

The True Tragedy of “Oedipus Rex”

Ignorance and Responsibility

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In Greek tragedies, as well as in the current day, the debate over whether an individual truly has control over their actions has plagued mankind. This idea has often considered fate and free will as mutually exclusive, while they actually act simultaneously. In *Oedipus Rex*, it would appear that Oedipus' fate is fully predetermined, as he is informed of his life's prophecy twice. Oedipus is told that he will kill his father and marry his mother, and after hearing this, he flees his home to evade this outcome. Nevertheless, his decision to leave Corinth initiates the beginnings of his prophecy's fulfillment. Regardless of his predetermined fate, Oedipus should still be held accountable for his decisions, as his agency proves his culpability. By exploring the concept of moral responsibility, alternative possibilities and culpable ignorance, it is evident that Oedipus is the agent of his actions and should be held accountable, in addition to the impact of his life's prophecy.

Moral responsibility is the concept that people are accountable for each decision they make, and the consequences that choice brings. Oedipus has made choices that have benefited his career, such as when he saved Thebes from a curse by slaying the Sphinx and is rewarded with the throne. Although this instance represents a positive consequence, not all of Oedipus' actions have reaped a similar result. According to philosopher Michael Zimmerman, agency is necessary in taking responsibility and accepting consequences, mentioning that “freedom is thus what may be called a root requirement of responsibly” therefore, any act that results in punishment shows culpability of the actor, ultimately representing the agency in that choice.¹ For example, in *Oedipus Rex*, Thebes falls victim to a curse

1 Michael J. Zimmerman, “Moral Responsibility and Ignorance,” *Ethics* 107, no. 3 (1997): 411, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2382323>.

that can only be lifted by uncovering the murderer of King Laius, demonstrating how even the Gods acknowledge the power of mortals' agency in changing the course of something predetermined. When Oedipus meets with Tiresias, the prophet and messenger of the Gods, Tiresias delivers Oedipus' life prophecy and accuses him of killing King Laius, and that "[he] [is] the murderer whom [he] seeks."² As a prophet, Tiresias represents the Gods' awareness of Oedipus' agency and the significance of his decisions, while also acknowledging the power of the prophecy. Through the interpretation of these interactions, it is determined that fate and free-will are not mutually exclusive. Furthermore, Oedipus' decision to first leave Corinth, kill a man, and marry that man's widow results in his eventual acknowledgment of guilt, as he blinds himself as punishment and insists upon his own exile, showing his accountability. Despite his life's prophecy, Oedipus is still the executioner of these actions as he is considered to be responsible by both the Gods and himself, ultimately proving his agency over his choices.

Oedipus' murder of King Laius represents his obstinate compulsions and how any alternative path would be against his nature. Instead of not acting, Oedipus made decisions based on his inner compulsions that led him to fulfill actions that were predicted by his prophecy. Harry Frankfurt, philosopher, introduces the theory of alternative possibilities, explaining "that a person is morally responsible for what he has done only if he could have done otherwise," highlighting that had Oedipus not gone out of his way to murder King Laius, the prophecy would not have been fulfilled.³ However, considering the possibility that Oedipus was coerced by the Gods, thus making the theory of alternative paths false, Oedipus is still accountable as an agent of action and consequences. Oedipus' self-destructive nature simultaneously contributes to his decision making, which ultimately impacts himself and those around him. M. D. Faber, author, says that "[Oedipus'] initial tendency to discharge his aggressive impulses on someone else and his subsequent tendency to discharge those same impulses on himself when he finds himself thwarted in his initial aim," discussing his innately impulsive behavior.⁴ According to Frankfurt, in certain situations "certain actions . . . make it impossible for the person to do otherwise . . . but that do not actually impel the person to act or in any way produce his action," indicating that the agent is always responsible for their actions.⁵ Oedipus' slaying of King Laius shows his impulsiveness, demonstrating that his overpowering and aggressive traits make it impossible for him to act otherwise because of who he is and chooses to be. Even if his actions

2 Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex: An English Version*, trans. Dudley Fitts and Robert Fitzgerald (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1949), 12, https://happydagger.weebly.com/uploads/1/2/6/2/12621669/oedipus_rex.pdf.

3 Harry G. Frankfurt, "Alternate Possibilities and Moral Responsibility," *The Journal of Philosophy* 66, no. 23 (1969): 829-39, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2023833>.

4 M. D. Faber, "Self-Destruction in 'Oedipus Rex,'" *American Imago* 27, no.1 (1970): 41-51, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26302607>.

5 Frankfurt, "Alternate Possibilities," 830.

are determined by the Gods, his prophecy or his inner compulsions, he still takes accountability as the actor: "I struck him in my rage . . . I killed them all . . . And I myself pronounced this malediction upon myself!"⁶ Thus, Oedipus is responsible for his actions, even under coercion, prophetic influence and inner compulsions.

A key source of Oedipus' lifelong ignorance stems from his early trauma. When Oedipus was a baby, King Laius and Jocasta attempted to kill him in an effort to eliminate any possibility of Oedipus growing to slay his father and marry his mother. John Steiner writes in the National Institutes of Health that the murder attempt "inflicted a severe trauma on the defenseless 3-day-old infant . . . we are obliged to assume that such trauma would have left a significant scar, both physical and psychological."⁷

Since Oedipus was quickly adopted into King Polybos of Corinth's loving family, he was shielded from his true reality throughout his entire life. His upbringing in an idyllic family shielded him from his past, aligning with Freud's observation that such fantasies arise from a deep-seated reluctance to confront reality.⁸ Professor Lutz Goetzmann describes Oedipus's hostile interaction with Laius was an "external event that [is] used as [a] representative for the unrepresented . . . a mobilization of a dispositive for action on the edge of the void, as an effect of this void," revealing that his violence stems from his trauma at the hands of Laius.⁹ It appears that certain situations have the potential to "awaken the trauma and reveal[] the full impact of the disaster" especially if someone has lived a false reality their entire life.¹⁰ Because Oedipus is aware of his prophecy, upon hearing it he is faced with a decision, "[everyone] will eventually have to make sense of the prophetic label and decide whether to accept it, resist it, become it, or overcome it," and this ultimatum combined with his trauma and inner compulsions impacts his choices.¹¹ Ultimately, Oedipus' unresolved trauma at the hands of Laius subconsciously shapes his decisions and fuels his violent tendencies.

Oedipus' most significant flaw is his ignorance and poor judgment, as reflected in his rash decisions that seal his fate. In situations where an inner compulsion or hypnotic suggestion impels someone to act a certain way: "these very circumstances also serve to bring it about that he does whatever it is that he

6 Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex*, 28.

7 John Steiner, "The Trauma and Disillusionment of Oedipus," *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 99, no. 3 (2018): 555–68, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00207578.2018.1452570>.

8 Sigmund Freud, "On Narcissism: An Introduction," *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* 14, trans. and ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1957), 91.

9 Lutz Goetzmann, "The Crises of Oedipus," *The Psychoanalytic Quarterly* 92, no.1 (2023): 114, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00332828.2023.2187580>.

10 Steiner, "The Trauma and Disillusionment," 565.

11 Richard W. Bargdill, "Fate and Destiny: Some Historical Distinctions Between the Concepts," *Journal of Theoretical and Philosophical Psychology* 26, no. 1-2 (2006): 218, <https://doi.org/10.1037/h0091275>.

does.”¹²After Oedipus makes the decision to kill King Laius, he seems to reconsider his action, believing there may be potential consequences. When Oedipus says “If that stranger and Laius were kin . . . [what] man is more miserable than I?” his poor judgement is reflected and his acknowledgement that he was fully ignorant to the severity of his action, and that he only second guessed himself after he considered its consequence.¹³As argued before, when an agent acts on any decision, they are accountable, or culpable. Zimmerman breaks down his theory of culpable ignorance, where he explains that an actor is culpable for their ignorant behavior and for “behaving as [they] did, even though [they were] ignorant” and for being unaware that their behavior is morally wrong.¹⁴ This assumes that an individual is at fault for behaving “ignorantly only if [they are] culpable for being ignorant . . . and [if] they were in control of that [action].”¹⁵ Zimmerman acknowledges that no one can be directly to blame for their ignorance but “if one is culpable for something but was only in indirect control of it, then one is indirectly, and only indirectly, culpable for it” as well as being indirectly accountable for their ignorance.¹⁶ He continues, mentioning that “if one is indirectly, and only indirectly, culpable for something, X, then one is directly culpable for something else, Y, of which X was a consequence.”¹⁷ Oedipus is only indirectly culpable of fulfilling his prophecy because he is directly culpable for his ignorance which led to the death of his father and his marriage to his mother. Although Oedipus is indirectly accountable for each consequence of his actions, he is directly culpable for his ignorance.

Long before Oedipus, the audience becomes aware of the truth through dramatic irony and metaphor, representing Oedipus’ shortsightedness. Jocasta, Oedipus’ wife and mother, received a prophecy like his own, foreshadowing the truth of their relationship. Jocasta was warned by a prophet that her son would grow to kill her husband, Laius, and take her hand in marriage. Here, the audience is becoming aware that the two received the same prophecy, and this foreshadowing doubles as a form of dramatic irony, as even the audience has a better grasp of the truth than Jocasta and Oedipus. She believes that they evaded their fate by having their child killed: “thus, Apollo never caused that child to kill his father, and it was not Laius’ fate to die at the hands of his son, as he had feared.”¹⁸ Due to this reasoning and her alleged success of besting destiny, Jocasta tells Oedipus that he should “have no dread of [prophecies]” because the one she was given did not come true, so she believes.¹⁹ The irony of Jocasta consoling Oedipus suggests

12 Frankfurt, “Alternate Possibilities,” 830.

13 Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex*, 28.

14 Zimmerman, “Moral Responsibility,” 414.

15 Zimmerman, “Moral Responsibility,” 414.

16 Zimmerman, “Moral Responsibility,” 415.

17 Zimmerman, “Moral Responsibility,” 415.

18 Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex*, 25.

19 Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex*, 25.

that both characters are blind to reality and are too ignorant to piece together the truth, ultimately conveying the blatant disregard of the truth. As an audience, it is hard to believe that Oedipus could be so blind, even upon hearing his wife (mother) received the same prophecy. Again, Jocasta and Oedipus are ignorant to their true relationship, and Oedipus' self-blinding with Jocasta's brooches represents her contribution to Oedipus' ignorance through her misleading influence regarding prophecies. Oedipus says, once he is blinded, "no more shall you look on the misery about me, the horrors of my own doing! . . . too long been blind to those [for] whom I was searching!" representing his guilt towards believing Jocasta and his indirect culpability of fulfilling the prophecy.²⁰ Tiresias, the blind seer, also plays into the metaphor of blindness as ignorance. Oedipus mocks Tiresias' lack of vision, though Tiresias argues that Oedipus is truly blind by mentioning "I say that you, with both your eyes, are blind . . . you do not even know the blind wrongs that you have done," furthering the metaphor of a physically blind man being able to see the truth about Oedipus more clearly than Oedipus himself.²¹ Since Oedipus has the truth right in front of him, his seeming perpetual blindness shows his ignorance of his true character: "to know one's destiny is to have some insight into what one could be by envisioning what one already is."²² When Oedipus finally realizes the significance of his actions, he holds himself fully accountable by blinding and exiling himself. The dramatic irony of Oedipus' truth and the metaphor of sight and blindness helps the audience recognize Oedipus' ignorance and understand the truth long before he does, highlighting his indirect culpability of certain actions but his direct culpability of ignorance.

The theories of moral responsibility, alternative paths and culpable ignorance can help to understand the story of Oedipus, as his inner compulsions and trauma are responsible for the consequences he faces. Through his self-inflicted punishment at the end of the play, Oedipus himself acknowledges his guilt and cannot live with his shame. His downfall represents the tension between fate and free-will, as he makes decisions driven by inner compulsions and external circumstances that fulfill his fate and inflict the consequences of his actions. His exile and blinding show his moral responsibility and accountability; his pattern of rash decisions and strong characteristics make it impossible for him to act otherwise; his direct responsibility for his ignorance and indirect culpability for the consequences represent that Oedipus must be held accountable for his decisions, no matter what was behind them. Knowing that fate and free will can act simultaneously despite contributions to one's decision like coercion or ignorance, these actors should still be held accountable for their actions. Thus, Oedipus' story ultimately serves as a cautionary tale about the limits of knowledge, the power of destiny, and the enduring responsibility that comes with human agency.

20 Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex*, 45-46.

21 Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex*, 14.

22 Bargdill, "Fate and Destiny," 217.