed in the play which make the prophecy true transpired is because the characters were worried about the prophecy and so took steps to try to avoid it.

- **Some Cases of this Sort of Thing:**
 - **The Appointment in Samarra (from Shreyas's Post):** There was once a merchant in the famous market at Baghdad. One day he saw a stranger looking at him in surprise and he knew that stranger was Death. Pale and trembling, the merchant fled the marketplace and made his way many, many miles to the city of Samarra, for there he was sure Death could not find him. But when at last he came to Samarra, the merchant saw, waiting for him, the grim figure of Death. "Very well," said the merchant. "I give in. I am yours. But tell me, why did you look surprised when you saw me this morning in Baghdad?" "Because," said Death, "I had an appointment with you tonight—in Samarra."
 - **The Final Destination Movies:** In the *Final Destination* movies, the characters know that they're all fated to die, and most of their deaths are the result of their attempts to avoid their death.
 - **This Funny Clip:** https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tIKj0SPc6_A
- **Question:** If you could know how you would die, would you find out? Would finding out and attempting to avoid it even make sense? What good could knowing it be if you couldn't avoid it on the basis of this knowledge?

3 Freud and the Psychoanalytic Reading of *Oedipus Rex*

- **Sigmund Freud:**
 - Lived from 1856 to 1939.
 - Neurologist, founder of psychoanalysis, with ventures into anthropology, religious theory, and many other fields.
 - One of the most important figures not just in psychology, but across all of the humanities.
 - Originator of the idea of the *subconscious*, and one of its most central forms: the "Oedipus Complex."
- **Why Read Freud in this Context?:** The name "Oedipus" is now forever associated with the "Oedipus Complex," and so it's worth looking at Freud's influential reading of *Oedipus Rex*, even if only to ultimately discount it.
- **Freud on Oedipus:** "His fate moves us only because it might have been our own, because the oracle laid upon us before our birth the very curse which rested upon him."
 - Freud is making an analogy here between the fatedness of Oedipus, in virtue of the prophecy, and our own fatedness, in virtue of our subconscious desires.
 - He thus sees the *Oedipus Rex* as a mythical representation of our own subconscious desires, the idea that we are driven in action by things that are beyond our control and of which we have no conscious knowledge.
- **Freud's "Oedipus Complex":** One parent primarily satisfies the desires of the young child, who is initially dependent, and the child regards that parent themselves as the most significant object of desire. The other parent comes into the picture as a *rival* who takes that parent away from the child, to where the child cannot go (the bedroom), and the child desires to get rid of that parent so that they can replace them and possess the other parent for themselves.
 - The general form of the complex, abstractly characterized, the child's wanting to *be* one parent and *have* the other.
 - In what Freud regards as a paradigm example, we have boy in a conventional family who desires the mother and wishes to get rid of the father.
 - But this just a paradigm example—the phenomenon is supposed to be general. The general structure—the "roles" of the various parents—could be played by various people, they don't need to be a mother and a father (they could, for instance, be two

fathers or two mothers), and they don't actually even need to be related. It could be, for instance, a single parent and a close friend of theirs.

- **Question:** How should we think of the status of the concept of the Oedipus Complex? It's status as an empirical hypothesis in psychology is controversial (to say the least). But might it still be powerful as a sort of literary concept, perhaps a sort of mythology of the human?
 - Freud himself seemed to take the concept rather literally as an empirical hypothesis, but it's not clear what to make of its occurrence in the work of his more humanistic successors.
 - **Oedipus is Not Oedipal, Not Even According to Freud (I don't think):** Jonathan Leer, says "According to Freud, Oedipus acts out unconscious childhood wishes which we all share—to possess one parent and get rid of the other," (39). I don't think Freud himself suggests this.
 - If we were to apply Freud's theory to Oedipus, the character, it would be Polybus and Merope who he'd unconsciously desire to kill and marry, since these are the people who fulfilled the "father" and "mother" roles when Oedipus was a young child.
 - Freud's take, as I understand it, is that Oedipus is a mythical representation of our own desires that he is not himself depicted as possessing.
 - **The General Structure, Perfectly Fulfilled:** We see exactly the general structure of the Oedipal desire fulfilled in *Oedipus Rex*: the boy comes to *be* his father, literally taking the place of Laius, and comes to *have* his mother ("I own his bed and make his wife mine," (259)).
 - **Freud's One Bit of Textual Evidence:** Freud's one bit of textual evidence that supports his reading is the following line from Jocasta, trying to ease Oedipus of his worries about sleeping with his mother:

"Many a man has slept with his own mother in a dream," (981-982).
 - **A Bit More (Less Direct) Textual Evidence:** The chorus (whose voice, recall, is supposed to represent our own, as the audience) says, towards the end:

You are my pattern, your fortune is mine, you, Oedipus, your misery teaches me to call no mortal blessed.
- Of course, this doesn't support the claim that it's *Freud's* sense in which Oedipus's fortune is ours, but it does make clear that, somehow, Oedipus's tragic fate is a mythical representation of some aspect of our own situation.
- **Oedipus Narratives in Popular Culture:** Consider *Star Wars*. There, Luke aspires to kill Darth Vader who happens to be his father. He doesn't have a mother, but his romantic desires are focused on Leia, who happens to be his sister.
 - **Question:** Since the desires of which these stories are theorized to be manifestations are *subconscious*, and not reflectively available to us, how could we know whether they really are manifestations of such desires or not?
 - **Psychoanalysis and Self-Fulfilling Prophecies:** One of the classical critiques of psychoanalysis is that it lends itself to self-fulfilling prophecies, not completely unlike the ones that we encounter in the play. It basically works like this:
 - The analyst suggests something as an interpretation of the patient's subconscious.
 - The patient, who trusts the analyst, internalizes the suggestion of the analyst.
 - This internalization actually makes the original suggestion of the analyst correct.

But perhaps this is not unique to psychoanalysis. Might this be how all myths work and take hold in our consciousness?