

Some Questions and Some Answers

- Why is Oedipus cursed? What is his “tragic flaw”?
  - o Oedipus exhibits a capacity for rage, which Creon observes may be his undoing (Scene II). Oedipus displays rage towards Creon and towards Tiresius, and towards Laios.
  - o Perhaps his greater flaw is pride or hubris. Pride is the source of his rage at Laios (being forced off the road) and is warned against by the Chorus in Ode II as likely to incur the wrath of the gods.
  - o Perhaps more specifically, Oedipus exhibits pride in his seeking knowledge. He has already defeated the Sphinx in a test of riddles. He prides himself on his ability to solve riddles, to bring to light what is hidden, what cannot be known. But only the gods have complete or perfect knowledge (Ode I). Jocasta pleads with Oedipus to give up his quest and to content himself with his life, which he will not do (Scene III).
  - o Note, too, the theme of knowledge, of seeing vs. blindness throughout. Jocasta rejects human knowledge of the gods (rejects prophesy; Scene II).
- What account of cosmic order is offered by Sophocles in *Oedipus Rex*?
  - o First, there is the moral order, which entails rules about proper human behavior. These rules include prohibitions against abduction (Laios original sin, in one version of the tale, is abducting the son of his host) and against patricide and incest.
  - o Second, there is the order establishing consequences for violations of the moral order and, in some cases, the means of their repair. Laios’ sin results in a curse upon his house, extending through Oedipus and his children. Oedipus’ patricide brings about a plague upon Thebes, which can be repaired by the discovery and punishment of the murderer. The sin of incest has consequences visited upon Oedipus and his children.
  - o Third, there is hubris in general, which entails a challenge to the divine order. If divine wisdom is properly beyond human understanding, then seeking it may be a challenge to that particular order. A challenge to or violation of this form of order may meet with particularly severe consequences if this form of order is understood as especially fundamental.
- What is the significance of the human/divine division?
  - o Perhaps the divine is the basic designation of law. Violation of law is one thing; violation of the foundation of law – trespass into the very realm of law – is perhaps something further and of greater threat to the integrity of the cosmos. Violation of law disrupts the proper order of the cosmos, but this is a disruption *within* that order, one that the order is equipped to handle. Violation of the realm of law constitutes a threat to the working of the system as a whole.
  - o Note, then, that it is Oedipus’ quest for knowledge that realizes his destruction. (Perhaps the cosmic *archia* include provisions for challenges to the system as a whole, in addition to “internal” challenges of the moral rules per se.)

- Oedipus' fate is then a cautionary tale for those who would challenge the knowledge of the gods, i.e., for those who would challenge the overall structure of the cosmos – our place in it, the system of principles defining our place in it. The gods have devised a particularly fearsome punishment for this sin – a further testimony to the wisdom and power of cosmic law.
- Is the gods' treatment of Oedipus just?
  - Oedipus expresses – and the audience sympathizes with – his bewilderment at being chosen for such a cruel fate. Patricide and incest may seem obviously wrong to us; and Oedipus is prideful to some degree. But he also expresses honorable intent in seeking the truth about the curse on Thebes (Prologue). Should we not expect challenges to the divine authority to be more clearly labeled as such?
  - The gods of this era are perhaps more jealous of their power than we are used to thinking.
  - And where the divine realm of cosmic justice is beyond human understanding, it may be inevitable that we run afoul of matters that we don't understand.

Burkert: "Greek Tragedy and Sacrificial Ritual"

- Burkert suggests that its origin in Dionysian goat-sacrifice ritual brings out several key points in Greek tragedy.
- First, we have the ambiguity of death. We find death repugnant and in killing we discover remorse. At the same time, however, death is the inevitable consequence of life, and in killing we realize our highest quality food. We must accommodate death into a civilized society, which entails making public peace with it psychologically. Death rituals – sacrifice – serve this purpose, on Burkert's account. In the goat sacrifice, as in others, we celebrate life even as we recognize its connection to death. In particular, we recognize the innocence of the life taken, acknowledging that innocent life always includes death.
- Second, in Greek tragedy, we find death in connection with the terms necessary for life. We live only to die; like all living things, we are innocents in this particular tragedy. In order to live, we must accept the cosmic order that we die. Tragedy is an art form expressing some of the deepest tensions in our experience. The deepest of these, perhaps, is death, which we must all face. In the Greek mind, the ambiguity of sacrifice is recalled in the art form charged with our accommodating ourselves to the ambiguity of death.
- This account helps to explain the ambiguity of our feelings for Oedipus. While he is the maker of his own fate, in some respects, he is also its innocent victim. This is redolent of the life-death ambiguity. Part of the cosmic order that we must accept is our innocent death; to challenge this order is to challenge what makes life valuable in the first place – its ending.