# An Analysis on the ancient Greek concept of fate in *Oedipus the King*

**Introduction**

*Oedipus the King* is a famous Greek tragedy written by Sophocles. It describes a story about killing father and marring mother. Oedipus is the prince of Corinth. One day, by accident, he knew that he is doomed to kill his father and to marry his mother. In order to avoid this consequence, he escaped from his homeland to Thebes. On the way to Thebes he killed the Laius, the king of Thebes, but at that moment he didn’t know that Laius is his real father. Later he freed Thebes from Sphinx by guessing the answer to Sphinx’s riddle. As a result, he succeeded Laius becoming new king of Thebes and married the wife of Laius. So far he had already fulfilled his fate unconsciously. One day Thebes was attacked by a plague and Apollo said Thebes must find the person who killed Laius, otherwise the plague would not stop. As the king of Thebes, Oedipus did his best to find the murderer, but at last he found the murder is himself. Then he realized that he had already become the person he didn’t want to be. Desperately, he gouged out his eyes and exiled himself from Thebes.

Most people classify *Oedipus the King* as Fate Tragedy and conclude this tragedy’s theme is that human beings cannot escape from their fate. That is true, but superficial. If we think further, we may find some interesting questions.

*Oedipus the King* is not only about fate, but also about incest. The story would still be valid without fate, and for this reason, why fate is essential to this story? What’s more, according to science, we all know that fate is ambiguous, at least those ancient Greek prophets cannot truly foretell the future, so how did fate such a concept come to their mind? And why did they put so much emphasis on a thing that they don’t know? It is a meaningful question but it has been neglected for a long time. This paper will scrutinize this question, and reveal deep meaning of the Greek concept of fate.

**The equivalent concept of Fate in other cultures**

Before we talk about the Greeks, we’d better have a look about another story of Bible. Job is very loyal to God, but he was still beset with horrendous disasters. However, he didn’t blame God. Instead, he tried to understand his situation. At last, God rewarded him for his obedience. Although Job and Oedipus did not live in the same age and shared different cultural backgrounds, they have one thing in common, that is both of them are good men but suffer for no reason. Here comes the question: why good men suffer? The Bible explains that it was because that God was testing his loyalty. In Greece, there must be some people who experience the same situation of Job. The coincidence combined and become necessity, and fate emerges as an entity at last. Although being called in different names, they are the same in essence.

There is also an equivalent of fate in Chinese—TianMing (decrees of Heaven). It was invented by Confucius. He was devoted to convincing the kings to adopt his political theory, but his theory was so ideal that no one put his theory into practice. So he said: “At fifty, I knew the decrees of Heaven.” By saying so, perhaps he was comforting himself by attributing his failure to a supernatural power. And He also said: “If my principles are to advance, it is so ordered. If they are to fall to the ground, it is so ordered”, which asserts that the success of a man is total depends on fate. We are not to distain Confucius, but try to prove that humans tend to seek exterior factor to comfort when they do the best but still failed. And both Confucius and Oedipus, although they used different expressions, supposed something unknown which restricts human beings and is out of human’s control. As to Oedipus, he struggled to escape his doom, but finally he failed. Perhaps we can attribute their experience to one reason—the limitation of human beings.

Now we see that fate is not an isolated phenomenon because many other cultures which are far from Greek, also have similar concepts. So we can conclude that it is a question of all human beings.

**The limitation of human beings**

As Aristotle says, the protagonist of a tragedy must be a good man, because only the suffering of a good man can arouse people’s sympathy and fear. If it is a bad man that suffers, then people will regard it as deserved punishment.

Oedipus is a good man and believed the gods. And actually, he did what Apollo asked him to do, though this is useless to change his disastrous fate. It seems like Oedipus suffered for no reason. Although in the Greek mythology system there is a reason. It says that Oedipus’s father was guilty, and thus was cursed, so Oedipus inherited the curse from his father and was born with original sin. But this religious explanation only answers superficial question, the deep reason remains to be found.

In my opinion, the deep reason is the instinct limitation of human beings. The Greeks had realized it very early. As the famous statement carved on the Temple of Delphi says: “know thyself”, which asks human beings to realize their limitations.

So was Oedipus. He was strong and wise, but still limited. It can be approved by guessing the riddle of Sphinx. He is also very proud of this. He said: “*But I came, Oedipus, who knew nothing, and I stopped her. I solved the riddle by my own wit alone. Mine was no knowledge got from birds.”*

But beneath the confidence is the ignorance of another kind of wisdom because he knew nothing about what had happened, just like what he said at first:” *I say as one that is a stranger to the story as stranger to the deed.”* We can say Oedipus is ignorant to the fate and gods, which is superior to human beings and cannot be controlled. This kind of ignorance lies in the nature of human beings and cannot be made up either by experience of ration. This is the limitation of human beings and the difference from gods.

This kind of wisdom belongs to gods as it is mentioned in the drama: *Truly Zeus and Apollo are wise and in human things all knowing.* Oedipus also told the prophet: “*Teiresias, you are versed in everything, things teachable and things not to be spoken, things of the heaven and earth-creeping things.”*

There is a metaphor about wisdom and ignorance in the drama-- the eyes. Oedipus can see, which symbolizes that he has human’s wisdom, but is blind to his fate. While Tiresias is physically blind, he has prophetic eyes. There is an argument about blindness between Oedipus and Tiresias which exactly shows the difference. Tiresias *said:* “*You have your eyes but see not where you are in sin, nor where you live, nor whom you live with…A deadly footed, double striking curse, from father and mother both, shall drive you forth out of this land, with darkness on your eyes, that now have such straight vision.”* And consequently, at the climax of the drama, Oedipus gouged out his eyes, saying that: “*they will never see the crime I have committed or had done upon me! Dark eyes, now in the days to come look on forbidden faces, do not recognize those whom you long for—with such imprecations”,* which is just Tiresias like’s foretell.

The chorus plays an important role. It represents the author’s attitude and the theme of the drama. It says:” *No longer to the holy place, to the navel of earth I’ll go to worship, not to Abae not to Olympia, unless the oracles are proved to fit, for all men’s hands to point at. O Zeus, if you are rightly called the sovereign lord, all mastering, let this not escape you nor your ever-living power! The oracles concerning Laius are old and dim and men regard them not. Apollo is nowhere clear in honor; God’s service perishes.”* From these lines, we can guess it is description of the Greek society at that time, in which people didn’t believe in gods any more. As we all know, the religion of gods is very essential to. In Greek myth, whoever doesn’t respect gods has been punished at last. Through the speech of the chorus, Sophocles aimed to restore the belief of gods.

So as Jean-Pierre Vernant claims that: the sin of Oedipus does not lies in himself, but is a universal living dilemma of human beings: people must struggle to live but still they may fail because of their innate limitation. And that is the wisdom of the Greeks. On one hand, they pursue wisdom and strength, on the other hand they realized the limitation of human beings and never looked forward to changing their fate, so that they reached a balance between free will and fatalism. Just like Jocasta said:*”* *Why should man fear since chance is all in all for him, and he can clearly foreknow nothing? Best to live lightly, as one can, unthinkingly.”*

**Reference**

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