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Source: *CEA Critic*, Vol. 37, No. 2 (January 1975), pp. 16-20

Published by: The Johns Hopkins University Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44378073>

Accessed: 03-04-2020 17:45 UTC

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# HUMAN SUFFERING AND DIVINE JUSTICE IN THE OEDIPUS REX

From Homer to Euripides Greek literature ponders the relation between divine justice and human suffering. Sometimes the suffering seems a denial of justice. "We men," says Achilles in that marvelous scene with Priam, "are wretched beings, and the gods, who have no cares themselves, have woven sorrow into the very pattern of our lives." (The translation of the *Iliad* is by E. V. Rieu, published by Penguin Books. Since they are readily available, I shall refer to Penguin editions throughout.) In the vision of the two jars which these gloomy words introduce, Achilles sees both good fortune and bad as matters of chance, not as divine responses to human virtue or folly. The opposite view prevails in the *Odyssey*, which begins with Zeus's complaint that while men blame the gods, they are themselves responsible for their pain. He underlines his point by the sorry end of Aegisthus, whose reckless disregard of the warnings of Hermes has earned him death. The disasters that destroy Eurylochos and most of Odysseus' crew, as well as the winning death of the Suitors, are further proof of Zeus's assertion. In the optimistic, clearly-lit universe of the *Odyssey*, suffering is the demonstration of divine justice, not its denial.

Both views are to be found in Sophoclean drama. Closing the Prologue of the *Ajax*, Athena warns Odysseus to "beware of uttering blasphemy / Against the gods; beware of pride puffed up / By strength or substance." *The Women of Trachis*, on the other hand, ends with the bitter speech of Hyllus, delivered over the corpse of his father Heracles, to whose agonized death the audience has been exposed with a directness unusual in Greek tragedy:

Let all men here forgive me,  
And mark the malevolence  
Of the unforgiving gods  
In this event. We call them  
Fathers of sons, and they  
Look down unmoved  
Upon our tragedies.

Hyllus' assessment of man's suffering is at the opposite pole to Athena's; it is a powerful indictment of uncaring, even malevolent gods, who destroy their human victims with unspeakable cruelty.

Between the divine justice manifested in Athena and the Manichaeian despair of Hyllus, where does the *Oedipus* fit? Certainly the play is deeply concerned with human suffering, but it seems to me to share neither the relative optimism of the *Ajax* nor the pessimism of *The Women of Trachis*. In what follows I shall try to explain why the *Oedipus* cannot be reduced to either of these extreme views, and finally what it does imply about the paradox Christians would call the problem of evil.

If the *Oedipus Rex* elaborates only a more subtle version of the ethical position expressed in the *Ajax*, we should be able to fit its protagonist to the pattern of the flawed hero described by Aristotle. Admittedly, the phrase “tragic flaw” slides over uncertainties about what *hamartia* means in the *Poetics*. As a concept of modern criticism, however, “tragic flaw” appears most useful if it is understood broadly enough to cover both criminal ambition (Macbeth, Agamemnon, for example) and egregious errors of judgment (the blind self-righteousness of such Euripidean figures as Hippolytus and Pentheus or the stubborn certitude of Lear).

Moreover, the concept is subject to several qualifications. A tragic flaw must be “tragic”; it must issue in a catastrophe. Nor does the flaw obviate free will and moral responsibility. It is not a determining psychological state over which the protagonist has no control. It merely explains, dramatically if not scientifically, why he chose a wrong action. Finally we should note that a flaw is not a necessary condition of tragedy. There are tragic figures, in both ancient and modern literature, that simply cannot be stretched to fit the conception of the hero who brings on his own ruin by foolish or immoral choice. Achilles’ preference for glory over life is noble, not foolish; Antigone’s decision to uphold the unwritten law in the face of Creon’s tyranny elicits our admiration (or should). Such characters, poised between a noble death and a base existence, choose honorably. They are tragic, but they are not flawed.

Understanding “tragic flaw” in these terms, we may ask: Is Oedipus flawed? Certainly he owns traits which are potential flaws. He is confident – even arrogantly so – in the efficacy of human reason, trusting to his powerful intellect to solve all problems. And while I do not think him untouched by compassion for his people (some critics have argued this), still he holds himself above common men, and is looked upon almost as a god by such men.

To be genuine tragic flaws, however, these qualities – weaknesses, if you will – must connect causally with Oedipus’ disaster. Here much depends upon what one takes that disaster to be. If it is defined simply as committing patricide and incest, then the question of a flaw is meaningless. By the premises of Sophocles’ play these actions lie outside the area of Oedipus’ will. They are foreordained “crimes” which he could not avoid.

On the other hand, it may be argued that the hero’s catastrophe is not committing these deeds but rather discovering his guilt. The discovery, unlike the crimes themselves, is a volitional action. He forces the investigation and thus is responsible for the truth it uncovers. A tragic flaw, however, must issue in a choice indisputably wrong: the most sinuous apologist could not convince us that Macbeth does a good deed. But a good deed is exactly what Oedipus does do. Forcing out truth, he averts disaster to Thebes. Far from behaving badly, Oedipus acts with great courage in continuing the investigation, conscious of the risk it involves; for Jocasta’s incidental remark about the crossroads makes clear the possibility that he may unknowingly have killed his predecessor.

Thus, if Oedipus’ disaster be taken either as committing the crimes or as discovering his guilt, it is not possible to conclude that he is a flawed hero, whose suffering is justified by culpability. A third possibility remains: that the catastrophe is less the crime or its recognition than the punishment. Here, perhaps, a case may be made that the play follows an Aristotelian pattern. Significantly, the sentence is both pronounced and executed by Oedipus. Early on, he condemns the killer of Laius and even those who may unwittingly have sheltered the murderer. The sentence is premature and in a way foolish, ignoring intention and circumstance and assuming guilt to reside solely in the act. From the point of view of modern law, carefully weighing intent, Oedipus’ adjudication does seem reprehensible. In our courts he would be acquitted of killing the stranger in the encounter at the crossroads. He acted in self-defense (the text offers no grounds for doubting the account of the fight which Oedipus relates to Jocasta), and the fact that the stranger proved to be his own father (a wild improbability Oedipus had no reason to suspect) would be held immaterial.

This is, of course, exactly the defense Oedipus himself puts forward in Sophocles’ last

play, the *Oedipus at Colonus*. Years after the event, when anguish has ebbed, Oedipus defends himself to Creon in an impassioned speech:

My life was innocent  
Search as you will, of any guilty secret  
For which this error could have been the punishment,  
.....  
Answer me this one thing: if here and now  
Someone came up and threatened to take your life,  
Your innocent life, would you then pause to ask  
If he were your father – or deal with him out of hand?  
I'm sure, as you love life, you'd pay the assailant  
In his own coin, not look for legal warrant.  
Such, by the gods' contrivance was my case.

The propriety of using the later play to interpret the earlier is open to question; but since the answer would take me far afield, I shall simply assert that on this matter of guilt I see no essential difference between the two works. The *Oedipus at Colonus* merely makes explicit what must be inferred from the *Oedipus Rex*, where Oedipus has not yet arrived at the balanced judgment he expresses later. On the contrary, he accepts his guilt and in the final scene punishes himself. That is indeed why he may be construed as an Aristotelian figure.

His "flaw," according to this interpretation, is excessive confidence in the power of reason to control human destiny, which commits him to the naive position of holding men responsible for all that they do. His brilliant career makes Oedipus' self-assurance understandable. Even so, his confidence overreaches itself, betraying the hero into dealing too simply with a question of guilt, both when he pronounces judgment early in the play and later when he blinds himself and accepts the self-imposed banishment. In the closing scene he remains consistent to his faith in reason and to his high standard of moral responsibility, consistent but wrong. Irony hides within irony; blinding himself in shocked revulsion, Oedipus fails to see that he could not be expected to see.

If the play is read in this light, then, the Aristotelian pattern of flaw – wrong choice – disaster may be argued without violating the dramatic facts. Whether such a reading satisfies the spirit of the *Oedipus* is something else. To me it seems hardly adequate to treat Oedipus as a more subtle variation of the flawed hero Sophocles drew so clearly in the Creon of *Antigone*. No doubt there are resemblances between Oedipus and the tyrant figure. Like Creon, Oedipus acts hastily, fails to listen to others, and threatens the innocent. Yet these similarities are superficial and dissolve into ambiguity on closer view. If Oedipus acts quickly, we need to remember that Thebes is dying. If Oedipus refuses to believe Tiresias, he has reason: he knows experientially that he never acted in concert with a band of highwaymen, yet that is who killed Laius. While Oedipus' conclusion that Tiresias must be lying is fallacious, it is hardly evidence of a paranoid refusal to listen. Nor are his threats against Tiresias and Creon the tantrums of a tyrant. His suspicions are based upon a reasoned conclusion: that the two are cleverly turning against him a plot hatched years before to assassinate Laius. The hypothesis of a criminal conspiracy is wrong. Still it explains a number of odd facts and, given the incompleteness of Oedipus' information, is both ingenious and rational.

Such ambiguities suggest that Sophocles did not intend his protagonist to be the sort of overreacher Aristotle was later to describe. Oedipus is more complex. Even if we regard his faith in human reason as presumptuous, we must be struck by the disparity between his "guilt" and his suffering. Even if we condemn his self-inflicted punishment as excessive, we can hardly argue that his despair and anguish are over-reactions. The primitive sense of guilt by deed may be inadequate, but in the context of the play it exists. Oedipus did commit patricide and incest, and his sense of pollution cannot be brushed aside. In short, no matter how his catastrophe be defined – as the actual crimes, as their discovery, or as their punishment – Oedipus cannot be made into the flawed hero

whose suffering is justified by a wrong action willfully chosen.

Recognizing the difficulty of interpreting the play in Aristotelian terms, some readers see it as a reversion to the darker world of the *Iliad*, where men are ultimately helpless against the gods, who amuse themselves with power, unrestrained by justice or mercy. This approach solves the problem of a flaw by denying freedom to Oedipus, though the solution is costly, reducing the hero to a puppet devoid of moral dignity.

A more serious objection is that such a reading stresses too much the events anterior to the play, too little those of the play itself. The plot that actually unfolds in the *Oedipus Rex* does not show us a wooden figure jerked about by unseen gods. Oedipus is very much the forcing character, pushing forward the investigation into Laius' death. A fact too little emphasized is that Oedipus succeeds in doing precisely what he promised to do: he investigates the killing of the former king and he brings the killer to light. And he does it by his own efforts. (One must concede that in an early scene Tiresias predicts Oedipus' end. The prediction might be taken to imply that Oedipus is not really free, but merely pacing out necessity. The logical tangle is not easily unraveled. It may be noted, however, that knowledge of an end does not determine the steps that will lead to it. One may confidently say of any man, "He will die"; yet the prediction does not entail how and when and where. It is with the steps leading to the end that the *Oedipus* is concerned; with regard to these one may claim – though with less assurance than Milton's God – that Tiresias' "foreknowledge had no influence.")

Not only does reading Oedipus as a helpless victim ignore his active, forceful role; it also tends to inject modern ideas into the Greek concept of fate. In Sophoclean drama fate seems to be less a doctrine of rigid necessity than a belief in limitations which circumscribe human possibilities. Within that framework one has freedom of choice and moral responsibility; once he steps beyond it he is gripped by fate. Thus a man standing on a cliff is free to jump or not. If he leaps, deluded that he can flap his arms and sail safely to the plain below, he has given up effective freedom of action. Willy-nilly he has submitted himself to the "fate" of gravity and is free only to fall at the accelerating rate of thirty-two feet per second.

In some of Sophocles' plays (*Antigone* and *Ajax*) the fatal limit to human action is moral law, which, whether it derives from god or from tradition, destroys the disobedient. Creon and Ajax exist in an illumined universe; if they fail to see, the fault is theirs. In the *Oedipus*, on the other hand, the world is dark, truth hidden, paths of right and wrong obscure. Oedipus does not know what he is doing and cannot be expected to know. Here, in effect, fate becomes the limitation imposed by the imperfection of human knowledge. Ignorance of his true identity leads Oedipus to commit the very crimes he would avoid. But that ignorance is irredeemable, essential to the human condition. Only gods are omniscient. Oedipus' "fate," then, is that he is human, not divine. His crimes are destined in the sense that they stand as absolute limits to his freedom. He is not free to avoid these acts, any more than a man is free to avoid death. But to say this is not to say that Oedipus is a will-less victim, whose every word, every step are predestined. He is "victim" only as we are all hostages to time and death. Such is the condition of man.

Heretofore Oedipus has been shielded from this truth by the very completeness of his success. Like a brilliant, talented youth – like Athens itself in the first half of the fifth century – he has found nothing impossible. In his naive faith in reason Oedipus embodies the claims current in Athens of the more daring of the Sophists. For Oedipus man is truly "the measure of all things." He stands as the champion of reason, twitting Tiresias, whose "bird-lore" could not solve the riddle of the Sphinx, and boasting of his own success. His cross-examination of Creon is masterly. Like a modern lawyer Oedipus trusts the power of mind to reveal truth. His own intelligence is quick, incisive, cutting instantly to the heart of a problem. Yet such minds may impress us as curiously incomplete, darting like waterbugs above the surface of life, imperceptive of the dark below. So it is with Oedipus. All his life he has seemed to possess great wisdom about man; his answer to the Sphinx was "Man." But the god-like knowledge has been illusory, ironically violating the

adjuration inscribed above the Delphic shrine: "Know Thyself."

Still in this most subtle of dramas ambiguity turns within ambiguity. Oedipus' claims for the power of mind are not contemptible. He does bring truth to light. If Sophocles is answering the arrogance of some Sophists, he is not proposing the abandonment of reason and a pious retreat to superstition. Reason, he shows us, is an imperfect instrument, limited by the irreducible residuum of ignorance that is the lot of man. Yet paradoxically reason reveals its own limitations, curling back upon itself at its outermost limit to acknowledge its own finitude.

Ultimately the *Oedipus Rex* validates the greatness of mind. Holding firm to the ideal of reason, as Achilles holds firm to the ideal of glory, Oedipus achieves the understanding of self which brings him as near to being god as man can come. His early claims to wisdom will be made good. The terrifying plunge into agony is justified finally by the fact that it opens to Oedipus what he has not known. By the end of the play Oedipus has lost less than he has gained. Here again is irony, for surely he has lost much. Yet all that has been taken weighs less than the mustard-seed of truth he has won.

This is the meaning of suffering in the *Oedipus* plays: that it is a necessary condition of spiritual growth. One need not argue that the hero has attained that growth by the end of the *Oedipus Rex*. Clearly he has not. The point is that he has been thrown down from false heights into the depths from which wisdom must grow. The process we see completed at the end of the *Oedipus at Colonus*, where the blind and crippled suppliant becomes the leader whom the others follow. In that scene Sophocles offers no easy rationalization of human anguish. The old answer of crime and punishment will no longer do. Death remains a mystery. He does reveal, however, that the mind of man, tempered by suffering, is "marvellous in our eyes."

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## MECHANIZED SCHOLARSHIP: A QUESTION

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and sneezes.  
But what would Kittredge say?

CHARLES B. DODSON  
*University of Wisconsin—Oshkosh*