
Defining the Soul of Oedipus: Sophocles' Play Alongside Plato's Republic

Translations of Sophocles' play are generally interpreted in one of two ways, 'Oedipus Rex', meaning Oedipus the King, or 'Oedipus Tyrannus', meaning Oedipus the Tyrant. The exact distinction between the two titles is undefined, though through the lens of Socrates' five characterizations of the soul, the readers can identify what type of man he is. Throughout the text, Oedipus exhibits elements of Socrates' tripartite soul: the rational, the spirited, and the appetitive. Each person has a unique balance of these parts, and only by combining these with Socrates' five characterizations of the soul is it possible to place Oedipus. The five characterizations are the aristocratic, the timocratic, the oligarchical, the democratic, and the tyrannical soul. Oedipus fulfills a share of each of these characterizations with his actions in *Oedipus Tyrannus*. Oedipus embodies all of these different types of character; and within them he resembles all three parts of Socrates tripartite soul. Socrates believed that one could have a gold soul of pure reason and willingness to learn, a silver soul, of courage, or an iron soul, one that hasn't the purity or drive to complete true goodness. Oedipus is able to embody each characterization, proving that he cannot truly have a gold, silver, or iron soul, due to the wealth of actions that he takes. His soul, and thus the type of man he is, must be regarded as a mix of gold, silver, and iron as a result of his mercurial nature.

Within *The Republic*, Plato relays through writing Socrates' vision for an ideal city, Kallipolis. The foundation of the city is built on the idea that society is perfectly balanced, and ruled through the system of aristocracy, the rule of the best. Socrates believes these aristocrats take the form of philosophers, yearning for knowledge and only ruling because they view it as a responsibility, not as an honor. Plato writes of the philosopher kings that they are, "they must refuse to accept what is false, hate it, and have a love for the truth".[1] Socrates' explanation of the philosopher king provides an explanation to how highly regarded they are, and as a result these kings carry golden souls. In relation to Oedipus, he amiably saves the city of Thebes from the clutches of the sphinx, allowing him to come to power and free the people of Thebes. His wit allows him to rise to power, after solving the riddle of a sphinx to free the city of a former plague, "You came to Thebes, saved us from the Sphinx." [2] He addresses his people when they congregate at the palace, and tells of how he won't relent in his search for knowledge on how to end the plague within the city. This displays how Oedipus naturally is inclined to take responsibility for his people, likening him to a philosopher king, who gives all he has to benefit his subjects. In addition, he wants to know this for the benefit of others selflessly. In Oedipus' conversation with Jocasta after Oedipus begins to come around to the idea that it may have been him who committed the murder, Jocasta urges him to stop investigating the case of Laius' death. However, Oedipus believes that he cannot stop until he finds the truth, "I still want/That herdsman here.", [3] referring to a witness of the death of Laius. His earnest inquiry relating to the death of Laius shines light upon his ability, albeit inconsistent, to control his emotions and think rationally, regardless of what is at stake. At a multitude of points during the play, Oedipus is able to logically pursue truth, displaying attributes associated with that of a golden soul. This suggests that Oedipus' soul partially consists of gold, that of the highest social ranking in Kallipolis.

A group known as the auxiliaries also exists within Plato's Kallipolis. The auxiliaries are born

with souls of silver, and their duty is to defend the city, of them Socrates says, “isn’t it truly most correct to call these people complete guardians (auxiliaries), since they will guard against external enemies and internal friends.”[4] As evidenced by this quote, their role was distinct from the philosopher kings in the sense that the auxiliaries’ pursuit of knowledge is not as strong as the philosopher king’s pursuit of knowledge, and honor replaces wisdom as the primary concern for auxiliaries. The silver souls of auxiliaries are equated to souls of honor, which is closely tied to the soul of a timocrat. The timocratic man is one who holds valor above all. Throughout *Oedipus Tyrannus*, Oedipus embodies the timocrat at a couple points. He sought retribution upon the person who put the city under a plague, he exclaims, “I will stop at nothing to find/ The one who has this man’s blood on his hands”. [5] Though he wants to help the city, he also aims to uphold his reputation while gaining respect for saving the city of Thebes once again, cementing himself as the most adept ruler. His drive to curse the murderer stems from his spiritual soul, not from his rational soul. As the play concludes, Oedipus learns of his fate as he falls from grace. He laments, “I am the destroyer, the curse,/ The man the gods loathe most of all”, [6] in this way, Oedipus is a timocrat. He realizes the honor that he has lost, and bemoans how he cannot get it back. Oedipus displays a timocratic character with a silver soul, and as a result he cannot be philosopher king or golden soul.

The natural progression from a timocratic character is to an oligarchical one. The oligarchical character possesses an appetitive soul, Socrates’ believed that this appetitive soul was the weakest of the parts of the soul, and easily submits to desire. The oligarchical soul desires wealth, and its insatiably appetite for wealth is treasured above all else. Oedipus makes his own oligarchical tendencies apparent through his obsession with power. He accuses Tiresias of conspiring with his brother-in-law, Creon, and cannot let go of his throne until he learns the full truth about his family, when he finally surrenders outside of his palace. Oedipus later accuses Creon, “Here’s the murderer in plain sight./ Clearly, he meant to steal my power”. [7] His extremely defensive of his power results in a fight between the brother-in-laws, establishing that Oedipus tests his familial relationship with his wealth and power. Oedipus obsesses over his wealth, which comes in the form of his royalty and political power. Terrified of losing these values, he goes to any extent to protect them, making him oligarchical. The oligarchical soul does not place emphasis on the truth of knowledge, and is only appetitive, meaning Oedipus’ soul is furthered cluttered with iron metals.

The Republic proposes another characterization of the soul, that of a democrat. The democratic soul is appetitive by nature and covets freedom above all else, sacrificing all they can for the sake of newfound liberty. Though freedom is important, it can often turn to licentiousness if it is unstructured, which restricts freedom if it is not used in moderation. The democratic characterization stresses that all everyone is involved, and Oedipus reflects that in his actions throughout the play. When Creon returns with news on how to end the plague, Oedipus makes sure all of Thebes hears, “Let everyone hear. I grieve for them/ Far more than I do for myself”. [8] His trust in the strength of the citizens as a collective is closely aligned with the ideologies of democratic characterization. Within a speech to the people where he promises to punish the perpetrator who killed the Laius, Oedipus is completely fair, “I damn myself, if I should come to know/ That he shares my hearth and home –/ Then I call this curse to fall on me.” [9] has a partially democratic character, meaning there is more iron mixed into his soul, separating him further from Socrates’ ideal of a philosopher king. Oedipus displays the soul of a democrat through his belief in people, and the idea that all are equal under the law. The notion of this is noble, but still appetitive, as he inadvertently damns himself with this statement. The soul of the tyrant is also present within Oedipus. The tyrant is chained to his appetite, he is

obsessed with lust and entrenched in himself. The tyrant is willing to do anything for more of whatever he may think will satisfy his appetite, and cannot think rationally, making him the opposite of the philosopher king. Oedipus can be seen as a tyrant when analyzing the extremes he performed to in order to gain and keep power. Without intent, Oedipus commits patricide, and incest. Afterwards, he threatens to kill his brother-in-law, Creon, "I demand your death." [10] Another commonality amongst tyrants is being blind to the truth. The soul of a tyrant is also present with Oedipus, further muddling his mix of gold, silver, and iron soul. The tyrant proves to be the soul farthest from that of a philosopher king, and though he shows negative characteristics, it cannot be said that Oedipus is a tyrant himself. Oedipus exhibits aspects of each of the five characterizations of the soul in Sophocles play. Oedipus uncovers certain aspects of the tripartite soul in his character, yet they all combine to form his soul. It must be concluded that his soul is a mix of gold, silver, and iron metals. It can threaten murder, and it can pursue learning and knowledge, Oedipus is a character that bridges is hard to define under one category. He cannot be only 'Oedipus Rex', nor only 'Oedipus Tyrannus', Oedipus can only be Oedipus. [1] Plato, Republic, Trans, G.M.A Grube (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1992), 485b [2] Sophocles, Oedipus Tyrannus, trans. Peter Meineck and Paul Woodruff (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2000), line 35 [3] Ibid., 860/81 bid.,

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