

# On misunderstandings of oedipus rex

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On the last occasion when I had the misfortune of analyzing E. R. Dodds's "On Misunderstanding the Oedipus Rex", I came to the conclusion that Dodds had a lot of free time. But his question of "does the Oedipus Rex attempt to justify the ways of God to man" does indeed drive readers to question the famous piece of literature.

Yet the theses he came to do not strike me as conclusive. In fact, I disagree with most of his statements. I thoroughly believe that what he labeled as "misunderstandings" are not misunderstandings at all; au contraire, they present the proper technique for how the book should be read. Dodds' first opinion is that Oedipus doesn't deserve the punishment of the gods; Dodds concludes that Sophocles has intended for readers to regard Oedipus as good and selfless. But the play would seem to indicate that Oedipus, while a clever man, is not a good one — we can see that through Dodds' own area of evidence: Oedipus' own actions.

Oedipus does not, as Dodds concludes, seek out the truth even though he knows it will be painful for him; rather, he has no idea what the outcome of his search will be, rejects the truth at every turn, and threatens those who speak of it. The other conclusion that Dodds rejects is that Oedipus could not have avoided his fate; alternatively, Dodds believes that Oedipus has free will over the gods and could have avoided his fate. Yet his argument can be refuted by the evidence he uses... again. It is clear that, as all of Oedipus' actions, including those over the course of the play, were determined before his birth, and he cannot avoid them although it is his will to do so, those actions cannot be construed as free will. In his rebuttal of the first student-made opinion, Dodds asserts that Oedipus does not get what he deserves.

He states that most readers do not see Oedipus as a good character; the way Sophocles had intended. But Dodds, ironically, seems to have misunderstood Sophocles. We can conclude that by analyzing Dodds' own evidence: the reaction of the Chorus and the actions of King Oedipus. Dodds notes that the Chorus took their king as a wise, darling-of-the-city type of guy, so he didn't deserve the punishment he received. Yet his godly wisdom is questioned and he is repeatedly given advice by the people around him. The leader of the Chorus subtly advises Oedipus that "Those who jump to conclusions may go wrong" (194), and later on, the entire Chorus advises Oedipus to keep his cool as he mourns over his mother/wife's death (239).

As Oedipus' actions get more erratic, the citizens start to become uncertain of his true intentions. Most of the time in ancient tragedies choruses do a lot of lamenting of terrible events, but do little to stop them. Amazingly, though, the Chorus in Oedipus the King manages to convince Oedipus not to banish or execute Creon (198). But his intent to execute his brother/uncle-in law lead to people doubting him and they seem to be startled by his actions: "The man's your friend, your kin he's under oath- do not banish him" (197). Oedipus also shows he is not a good man during the scene with the blind prophet; Tiresias.

Oedipus denies the sayings of the prophet and decides to accuse the prophet of being the murderer (even though he's blind) (180). He calls the prophet a "fraud" and tells him that nothing compares to him [Oedipus] when the "flight of my own intelligence hit the mark" (182). We can also see that Dodds is incorrect when he describes Oedipus as selfless. After his conversation with the priest, the Chorus prays to the gods to help solve the

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issues that they are going through, Oedipus selfishly says, “ You pray to the gods? Let me grant your prayers” (171). He goes on to curse the man who killed Laius and whoever is harboring the killer and he curses himself if the murderer is residing in his house.

He foolishly curses himself three times in one go. And so Dodds’s first opinion that Oedipus does not deserve the punishment that he got is the real misunderstanding, as Oedipus is neither a good or wise man (and he certainly isn’t a selfless one). The only situation where Dodds’s opinion could be considered correct is if he intended that Oedipus deserves more than what he got. The second assertion E. R.

Dodds proposes is that Oedipus could not have avoided his so-called fate. His first point of argument is that the Oracle was “ unconditional” (Dodds 21). And since it is unconditional, there is no way for Oedipus to know what he should and shouldn’t do in order to avoid his fate. Now it seems that Dodds falters in his argument here, as there are endless possibilities to what Oedipus could have done BECAUSE the oracle was unconditional. For me to list every way in which the fate could’ve been avoided, it would take more than one essay, but the easiest way he could’ve avoided it is by doing exactly what he didn’t do: nothing. All Oedipus needed to do is not sleep with anyone and not kill anyone.

Surely these mere human desires could have been put aside by the mighty Sphinx-slayer. But since he was so eager to avoid the avoidable, he ended up fulfilling the prophecy. Oedipus could have tried to live as an ordinary man, but his ego drove him to believing he wasn’t a man. He took upon the

challenge of the Sphinx, and ironically, the answer to her riddle was 'man'. After that point, he believed that he was no longer a petty man, but a god-like creature.

His ego led to his downfall and the prophecy coming true, and since ego is controllable, he could have avoided his demise. Dodds also brings up the point of free will and how even if the outcome is known, the actions that lead up to that outcome are of free will. As Dodds says, "this doesn't satisfy the analytical philosopher, but it seems to have satisfied the ordinary man" (Dodds 23). But in order to satisfy both the philosopher and the ordinary man, one must realize that the actions that lead up to the outcome are irrelevant. If the outcome is set-in-stone, whatever the stone is inscribed with does not matter. To avoid contradictions, we have to look at it from a human perspective.

Being human, we do not know our future; so to ourselves, we seem to be free. Yet if we somehow find out about our future, does that make us free agents? Or were we meant to look into our future in order to avoid it from happening? But if so, wouldn't that have already been accomplished? The conceptualization of the future is a paradox within itself. But in the case of Oedipus, his future was predicted before his birth when the oracle told Laius that he would die at the hands of Jocasta's son (201), so Oedipus is no longer a free agent anyway because of the actions of the people that caused him to fulfill the prophecy. Oedipus could have avoided his fate, while not having free will. That is because if he had avoided his fate, it would have already been known by the gods.

His actions are irrelevant in the manner that his outcome is already determined. It is like choosing the road less traveled, only to reach the same destination of the one commonly traveled. It does not matter which one you take; it is irrelevant. It is very challenging for the human mind to accept or understand a concept of this complexity since we can only see it through our eyes, and not from a higher perspective. Some readers of " On Misunderstandings the Oedipus Rex" have told me that it has struck feelings of dismay and confusion in them. They do not see how or why Dodds reached the conclusions that he did.

But unlike Dodds, I do not fear that what I have done here today has removed those feelings. That is because those feelings should be felt when reading E. R. Dodds. What he labeled as misunderstandings are nothing of the sort. Oedipus could have avoided his fate, if only had he controlled his ego and acted like an ordinary man. He was not a selfless, egoless, kind, or wise man; he did indeed deserve the downfall that was set upon him. The real Oedipus Complex that is yet to be dismissed, is the one known as " On Misunderstanding the Oedipus Rex".