

Oedipus and Fate

To what extent is Oedipus responsible for his own fate?

In looking at the play Oedipus Rex I found several possibilities surrounding his fate. Firstly, we could make the assumption that perhaps as destiny controls all fates, then Oedipus' character was created long before he was conceived. On the other hand, we could also say that perhaps Oedipus' horrific fate came about because of his character. The third possibility is that everything is inevitable - therefore no one ever has had any say in their own fate, let alone Oedipus.

The first explanation to this question is the idea that destiny makes character. As destiny, supposedly in the Greek mindset, maps out all events before they occur, we can today assume with this logic that perhaps the components that "built" Oedipus' character were caused by fate. We know today that character is determined by biological factors and experience. These biological factors would have been determined by how well he was fed, how well he developed, his genes etc. The experience would have also been determined by the pre-destined master plan of Fate. Thus it is possible to argue that Oedipus, as components of his character and mind, was entirely shaped by fate and therefore cannot be held responsible for what he has done, as he has no control over his actions.

But the grounds that these arguments are based on are essentially unreliable. In my opinion, fate does not exist. Yet, as this is a personal choice similar to religious belief in the sense that there can be no definitive argument for or against, we cannot rationally conclude decisively either way. Yet it would be interesting to note that as this play is constructed along the lines of Aristotle's theory of tragedy, the way in which the play is constructed would try to convey the sentiment that fate was the overriding factor and thus could be a valid basis for the argument just outlined. But if we were to look at the play and interpret it according to our own value judgement system, then we could just as easily reject this principle. It all depends on how we would like to approach the play. And as there is no definitive, positive way of doing this, neither way can be said to be "right" or "wrong".

The second explanation is the idea that it could be a mixture of both destiny and character. But this seems a little inconsistent. How can anyone's character have any consequence if destiny is at work? During Oedipus we see many examples of how this can be resolved. When Oedipus (unbeknown to him) meets his father on the road, he could have decided to walk away and not react. However he decided to react aggressively, and thus kills his father. But theoretically, if his character had been different, fate could have returned later and tested him in different ways, perhaps then engaging his good-natured side. When Oedipus meets the sphinx, he could have turned away, but instead his character dictates that he should be bold and face her. Thus he becomes King, and sets him on his path to incest. However, if he had acted differently, surely fate being fate, it would have found another way to trap him. In this logic the crucial difference is that fate requires him to play a part to actually exact the plan.

Finally, I come to the last possibility. Perhaps of all the possible choices, this is the one favoured most by Aristotle. It conforms completely to his way of looking at things. This solution is the idea that we are all controlled by fate. Everything is controlled by fate. In Oedipus, if we were to accept this way of looking at things, we would come to the conclusion that the entire Athenian world is one giant chess game. It is as if everything

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was kick started millions of years ago, with each and every action already planned out. Then as the gods saw the world developing around them, they decided to punish and reward those who they favoured. Here with Oedipus they have found their plaything. Conforming to the tragic human situation, a basically decent character falls through an error of action that has its origins in his character. This is merely Aristotle's theory of tragedy, which is what the play was based on. On lines 20-1 the priest even tells Oedipus that the city is "...caught in a tide of death from which there is no escaping", which lets us know that this was definitely the view at the time.

Essentially we are dealing with an artificial plot. These series of events do not conform to real world values, only to the main beliefs of Aristotle. Thus when we look at this plot, the mechanics of it cannot be dealt with in a normal way. This is theatre. It has been crafted to look as though the fall is due to some error of action, strongly entwined with fate. It gives the impression that Oedipus could not have stopped the actual horrific incest with his mother and the murder of his father from occurring, only the recognition of it. For Sophocles, it seems almost certain that, it was all down to fate. However in today's society it is not likely that many people would believe this unreservedly as people would in the time of Sophocles. Oedipus seems unfortunate, a victim of superstition as much as anything else. Yet to those of who accept fate, then perhaps this could be the explanation. It is a completely personal decision, based on an individual interpretation. There is no one correct answer for interpretation in the 21st Century, in depends completely on individuals perception of the actuality of fate.