

Oedipous Tyrannos Lecture Notes FYP 2014
Principal Points

General. I recommend aspects of the introductions by Bernard Knox, the general one and his particular introductions to the *Oedipous the King* and the *Oedipous at Colonus*. Although written much later and not performed until after Sophocles' death, the *Oedipous at Colonus* is helpful for understanding the *Oedipous the King*. I shall cite these introductions by Knox and a page number. Crucial to any right understanding of Sophocles' dramas is Knox, 19: the theatre "was from the beginning a sacramental area, a place where divine forces were invoked and put to work, where the performance was, for actors and audience alike, an act of worship." Equally important and related to this are Knox's remarks at 21 on the political aspect of drama. Indeed these could be much expanded.

1. The telling of the story, the myth, is not Sophocles' aim; all those present in the theatre would have known it intimately. See Knox, 24.
2. Sophocles is interpreting the myth but *crucially* the interpretation takes the form of *something done*, a drama.
3. In it the action must result from the characters, or principles of motion, set in play.
4. What Sophocles sets in play are diverse, indeed, opposed forms of knowing. Two forms of knowing, both of which give truth, are in conflict. They are equally necessary, so the conflict is not between good and evil but within the good; the good is in conflict with itself under two forms. Another way of saying this is that the gods or the divine are in conflict among humans. Knox on Hegel on the *Antigone* at 41 is useful.
5. As with Homer the destructive conflict between principles equally necessary and active in life emerges when there is a practical crisis, in this case plague—students might be referred to the beginning of the *Iliad*.
6. The thing done in Sophocles' *Oedipous Tyrannos* is the discovery of their inner connection, a connection hidden from, or even hidden by, the characters. Iocasta flees the knowledge which she foresees will destroy herself and Oedipous. Oedipous is heroic because he demands to know what he foresees will destroy him. He is totally moved by his principle.
7. The two forms of knowing in conflict are those of Teiresias, the blind prophet, whose wisdom as an immortal principle is certainly and explicitly Apollo's. By way of his self blinding, Oedipous will become a blind prophet and will function as one in the *Oedipous at Colonus*. In this sense Teiresias the prophet triumphs; Oedipous is correlatively defeated.

8. Throughout the drama Apollo's efficacy, help and worship are issue. By the time we get to the crux in the exchanges between Oedipous and Iocasta, the issue appears as the worship of Apollo or a practical atheism. Oedipous 1054: Why look to the Prophet's hearth"? [the prophesies] "are nothing, worthless" (1063) carried to Hades [παρ' Αἰδη Πόλυβος ἄξι' οὐδενός]. "Chance rules our lives" (Iocasta 1070).

τί δ' ἄν φοβοῖτ' ἄνθρωπος ᾧ τὰ τῆς τύχης
 κρατεῖ, πρόνοια δ' ἐστὶν οὐδενός σαφής;
 εἰκὴ κράτιστον ζῆν, ὅπως δύναίτο τις.

9. The other side, that of Oedipous in opposition to Teiresias can also be represented by Apollo who is the god of light and of enlightening knowledge. This appears immediately when Oedipous presents himself in the blaze of the altar fires and it makes itself clearer as he takes upon himself the task set by the oracle of Apollo at Delphi and then undertakes to bring light on the forgotten past. He will certainly become the voice of Apollo in the *Oedipous at Colonus*.
10. However, in the *Oedipous at Colonus*, he becomes a protecting spirit of Athens and here in the *Oedipous the King* it may also be useful to understand him through Athena, who, in the Homeric / Hesiodian theology which Sophocles inherits, is Effectual Intelligence. Born without a mother from the head of Zeus, she is wisdom as the civilizing arts but including those of the warrior. She is contrasted with Ares, as she is in the *Oedipous the King*, as well as with Apollo. I find it easiest to represent her in Oedipous by way of knowing as "problem solving" or the mentality of the engineer. For a good example of it you might read President Richard Florizone's 2014 Convocation Address (on line at Dalhousie: <http://www.dal.ca/news/2014/05/29/on--intention-and-possibility---read-dr--florizone-s-convocation.html>).
11. Because students are reading the *Odyssey* this year it may help to look at how Athena is manifest in Odysseus. See for example, XIII, 287ff (Athena speaks) "He must be indeed a shifty and deceitful person," said she, 'who could surpass you in all manner of craft even though you had a god for your antagonist. Daring that you are, full of guile, unwearying in deceit, can you not drop your thievish stories and the deceitfulness which is close to your very nature, even now that you are in your own country again? We will say no more, however, about this, for two of a kind are we, deceivers both—you are the best counsellor and orator among all humankind, while I for diplomacy and crafty ways have fame among the gods. Did you not know Zeus' daughter Athena - me, who have been ever with you...'"

(Butler translation accessed through Perseus, modified)

κερδαλέος κ' εἶη καὶ ἐπὶ κλοπῆος ὅς σε παρέλθοι
ἐν πάντεσσι δόλοισι, καὶ εἰ θεὸς ἀντιάσειε.
σχέτλιε, ποικιλομῆτα, δόλων ἄτ', οὐκ ἄρ' ἔμελλες,
οὐδ' ἐν σῆ περ ἐὼν γαίῃ, λήξειν ἀπατάων
295 μύθων τε κλοπίων, οἳ τοι πεδόθεν φίλοι εἰσίν.
ἀλλ' ἄγε, μηκέτι ταῦτα λεγόμεθα, εἰδότες ἄμφω
κέρδε', ἐπεὶ σὺ μὲν ἔσσι βροτῶν ὄχ' ἄριστος ἀπάντων
βουλῆ καὶ μύθοισιν, ἐγὼ δ' ἐν πᾶσι θεοῖσι
μήτι τε κλέομαι καὶ κέρδεσιν: οὐδὲ σύ γ' ἔγνωσ
300 Παλλάδ' Ἀθηναίην, κούρην Διός, ἧ τέ τοι αἰεὶ
ἐν πάντεσσι πόνοισι παρίσταμαι ἠδὲ φυλάσσω,

12. Oedipous has the same endless confidence in his own proper possession of practical problem-solving wisdom. As in the *Odyssey* this can appear as a kind of atheism and must be corrected. That the knowledge by which he solves problems and became king when he defeated the "riddling" Sphinx, who reappears as riddling in Teiresias in this play, is his own and enables him to be free or self-moved is shown in the speeches beginning at 70 and going on to the chorus at 170. It is essential that in these he curses himself, although he does so unknowingly. His identification of himself with the polis as king, and his interest with its, has this consequence.
13. Knox 140-142 is excellent on Oedipous as representing, in his practical rationality, the progressive spirit of 5th century Athens whose hubristic praise Thucydides puts in the mouth of Pericles. It is crucial to understand that Thucydides' *Peloponnesian War* is an extended tragedy as history (one Sophocles experienced) in which this spirit is defeated as it is in the *Oedipous the King*. See G. McGonagill, "A Note on Thucydides 2.41.4..." *Dionysius XXII* (2004): 7-18.
14. If the two forms of knowing are contrasted as receptive intuition and reflective reasoning (as they will be in the Greek philosophers, especially Plato and Aristotle), then the *Oedipous Tyrannos* is about the discovery by practical reason of its ground in receptive intuition. However, because self-movement or freedom requires the truth of reflective reasoning, the play also concerns its necessity and this is vindicated in the *Oedipous at Colonus* and the

justification of the worship of Oedipous as hero of Athens. It is not perhaps insignificant that Sophocles was born in Colonus.

15. The forms of knowledge and freedom in the sense of self motion or the lack of it are indissolubly connected. Teiresias like the oracle herself, responds to questions, he is not self-moved but stimulated from outside so as to know or uncover what is given him to see. Oedipous is self-moved in his self-destruction as well as his demand to know.

Apollo, friends, Apollo
he ordained my agonies—these my pains on pain!
But the hand that struck my eyes was mine,
mine alone—no one else—
I did it all myself.
p. 241, lines 1467-1471.

Οἰδίπους Ἀπόλλων τάδ' ἦν, Ἀπόλλων, φίλοι,
1330 ὁ κακὰ κακὰ τελῶν ἐμὰ τάδ' ἐμὰ πάθεα.
ἔπαισε δ' αὐτόχειρ νιν οὔτις, ἀλλ' ἐγὼ τλάμων.
τί γὰρ ἔδει μ' ὄρᾶν,
1335 ὅτ' ὄρῶντι μηδὲν ἦν ἰδεῖν γλυκύ;

16. Knox 134-138, is good on the centrality of prophesy in antiquity generally, and in Greek society particularly, and on how this is in question when the two Oedipous plays were written and performed. It is crucial to understand that although, in virtue of his self-movement, there is an epiphany of the ruined Oedipous in the *Oedipous at Colonus* he becomes the voice of the god as a daemonic hero. Knox 257, 270, and especially 275-276 is excellent on what a daemonic hero is. His doctrine here is that of Proclus, an irreproachable authority on Greek religion.

17. Aristotle on tragedy from the *De Poetica* [1449β]

ἔστιν οὖν τραγωδία μίμησις πράξεως
σπουδαίας [25] καὶ τελείας μέγεθος ἐχούσης, ...

Tragedy is the imitation of an action that is serious and with a size complete in itself.

δρῶντων καὶ οὐ δι' ἀπαγγελίας,

A drama not a narrative

δι' ἐλέου καὶ φόβου περαίνουσα τὴν τῶν τοιούτων παθημάτων κάθαρσιν.
with incidents arousing pity and fear in such a way as to purify these emotions.

[35] ἐπεὶ δὲ πράξεώς ἐστι μίμησις, πράττεται δὲ ὑπὸ τινῶν πραττόντων,

οὐς ἀνάγκηποιούς τινὰς εἶναι κατὰ τε τὸ ἦθος καὶ τὴν διάνοιαν
διὰ γὰρ τούτων καὶ τὰς πράξεις εἶναι φάμεν ποιὰς τινὰς,

The imitation is of an action ; the actions must follow necessarily from the characters of the actors. [paraphrase]

[1450β] πρὸς δὲ

τὰ μέγιστα οἷς ψυχαγωγεῖ ἡ τραγωδία τοῦ μύθου μέρη ἐστίν,

The action (or story or plot) is the soul of tragedy. [paraphrase]

[1453α5] ἔλεος μὲν περὶ τὸν ἀνάξιον,

φόβος δὲ περὶ τὸν ὅμοιον, ὥστε οὔτε

ἐλεεινὸν οὔτε φοβερὸν ἔσται τὸ συμβαῖνον.

Our pity is aroused by the suffering of those who are not unworthy, good people. Fear is aroused by the suffering of those like ourselves. [paraphrase]

Thus, in order to arouse pity and fear and to effect their purification, which is the purpose of tragedy

ὁ μεταξὺ ἄρα τούτων λοιπός. ἔστι δὲ τοιοῦτος ὁ μήτε ἀρετῇ διαφέρων καὶ δι
καισύνη μήτε διὰ κακίαν καὶ μοχθηρίαν μεταβάλλων εἰς τὴν δυστυχίαν ἀλλὰ

δι' [10] ἁμαρτίαν τινά, τῶν ἐν μεγάλῃ δόξῃ ὄντων καὶ εὐτυχία, οἷον

Οἰδίπους ...

ὥσπερ τινὲς φασὶ καὶ μεταβάλλειν οὐκ εἰς εὐτυχίαν ἐκ δυστυχίας

ἀλλὰ τοῦναντίον [15] ἐξ εὐτυχίας εἰς δυστυχίαν μὴ διὰ μοχθηρίαν ἀλλὰ δι' ἁ
μαρτίαν μεγάλην ἢ οἷου εἴρηται ἢ βελτίονος μᾶλλον ἢ

χείρονος. πράξεώς ἐστι μίμησις, πράττεται δὲ ὑπὸ τινῶν πραττόντων,

the character of tragic hero must be in the middle between great virtue and evil and his fall must be the consequence of a hamartia [missing of the mark] ... a great hamartia [error, missing of the mark]. (paraphrase)

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September, 2014