

Truth or Happiness?

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“Truth” belongs among the words which we use so often, but whose meaning we do not exactly know. One cannot define truth, for then we would have to define all the other words in terms of themselves and we would get a cycle. Since everybody can claim his tiny piece of truth, the complete truth remains hidden to humans. The truth in Sophocles’ *Oedipus the King* lies with the god Apollo and his prophet Teiresias. Because humans cannot embrace the whole truth, it must be given to them in small pieces called oracles. Then why waste energy by seeking the truth we can never reach, instead of simply enjoying ourselves?

Oedipus, however, finds the truth, which ruins his life. But was that life of one big lie worth it? As a reaction to the discovery of the truth, Oedipus, paradoxically, returns to praying to the gods. Since comprehending the truth does not bring any benefit to one, he should not sacrifice his happiness. Happiness exists only in a moment, but we live in a moment, and thus we should protect our happiness from any damage.

Teiresias, the prophet of Apollo, holds the truth and although he uses it as his shield and his sword, he occasionally doubts its usefulness. Truth can be an unwieldy burden: once you grasp it, you cannot release it. Teiresias sees that exclaiming the truth would do no good because it would only bring suffering. To protect Oedipus from truth, Teiresias refuses to tell him the truth about his past: “I will not / bring to the light of day my troubles, mine—rather than call them yours” (328). Since Teiresias directly represents gods’ will, it follows that his actions are always right, and since he refuses to tell Oedipus the truth, Sophocles

concludes that protection of happiness justifies keeping somebody from the truth. Thomas Gray expressed it similarly: “Where ignorance is bliss, ’tis folly to be wise,” understanding that preaching to the young students of Eton College about the awaiting suffering would not make any sense: they would be either confused, or overwhelmingly sorry for themselves. In both cases a superior being deprives the others of true knowledge for their own good, setting the boundaries to democracy and one’s free will.

Thus the knowledge of truth makes it impossible to stay with society, and one must alienate himself from it. So Teiresias had to leave the city, and did not communicate with others. His blindness contrasts with his inner vision of the truth, and Teiresias escapes from the reality (356) in order to see this truth. Similarly, Oedipus also must leave the city and live alone, contemplating about the truth he achieved. Firstly, Oedipus was laughing at Teiresias, but soon he takes him as a model. Teiresias inspires Oedipus because both have an intense connection to the gods: one is a prophet, and the other is “hated by the Gods” (1519).

As opposed to godlike Teiresias, Jocasta and Creon represent humans, who only want to live happily, and seeking the truth becomes infringing on gods’ territory. Jocasta explains: “Best to live lightly, as one can, unthinkingly” (978), yet she might have just made this up to justify her pressure on Oedipus to give up his search for truth. Having grasped the truth about the murder and the incest before Oedipus, would she just go to bed with him again, had he not found out? Creon likewise advises him not “to throw [mortal] life away, which a man loves the best” (612). Both Creon and Jocasta represent the view of common people: they prefer happiness, here and now. Hence there must be a strong inner force driving Oedipus even against the compulsion of the surroundings to find the truth. Perhaps, he inquires about the truth because he takes it as an eternal value, as compared to momentary happiness. At the end of his life all happiness will disappear, but he can at least be sure that he was honest with himself.

Importantly, Oedipus *alone* chooses to end his happiness, for the oracle just prophesies

that he will kill his father and sleep with his mother (995). The consequences, however, result solely from Oedipus' will. Only his own curse limits Oedipus: to prove that he can surely hold to his word and punish himself severely means to prove that his own will has the same importance as the gods' prophecy. Obviously, Oedipus aspires to godhood, which shocks the Chorus terribly: "Poor wretch, what madness came upon you!" (1300). Greeks always opposed usurpers who claimed to be gods, which made mortal humble servants of the gods, living out of their grace and never revolting. So Teiresias manifests that the knowledge of truth separates human and godlike, and these two elements cannot be combined. Because the gods identify with truth and humans with happiness, Oedipus cannot achieve both happiness and truth at the same time. Consequently, this necessity of choice drives Oedipus into decision for truth, which springs from intuition and inner sight, rather than from reason.

In certain sense, however, he achieves both truth and happiness: by completing his terrible doom as a reaction to truth about himself, Oedipus gets infinite happiness, for he cannot condescend any lower; even a death would be welcome. The Chorus doubts the value of his old happiness,

What man, what man on earth wins more
of happiness than a seeming. (1190)

This means that his previous happiness was only virtual, and since now he looks down upon it from the clouds, he can say how terribly he sinned in that "happiness." The state he ends up in, on the contrary, does not allow any disappointment; he has released his fears out of his mind, and nothing worse than what already happened can surprise him. For this reason, he lives a real life containing both happiness and truth. The last words of Creon and the Chorus, however, suggest that life with happiness in the old sense and with the belief in gods' providence is equally valuable. Even Oedipus in the end accepts the superiority of the gods, as Creon notes: "Now even you will trust / the God," (1445) which only amplifies how the truth connects to the gods.

Furthermore, when Oedipus finishes his suffering by blinding himself, he is proud that he himself caused this to happen, not the gods. He boasts to his brother-in-law Creon, “No man but I can bear my evil doom” (1415). Although he admits his choice was a bad mistake transforming him into so wretched a being, he accepts its consequences, heroically refusing death as too easy a path. Ironically, discovering the truth made the people scorn him, and everybody hates him for crimes that he was not aware of. The only reason for the Chorus to demand the truth links to the gods’ wish, by which their happiness is conditioned by the discovery of the truth.

Most tragically, Oedipus, who tried his whole life to act justly, finds himself a liar to the whole community. His best belief and effort did not suffice to attain a happy life, and so Oedipus greatly resembles Hector of the *Iliad*. Moreover, Oedipus finds it hard even to communicate with people from his old life, for he is so embarrassed by his previous actions in the light of the truth:

How can I justly hope that [Creon] will trust me?

In what is past I have been proved towards him an utter liar. (1420)

Oedipus emphasizes the division line between his previous and current life. Additionally, he clearly knows that staying among his fellows would spread a bad example (1434), and so he still cares about the prosperity and well-being of his community.

Oedipus’ message to his daughters epitomizes the experience of his life—one should “pray: give me a life / wherever there is opportunity / to live, and better life than was my father’s” (1513)—and he therefore finds the truth in the relationship with gods (in his case they hate him). Though he could handle his life, he does not want his daughters to go through the same spiritual anabasis. Possibly, he gives this advice because he does not believe in his daughters’ strength and maturity to face the truth, which precisely agrees with Thomas Gray’s poem. Nevertheless, as everybody urged him before not to seek the truth, so now he urges his daughters. Thus even he, in the end, prefers happiness to truth, for the truth weighs too much to allow one to live.

Works cited

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