

## Research Article

### Forum

# Oedipus Philosophus: A Thought Experiment

Jerome Moran

Independent Scholar

## Abstract

This article has a four-fold purpose: (i) to point out the interface and overlap of Classics and Philosophy; (ii) to encourage the take-up of A level Philosophy as a fitting companion for Classics courses, linguistic and non-linguistic; (iii) to reinforce the correction of certain crucial misunderstandings about Sophocles' play, *Oedipus Rex*, especially concerning the agency of Oedipus both in the play and the back story of the play; (iv) to present a 'thought experiment' in order to show how modern philosophy might be applied to an ancient Greek play in order to resolve issues of truth and necessity.

**Key words:** Oedipus Rex, Thought Experiment, Oracles, Modern Philosophy, Truth

ἀνάγκαια δ' οὐδὲ θεοὶ μάχονται (Simonides MPG 542)  
'Not even gods fight necessity.'

## Thought Experiments

Could an awareness of modern philosophy with its understanding of necessity and necessary truth have saved Oedipus? This is the thought experiment that informs this article. A good deal of philosophy consists of thought experiments. Fiction too, including drama, can be thought of as a kind of thought experiment. What 'happens' in a play, including what happens *ektos tou dramatos* ('outside the drama') is the playwright's invention. What does not 'happen' in the play or the back story of the play does not happen at all. Our understanding and interpretation of a work of fiction should be based on the author's invention, not on the reader's, even if the reader, not the author, is the arbiter of the 'meaning' of what the author has invented.<sup>1</sup>

## Why Philosophy? A Protreptic

Philosophy is a very verbal subject, concerned as it has been since Socrates with the correct analysis of concepts and the precise meanings of terms. Students of Greek and Latin should feel at home with Philosophy. Ever since the subject first became available in the 1980s, it has seemed to me that A level Philosophy is a very fitting companion for A level Classics subjects, linguistic and non-linguistic. (Not many candidates these days offer the traditional triad of Greek, Latin and Ancient History.) After all, philosophy as we know it has its origins in the Classical period of ancient Greece. The prescribed texts for A level Philosophy include Plato and Aristotle (in translation, but Classics students could study them in

the original Greek). Interestingly, only two examination boards in England and Wales (apart from the Cambridge Pre-U) now offer Classics subjects, and only one (there used to be two) offers A level Philosophy. This is AQA, with 2,240 entries in June 2020, spread over an unknown (to me, and not for want of trying) number of centres. It is also available as a subject in the International Baccalaureate (IB), and the Cambridge Pre-U (the latter coupled with Theology). For some reason, only a very few (none?) of the few centres that do Classics offer Philosophy as well. It no longer has the stigma of a 'new subject', any more than Law, Sociology, Psychology etc.; nor is it still seen as a pariah by university philosophy departments. In fact, it has become a 'preferred subject' for university entrance. As for no longer being a new subject, it can lay claim to being the oldest of all academic subjects.

Has it not occurred to centres that there might be a mutual benefit, in terms of interdisciplinary interactivity (not to mention student numbers), in offering both Classics and Philosophy? The very name, and the 'big ideas' association of the subject, have an allure for many young would-be students of philosophy. Ancient Philosophy, in one form or another, is an ingredient in the courses of most university Classics departments (and many Philosophy departments). Modern Philosophy was a compulsory component of my Classics finals year. I have always been more attracted to truths than to facts (see below for the distinction), and would have gladly exchanged Ancient History (as it was taught then) for Philosophy at A level, if Philosophy had been available then. Now it is available, and I would exhort centres who do Classics to take it up, as a companion to Classics and/or as a possible way into Classics. A former UK Prime Minister (Harold Macmillan) once said that an Oxford tutor commended the study of the classical languages on the sole grounds that a student in later life 'should be able to detect when a man is talking rot'. I would maintain that the study of philosophy may be even more effective in this regard.

**Author for correspondence:** Jerome Moran, E-mail: [jeromemoran@hotmail.com](mailto:jeromemoran@hotmail.com)

**Cite this article:** Moran J (2023). Oedipus Philosophus: A Thought Experiment.

*Journal of Classics Teaching* 24, 62–64. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S2058631022000198>

(I must declare an interest here: I was a member of the group who under the astute direction of John Watling of UCL got Philosophy accepted as an A level subject. I was also the Moderator for the first six years of the old AEB A level Philosophy.)

### The play and the oracle(s)

But enough of the proreptic, let us turn to the play. We learn that some years before the action of the play begins — at least as many years as the age of the oldest of his four children (two of whom were also half-brothers, two half-sisters) — Oedipus was told by an oracle that he would kill his father and marry, i.e. commit incest with, his mother.<sup>2</sup> Significantly, his parents were not named by the oracle. Nor did the oracle give any reason why Oedipus would commit parricide and incest. But oracles were typically oracular as well as lapidary (self-protectively ambiguous too in many instances). This one was unambiguous, and *unconditional* too, as was the similar, much earlier oracle delivered to Laius soon after the birth of Oedipus, neither oracle leaving any way out for Oedipus or his parents. Or so it would seem: soon after receiving the oracle Oedipus unwittingly fulfils it.

In the fictional world in which the play is set — unlike the more sceptical real world in which the play was written — characters on the whole tended to believe that an oracle was infallible, and therefore that its pronouncements were true *necessarily*. Even so Oedipus (and Laius before him) sought to avoid the (unconditional) prediction of the oracle, and we are told that he had his doubts about the veracity of oracles. Jocasta too belittles oracles (and dreams, another medium of revelation), to reassure Oedipus and to prevent him from knowing the truth. The chorus, Greek tragedy's 'Everyman', is more circumspect.

Modern philosophy would have strengthened his doubts about oracles: it would have taught Oedipus that the oracle he received was not infallible, because it could not be true *necessarily*. This is because its contrary was conceivable; it was conceivable because it was not contradictory. Only statements the contrary of which are contradictory can be true necessarily. The oracle was not only not true necessarily, it might actually, as far as logic goes, be false. (More of this later.) Most people today are as ignorant of philosophy as Oedipus was, and are not aware of the notion of necessary truth. Not that in our 'post-truth' era people care all that much about truth, necessary or otherwise. But Oedipus did, and his (freely chosen) dogged pursuit of it was his undoing. He may have been the cause of the plague; but he was also the cause of its cessation. He was true to his word when he said that he would discover the person who was responsible for the plague and banish him from Thebes.

### 'On Misunderstanding the *Oedipus Rex*'

The *Oedipus Rex* is probably studied and performed more than any other play from antiquity (unless that accolade goes to *Antigone*). It is certainly the most seriously misunderstood. It served for Aristotle as a model of a Greek tragedy; but Aristotle is as much misunderstood as Sophocles. More than anything it is a play about *truth*, a central concept in the study of philosophy. I believe that not only Oedipus, but people today, with a knowledge of philosophy would be better equipped to understand the part that truth plays in the drama.<sup>3</sup>

In 1966 E.R. Dodds (a Classicist who specialised in (ancient) philosophy, it should be noted) wrote a famous article for the journal *Greece & Rome*, 'On Misunderstanding the 'Oedipus Rex'. (Interestingly, the article started life as a paper read two years earlier

at a refresher course for teachers at the London Institute of Education.) One major misunderstanding that he sought to correct was that Oedipus was not a free agent at any stage in the play; rather he was a helpless victim of the oracle, the gods, or fate. On the contrary said Dodds: everything he does on stage he does as a free agent, however 'fate-bound' he may have been by the oracle with regard to his father and mother. But more than 50 years on, this and other misunderstandings persist on the part of people who are not familiar with Dodds' article, and with philosophy. My article is written as a sort of philosophical coda to Dodds' article. It is intended to show (a) that no statement of fact, including the words of an oracle, can be true necessarily; (b) that the (words of the) oracle itself could not have constrained Oedipus to do anything to anybody. If he was constrained, it must have been by some other unknown causative factor, some form of determinism. None is mentioned in the play, however, and none is known of before the Hellenistic age. There is no suggestion in the play that fate in the form of an oracle is responsible for anything Oedipus does in the play itself, only in the back story of the play. But without the back story there is no play.

In Sophocles' play Oedipus is represented as a free agent, which is to say that he is free to act otherwise than he does act. Why he was fate-bound in committing parricide and incest is not explained in the play itself. Presumably, the audience was to accept that these were believed in the world of the play to be inevitable because foretold by an oracle. Certainly, no other explanation is offered in the play. There is no suggestion in the play that anything other than the oracle was responsible for Oedipus' predicament.

### Philosophy: Facts, Truth and the play

I want to approach the question of necessity, of both statements and facts, from the perspective of modern philosophy, by enlarging on what I said earlier. Dodds himself was well aware of this (he refers obliquely to analytical philosophy) but chose not to make use of it in his article as I do. But first a caveat: philosophers are a notoriously disputatious lot and it is possible that you would get a different account of necessity from a different source (most notably from W. V. O. Quine). The outline account of it presented here is the traditional one going back to Hume and Kant (the latter with important reservations about the status of certain *a priori* propositions) that is accepted by many/most Anglophone philosophers.

First, one should distinguish between truths and facts (Oscar Wilde once remarked that the English are always degrading truths into facts); between what is necessary and what is contingent; between truths that are true necessarily and non-necessary truths. It is most unlikely that such distinctions were made by Sophocles or his audience, which is perhaps why Dodds did not make explicit use of them. And he was not conducting a thought experiment.

Briefly put, a fact is something that is the case in the world of experience, i.e. sense experience. A truth is a proposition (what is asserted by a statement) that something is the case within or outside the realm of experience. What is affirmed to be the case must be the case for the proposition to be true.

A fact is contingent. This means that it happens to be the case, but is not necessarily the case. A fact is contingent if its non-existence is conceivable. It is conceivable if it is not or does not entail a contradiction. Most philosophers agree that there are not such things as necessary facts, nor necessary truths that affirm facts. There are necessary truths, but these are not about

matters of fact in the realm of experience, but rather about the meanings antecedently ascribed to the terms that constitute the subject and predicate of the proposition. So, for example, 'A triangle has three sides' is true necessarily. It is a tautology, true by definition: a thing that has three sides has three sides. A necessary truth then is one the contrary of which is a contradiction. A contradiction is inconceivable and must therefore be false necessarily. And no proposition of a contingent fact can be true necessarily.

Applying now these distinctions to the play:

Philosophers question whether there can be such things as future facts at all. But if it can be known that X will happen, it is true that X will happen. One cannot know what is not true. But it is not a necessary truth that X will happen: one can conceive without contradiction that X will not happen. Only if the oracle knows that it is a necessary truth that Oedipus will commit parricide and incest can he fail to avoid them. But an oracle can only know what can be known; and no being, human or divine, ancient Greek, Christian or non-Christian can have such knowledge. This is a matter of logical possibility and impossibility (see later). It is in fact the oracle, not Oedipus, that is constrained, constrained by logic. (But it is fortunate for us that the ancient Greeks were not aware of this. Had they known, they might have had a different attitude to prophecy, and there might have been no *Oedipus Rex*.)

Did Sophocles, his audience, fifth century Greeks generally, believe that oracles knew what would happen? If they did, did they also believe that the truth of an oracle in itself caused the fulfilment of the oracle? It is unlikely that they distinguished between the knowledge of necessary and non-necessary truth, and the criterion for each, as a modern philosopher does. Non-philosophers these days assert that something 'must be true', having no knowledge of what 'must' means when used of an assertion.

Even if it is allowed that an oracle knows that X will happen, this does not mean that the oracle itself *causes* X to happen. What does cause it to happen is the agency of Oedipus in this case. We might suppose that Oedipus must therefore be regarded as a victim of determinism who is unable to act otherwise, but it is doubtful whether Sophocles or his audience distinguished between free will and determinism any more than they did between necessary and non-necessary truth.

There is no indication in the play itself that an oracle, or any other divine foreknowledge, knows what will happen except for Oedipus' parricide and incest. Nothing else is predetermined, either by fate or the gods or an oracle. And what was predetermined happened years before the action of the play. As has been observed, by Dodds and others, what was predetermined could not be a punishment for anything Oedipus does or does not do later in the play itself.

Why Oedipus is represented as a helpless victim of the oracles, both his and that of Laius, we are not told. If we are not told in the play, there is no explanation to be found. Either Sophocles did not know or he did not want the audience to know. The inscrutability

adds to the pity and fear (especially fear) that Aristotle claims are characteristic of Greek tragedy. There is nothing remarkable about a man killing another man and marrying his wife. What is remarkable in the *Oedipus Rex* is the back story. The oracle did not name the father and mother, merely their relationship to Oedipus. Enter now the *hamartia*, the mistaken belief about his parentage (an intellectual falling short) that leads to the killing of his real father and marriage with his real mother (a behavioural falling short). Both were done in ignorance of the truth, therefore excusable legally (if the killing was excusable as self-defence), but not tolerable religiously, either by the community or by the victim himself. As Dodds said, the guilt of pollution inhered objectively and uneliminably in Oedipus; and he knew it.

If Oedipus, a clever man by all accounts (and he does express doubts about oracles generally), had done modern philosophy he might have shrugged off the oracle. (One of the many 'if only' counterfactuals that characterise the play.) Even a supposedly omniscient theistic god can only know what can be known, just as a supposedly omnipotent god can only do what can be done — which does not include creating triangles with two sides, valleys without mountains, compassion without suffering. (Can an omnipotent god create problems that he cannot solve? If he can, or if he can't, in either case he is not omnipotent.) Such a god cannot know that a proposition the contrary of which is conceivable is true necessarily. The deliverance of the oracle to Oedipus was such a proposition. It was not true necessarily and could not in itself have predetermined his actions. Armed with his knowledge of philosophy, he could have stayed in Corinth with his adoptive parents, relying on philosophy rather than acquiescing in superstition. But we are glad that he didn't. Otherwise, we would not have the thought experiment that is the *Oedipus Rex*.

## Notes

1 For another thought experiment on Sophocles' version of the Oedipus story, see *Giles Goat-Boy* by the American novelist John Barth (1966). This is a postmodernist allegory that contains a brilliant and hilarious parody of the whole of the *Oedipus Rex* with the title 'Taliped Decanus'. A must read. I doubt if most students of the Sophocles play outside the USA are aware of it. He has also written (2005) a triad of novellas with the Oedipidean title *Where 3 Roads Meet*.

2 The only references to how long ago it was since the killing of Laius are in the following lines of the play (the translations are those of the Loeb by Lloyd-Jones):

109: 'ancient guilt'; 290: 'ancient rumour'; 561: 'the count of years would run far back' (since Laius was killed); 735-7; 1010-1015.

Antigone (and Ismene) are still young girls, barely in their teens, in the play *Antigone*. But their brothers were old enough to fight (and die) in the assault against Thebes.

3 Sophocles is considered to be philosophers' favourite Greek tragedian because of the sort of issues his plays deal with, and the manner in which they are dealt with.