Nietzsche's *Beyond Good And Evil*

An Analysis of his Oedipus Analogy

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The concepts of truthfulness and honesty are virtues known to man as something being upright and good. What Nietzsche sets forth with his *Beyond Good And Evil* is that this is not entirely true in and of itself, by moving forward with this premise, Nietzsche attempts to speak of truth as an absolute; that truth is something quite literally beyond good and evil, the societal and abstract concepts. What can be appreciated about Nietzsche's writing is that it seems to be similar to that of Plato's and the way Plato writes Socrates. Socrates speaks to others as if to seduce them to philosophy, he speaks to his audience. And Nietzsche, in the time of writing this, 1886, was writing to his audience.

In another similarity to Socrates, Nietzche was not very popular in the public light, even during and after writing his books (humously). In his teachings, when Nietzche was a professor, he taught in-depth Greek Classics courses but did not have many students attend. This deep analysis of the Greek Classics has much shaped to what Nietzche, and how, he wrote his books. As mentioned, Nietzsche attempts to seduce his readers just as Plato, and with this, uses the Greek myths to connect his readers to something they are already aware of.

In the first part of the book, "On the Prejudices of Philosophers," which this subtitle itself is Nietzsche's first clue to who this book is for, the higher class German society of the present and the more understanding society of the future, in its introductory section, Nietzche lays out the theme of *Beyond Good And Evil*:

"The problem of the value of truth came before us–or, was it we who came before the problem? Who of us is the Oedipus here? Who the Sphinx? It is a rendezvous, it seems, of questions and question marks. And though it seems credible, it finally almost seems to us as if the problem had never even been put so far–as if we were the first to see it, fix it with our eyes, and *risk* it. For it does involve a risk, and perhaps there is none that is greater" (p. 199).

With this prevailing problem, of philosophers sticking down the same route and missing an utmost obvious question of why, why do we set such a value on truth, Nietzsche opens the reader to wonder for himself. By not saying answers outright and writing his own doctrines, as most philosophers did at the time, Nietzsche mirrors Socrates' style of seduction. Of course, the reader will automatically presume, "no, I am not like Oedipus" and rests their ease on the image of a sphinx. But little does the reader know, that both King Oedipus and the Sphinx alike had fairly tragic demises.

One can reasonably infer that Nietzsche knew the Greek myths through and through, but from what is commonly known, the Sphinx's tale is moderately short and without an obvious moral. It would be possible to assume that Nietzche either knew the myth better than what is now told, or that he took to his studies as Plato did and expand on those that needed expanding. In bringing up the story of Oedipus to first introduce his problem with truth, it is possibly more brilliant than most readers would first think. The infamous Oedipus killed his father and married his mother, a common reader may recollect the story as it being because he was running away from his fate, which is true in all actuality but there is much more to the story than this that Nietzche is referring to.

When Oedipus heard a drunkard say that he ought not to be in line for the heir, he went to his father, a king, for the truth. After his father not telling him, he went to the Delphi for the truth; his need and value set on knowing the truth only grew. And was finally told his terrible fate, “you will kill your father and marry your mother.” Years later, after unknowingly fulfilling his fate, Oedipus is forced to beg a blind sage for the truth of his father’s killer and exiles him in hearing his terrible truth, not believing him, his wife/mother all the while saying that prophecies no longer come true. Oedipus hears word that his father is dead but that also, his mother was not his mother, and again, he needs to know the truth. Each and every step, Oedipus seeks for the truth and it leads to turmoil and heartache. In the midst of this, after he killed his father and why he became the King of Thebes and his mother’s husband, Oedipus fought the Sphinx who went to Thebes to riddle men and eats all who could not answer her. Her famous riddle, “what walks on four legs … two legs … three legs,” was of course easy enough for Oedipus and he became the hero he set forth to be. After which the Sphinx plunges herself off of a cliff.

In this myth, Oedipus constantly saught out the truth but then was continuously met with tragedy and untimely fate. The Sphinx, on the other hand, approves of those who know the truth and devours those who do not. What is beautiful here is that Nietzsche writes this passage in a way so that the reader is inclined to see itself as a simple monster versus a deeply complex hero. And that is what the Sphinx is meant to be, a monster; even though she is beautiful with the face and chest of a woman and the body of a lion, she is as just a monster as the Hydra, the multiple-headed dragon. While Oedipus is written into stone to be doomed and attempts to diverge from the gods’ will as best as he could; of course, “as best as he could,” was in a way that was persistently toward truth, to which he thought was right. Without knowledge of who his

parents were, Oedipus begged those who knew for the truth so that he could elude his destiny. But after hearing such news, he stabbed his eyes out as to not see his fulfilled fate, hanging wife and mother. It is also said that one of his daughters went to exile with him and was a sign that the gods forgave him. For which his crime must have been in a past life.

When Nietzsche continues "–as if we were the first to see it, fix it with our eyes, and risk it," he may be keeping the same theme of Oedipus. The wise men, prophets, sages were often blind, as was in the myth told above, and after Oedipus had finally reached his truth he made himself blind. But now, "we were the first to see it," wise men today can finally see the truth and "fix it with our eyes." Nietzche is glowing up the reader, and himself, as someone who has the wisdom of a man who absolutely seeks the truth, or of a man who can see the truth right in front of him. Unknowingly, the reader is just as Oedipus is, as well as most other philosophers, seeking out the truths to life and what is the true good and evil.

Intentionally readers are pointed toward the Sphinx, the demander of all truths and destroyer of those ignorant; but throughout the book, Nietzsche uncovers that each reader ought to that of Oedipus in his last moments: wise and all-knowing but forsaker of such. All he wanted was to be good, even in exiling himself, I do not believe this part of the hero is what Nietzsche wants to inspire but more toward the fact that after all was said and done (quite literally), Oedipus no longer cared for the truth and did what he felt was right.

Subsubtly does Nietzsche pull this veil from the reader, in the same part "On the Prejudices of Philosophers," section number 22 points fingers at scientists and metaphysicians and writers of their nature–that nature follows the rules they have written for it–and ventures in putting this notion on its head. "And somebody might come along who, with opposite intentions

and mores of interpretation" and write their very own rules to nature. This is another point of seduction where Nietzsche starts to degrade the words of truth, of fact, of language almost in itself. That all scientists, imperialists, Oedipuses are out there seeking truths where in turn, some could turn to tragedy or could turn to absolute, subjective falsity.

Nietzsche breaks his veil over his seduction completely toward the end of his book; in the second-to-last, outside of the song, section "Our Virtues":

"These words are beautiful, glittering, jingling, festive words: honesty, love of truth, love of wisdom, sacrifice for knowledge, heroism of the truth–they have something that swells one's pride … this worthy verbal pomp, too, belongs to the old mendacious pomp, junk, and gold dust of unconscious human vanity … to see to it that man henceforth stands before man as even today, hardened in the discipline of science, he stands before the *rest* of nature, with intrepid Oedipus eyes and sealed Odysseus ears, deaf to the siren songs of old metaphysical bird catchers" (p. 351)

Here Nietzche is calling out to the reader to be as Oedipus and Odysseus, the heroes alike, for Oedipus did what he felt what right even after learning the truth; and Odysseus, strapped down with wax in his ears, is unable to be swooned by tales of unobvious fiction. Nietzsche continues on to say that knowledge is important, "learning changes us," but that does not necessarily mean that there is an end to it, a truth to it, a point to say that this is good and this is evil, as the world keeps changing around us. What is curious is that Nietzsche allows his use of thinking of the reader as a type of Oedipus to slip but never fully explains, assuming all of his readers know the general story, he could have just as easily spoken of his high value to truth and how it led to his eventual and inevitable demise.

In the aphorism that begins with “learning changes us,” and follows the one including Oedipus and Odysseus, Nietzsche ends his text with a small transition for the next few pages. With the preface of the novel starting a question: “Supposing truth was a woman–what then?” One would be curious as to what Nietzsche thought of women as, of course, this question alludes to a single woman. Nietzsche continues his text on truth and learning and finishes by stating he would like to express “*my* truths” on women. Which, in and of itself, is almost absurd as he has nearly rejected all points truths, as an objective possibility, and so it had to be mentioned here. That, in another similar way that Plato’s Socrates, Nietzsche could be uttering out complete silliness and further seduction to the reader, as he is playing with his words and rhetoric.

Just as most scientists and metaphysicians at the time, Nietzsche knew the reader would be one to assume that truth ought to be held at a high value, as a just good, as something that ought to be found, just as Oedipus once did. But then as his book unfolds, Nietzsche slowly unravels this “faultless” facade and brings to light and in question, maybe what we know to be as truth is not true, maybe what the truth we want to seek is not exactly what we are seeking. Or maybe, what we know to be good as a fact of life is not exactly that, perhaps it is only one perspective, one person’s truth, one Sphinx’s acceptable truth and one another would devour.