

Truth and Perception

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The truth is a concept that people value. It is an ideal reality that people seek to understand. Reality, or truth, is pure, and cannot be changed by various perceptions by different individuals. The truth is objective, as opposed to certain falsehoods and deceptions. However, the truth is not always within our understanding. It does not deceive by itself, only through the interpretations and conclusions that arise from it. Truth is not subject to perception. Varying perceptions of truth are analyzed through Roger Thornhill's journey in *North by Northwest*, Oedipus' quest for truth in *Oedipus the King*, and Oedipus' discovery of truth.

The film *North by Northwest* involves a search for truth. Roger Thornhill is kidnapped by several men who believe he is a different man. Thornhill begins his journey for the truth when he escapes assassination and is arrested. He seeks to discover the truth of George Kaplan. Vandamm and Leonard aim to stop Thornhill from uncovering the truth about Kaplan. After Thornhill's release from the police station, he goes to the United Nations General Assembly Building by taxi to contact Townsend. Townsend seems to be unaware of the events that have occurred in his house. Then, Townsend is killed by a knife, and Thornhill appears to be the murderer. The crowd makes this assumption based on the knife in Thornhill's hand. The crowd's assumption is not derived from the truth, but it is derived from their perception of the truth. Later in the film, when Leonard plans to kill Eve Kendall, Vandamm recognizes that Leonard is simply trying to deceive him into following his plan. Leonard tells Vandamm that "Sometimes the truth does taste like a mouthful of worms" (Lehman). Vandamm replies, "Truth? I've heard nothing but innuendo" (Lehman). Leonard tells Vandamm that he is speaking the truth, and that the truth is not always good. During the film Thornhill begins to believe the deceptions of Vandamm and Leonard, but the truth is unchanged, and their deceptions are proven incorrect when Thornhill

learns the truth of his kidnapping. Thornhill realizes that the truth was not changed by his perception.

Oedipus' quest for the truth of the murder of Laius leads him to discover that his perception of the truth is incorrect. The play *Oedipus the King* presents Oedipus as a tragically flawed character who is blind to his own truth. The play begins when Thebes is struck by plague and other ailments. The mandate of the gods is a purge of a certain man's blood. Creon is sent to the place Apollo haunts at Pythia to learn from the mouth of the god. He returns with bright eyes and says, "'Here,' says the god. 'Seek and you shall find. Only that escapes which never was pursued.'" (Sophocles 9). In the play by Sophocles the god's design is portrayed as the ultimate truth that is inevitable. The death and banishment of Laius' murderer will save Thebes, according to the god's design. Out of fear for his murder, Oedipus tells Creon that "The cause of Laius therefore is my own" (Sophocles 11). He is determined to find the truth of Laius' murder. Oedipus is unaware of the truth, and is unable to perceive the murderer as himself. This moment of dramatic irony foreshadows Oedipus' eventual discovery. He believes his perceptions are correct, as opposed to the blind prophet Tiresias, who is referred to by the Chorus as the "sole temple of incarnate truth on earth" (Sophocles 17). Oedipus is blinded to the truth because his own perceptions and beliefs of the gods and prophets will not allow him to see the truth. He perceives Tiresias as a threat, and suspects him of the murder, asking him if "you think you're safe?" (Sophocles 20). When Oedipus discovers the truth, he also discovers that his perception of the truth is very flawed.

Oedipus' discovery of the truth results in his realization of the objective quality of truth. Later in the play, Oedipus believes his fate lies on a herdsman, who lives far from Thebes. He

believes the herdsman's account of the truth will determine the verdict for Oedipus. Both Oedipus and his wife, however, are still blinded by their perceptions. Jocasta assumes the accuracy of her perceptions, as she says, "How dwindled are the grand predictions of Apollo!" (Sophocles 51). Apollo proves her wrong. Jocasta kills herself, and Oedipus finds her and blinds himself, thus eliminating his sense of perception. Oedipus has realized his false perception of reality, and believes that by blinding himself he will be free from his act of murder and incest. Oedipus believes he is free, and the Chorus questions Oedipus, "But how can we say that your design was good? To live in blindness? Better live no longer" (Sophocles 74). Oedipus' lifelong blindness of the truth has ended, and he believes that the act of physically blinding his eyes is his best plan. Oedipus is blind, but he now sees the truth. Oedipus asks Creon to grant him his request to purge Oedipus from Thebes, saying, "The god's design is open, all his oracle is clear: kill the impious one, the parricide, kill *me*" (Sophocles 76). In a moment, Oedipus realizes that the truth is objective and he realizes that the god's design is the clearest truth.

As in *Oedipus the King* and *North by Northwest*, people have a desire to seek the ultimate truth, which is often independent from its perception. The truth in *Oedipus the King* is one that horrifies Oedipus. Oedipus realizes that his life was not what he had imagined. His reaction demonstrates his attempts to master the truth and his perception of it. Oedipus' design is one wherein he realizes that his eyes are useless to him, and that he must blind himself. He believes that by blinding himself, he can again become blind to the truth. Oedipus' perception of the truth was subjective and changing. Oedipus saw, but was paradoxically blind to the truth. Ultimately,

Oedipus realizes that the truth is eternal. He sees himself as an unlucky man, ruined by fate, and does not blame himself. The purest truth is objective, and it is not governed by people's design.