

Oedipus Rex: In the Light of Kant's and Plato's Ideas of 'Good'

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Abstract

The debate regarding human morality and human conscience is a crucial part of history in the present and the future of humanity. This debate on what's in actuality is 'good' and right, and what is 'bad' or the evil is an integral part of philosophy. Be specific on the philosophy literature and basic ethical considerations. This research defines and differentiates between good actions and moralistic thoughts. For this purpose, Plato and Immanuel Kant were selected for the moralistic comparison. The philosophy of Kant regarding good and virtuous actions performed through free will and the shift from transcendental aesthetics towards transcendental logic is observed and compared with the theories presented by Plato. Plato details the movement of human morals and intellectuality from sheer ignorance towards knowledge or the intellectual realm with the analogy of the Cave and the Simile of the Divided Line. This moralistic comparison is drawn through the moral analysis on the text of Oedipus the King by Sophocles. This research concludes that although the two philosophies diverge and differ in their perspectives of the good but strive for man to achieve and attain the 'good' and wisdom. However, this research is limited in the sense that not all the angles of these philosophers' theories were analyzed and some parts of the text under consideration was left untouched. This research is open for further study.

Keywords: Moralistic Comparison, Moral Analysis, Plato, Immanuel Kant, Oedipus, Philosophy

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Introduction

Good, in English, is derived from the German word 'Gut' which suggests anything beneficial or desirable. Throughout History and learning, man is trying to discover and decide what exactly is to be good and what are the acts that pertain to the

concept of good. Aristotle determines human history good is taken for the "activity of the soul in accordance with virtue" (12) whereas G. E. Moore describes 'good' as a simple notion that "states what are the parts which invariably compose a certain whole" (10). Similarly, philosophers like Plato and Kant have come up with diverging

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ideas and the theories discerning the belief in what is 'good'. My goal in this paper is to highlight the distinct philosophies on the ideas of 'good' presented by Plato and Immanuel Kant and use a literary text to observe the practical application of these theories. For this purpose, I have divided my paper into six sections for an effective moral analysis. The first and second sections of my paper highlight Plato's theory of 'good' and relate it with the literary text of Oedipus the King written by Sophocles. The third and fourth sections of this research discuss Immanuel Kant's philosophy of 'good' and apply it to the same literary text. Furthermore, the fifth section illuminates the evident similarities and differences of the ideas of good that become apparent within the textual analysis. Afterwards, the six-section concludes the overall research.

Plato's Form of Good

Plato was a renowned disciple of Socrates and a teacher of Aristotle. Among the myriad of theories of Plato, his Theory of Forms presents a pivotal understanding of the ideal and the good. Plato illustrates this concept further by the Allegory of a Cave and the Simile of the Divided Line.

Plato in his *The Republic* presents a Theory of Forms which represents the absolute, universal and ultimate forms of abstract concepts like beauty and good. A form is the innate and purest essence of an object. For example, an object of wood has a pure and universal form of woodiness and a

beautiful object contains an essence and a pure beauty in it. Similarly, a good act or thing will have a core value of goodness in it. Although Plato did not directly give a definition of 'good', he describes in detail how to achieve the form of good.

In the "Allegory of the Cave," it is imagined that humanity is tied up in a dark cave where the only iota of light can be visible from the end of a very narrow, long tunnel. The prisoners are shackled since birth and their hands are also fastened so they cannot really see each other or turn sideways. They have been tied since their childhood facing a big wall. Behind them is an enormous fire that casts shadows on the wall. The bound prisoners have only these shadows to educate and entertain themselves; therefore, they have given names to these shadows and determine the shadowy images to be the real objects. Nevertheless, one of the prisoners somehow managed to break the chains tied around him and view his surroundings for the first time. At first, he was befuddled by the light of the fire and this confusion would make him want to return to captivity again. However, with time he will become accustomed and make his way to the end of the tunnel and reach the outside world where the brilliant light of the sun will make him very disoriented and utterly bewildered. Though when the prisoner starts to view, interpret and understand the real objects around him and along with their shadows, he will slowly start to educate and learn. He will be able to comprehend the reflections of the sun, the actual objects

and ultimately be able to look at the sun. This will lead him to the comprehension of how the world exists and governs. The prisoner would want to go back into the cave and educate his fellows. When he tries to explain to them the workings of the seasons and the forces of the world, he gets mocked and taunted by the bound prisoners who deem him as delusional and having mental problems. If the prisoners were somehow able to free themselves, they would have killed the freed prisoner for his revolutionary and rebellious ideas. This Allegory of the Cave connotes the idea of gaining education and awareness, and in attaining the form of good.

Everything that exists in this material world is the imperfect copies or imitations of the perfect and ideal concepts and ideas present in our minds. The shadowy images that the bound prisoners notice are held in the visible realm of understanding. The visible realm is also known as the physical realm where you assume the objects by use of the five basic senses of sight and sound. The physical realm that leads to the development of 'opinion' is divided into two categories of images and objects. We view the images, reflections, shadows and pictures that lead to the formation of one's ideology based on conjecture and imagination. While the actual objects, like animals, plants or manufactured things, that we view formulate our belief and trust.

On the other hand, an intellectual realm exists based on our

perceptions and intuition. This realm is divided into the lower order and higher order of understanding. The lower-order thought is free from conjecture as transient thinking established by guesses and hypotheses leads to the construction of definitions of abstract and ideal concepts of beauty, justice, ideal squares and mathematical speculations etc. This is the platform where we start forming ground knowledge and our opinions alter into knowledge as Plato says, "Haven't you noticed that all opinions without knowledge are ugly? The best of them are blind." (Book VI, 506c). While in the higher-order of understanding knowledge morphs into wisdom as meticulous intellectual reasoning is used to comprehend actual truths like the essence of beauty or the form of good. This is explained by the Simile of the Divided Line. To achieve the true form of good and wisdom, the individual has to rise along with the divisions of the visible world from illusion and belief to the reason and intellection of the intelligible realm.

Plato relates the form of good with knowledge and wisdom. The dark cave represents the real visible world where the light comes from the fire which symbolizes the sun. When the prisoner leaves the cave and sees the sun, this is a metaphorical climb of the soul from the visible realm to the intelligible realm to attain the real form of good and wisdom. The sun keeps us alive as we see the visible world around us. This enabled sight and light of the sun and is a symbolic representation of the intellect or the good that facilitates

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the growth of life and knowledge of further concepts of truth, justice and beauty. Attaining the highest form of good leads one to the path of other positive things like justice and virtue, "...with considerable effort, is the idea of the good; but once seen, it must be concluded that this is, in fact, the cause of all that is right and fair in everything" (Book VII, 517b-c).

The Application of Plato's Philosophy in Oedipus the King

The philosophy of Plato can be clearly discerned in Oedipus the King written by Sophocles. Oedipus Rex is the person who murders his father and marries his mother unknowingly as foretold by a prophecy. Ultimately, he blinds himself deliberately after becoming aware of his wretched actions. This journey of Oedipus from metaphorical blind ignorance to the path of knowledge is an evident depiction of Plato's Allegory of the Cave as seen in what follows.

At the start of the play, Oedipus Rex displays his ignorance and cluelessness in the murder of Laius. He exclaims, "And where are they? In what country? Where am I to find a trace of this ancient crime? It will be hard to track" (127-129). Here, he is similar to one of those prisoners bound in the cave who base all their understanding of the world on mere reflections and shadows cast by the fire behind them. They live in a world of darkness and imagination. It can be rightly inferred that Oedipus exists in the conjecture where his existence is based upon thoughts and

shadowy reflections. Similarly, Oedipus has limited knowledge of the world around him including the murder of Laius, his wife's ex-husband, and limited knowledge of his own origins. In his unfamiliarity with the truth, Oedipus assumes Merope to be his mother and Polybois to be his real father he was destined to kill. Oedipus symbolizes those "[Men trapped in the cave] would hold that the truth is nothing other than the shadows of artificial things" (Book VII, 515c).

When Tiresias, an individual who has attained the highest form of good and enlightenment, tries to tell Oedipus the truth, Oedipus refuses to listen and believe him. This scene depicts the ignorant prisoners who get taught by the freed prisoner but turn to laugh, taunt and insult him. They take him to be a delusional and unthinking person who speaks nonsense the manner Oedipus calls Tiresias, "You dare utter shameful words like this?" (422).

When Jocasta seemingly becomes conscious that the truth about Oedipus parentage will be revealed, she tries to dissuade him from further inquiry saying, "Listen to me, I beg you. Do not do this" (1276). Later when she cannot grasp the full horror the truth unveils; she commits suicide as a way of escape from the pain. Just as a prisoner from the dark cave is released and is made to face the fire, the prisoner desires vainly to return to captivity and away from the burning truth or light.

The dialogue in Oedipus,

"Lady, as I listen to these words of yours, my soul is shaken, my mind confused..." (875) is likened to the idea when the prisoner was freed and made to face the light of the fire. The prisoner was disoriented, worried and confused upon seeing real objects and the source of light that had made him see the shadowy images as actual things. This is the stage where Oedipus seems to have formed a 'belief' in the physical realm of understanding upon seeing the 'object' or in this case learning the facts relating to Laius' murder.

When Oedipus is at the brink of hearing the dreadful truth and fact of his parentage from the shepherd and former royal slave, he exclaims "And I'm about to hear it. But nonetheless, I have to know this" (1400). He appears highly reluctant and scared to know the details but his curiosity and moral duty compel him to listen. This is similar to the startled and inquisitive spirit of the freed prisoner who is dragged out of the dark cave and made to face the light and the real objects. The prisoner is at first completely baffled from the powerful light of the sun but has to look around his surroundings to make sense of the world. He slowly adjusts to the brightness and starts conceiving his own definitions and interpretations of the real objects before him. Here Oedipus assumes the stage of the lower order of the intellectual realm where he starts forming thoughts based on gathered knowledge rather than on opinions and conjectures.

After learning the truth from the shepherd, Oedipus bellows as "Ah, so it

all came true. It's so clear now. O light, let me look at you one final time, a man who stands revealed as cursed by birth, cursed by my own family, and cursed by murder where I should not kill" (1418-1422). This is the point where the prisoner or in this case, the prisoner of fate, Oedipus Rex achieves a complete perception of the world. Here he stares the truth in the eye and the metaphorical sun that shed light on his fate and actions. He attains the higher order of the intelligible realm where his knowledge turns to wisdom. Such wisdom that only the true philosophers attain. Oedipus becomes informed of the true essence of good, truth and fate. This knowledge of the truth and good further cultivates the knowledge of justice in him as he blinds himself to atone for his ignorant sins. Additionally, by this act, Oedipus assumes the physical form of blindness even as he was once metaphorically blind by ignorance.

Oedipus Rex also proves himself to be a capable guardian of Thebes when he assures the citizens of his concern to help them at a difficult time by declaring, "But the soul inside me sorrows for myself, and for the city, and for you-all together" (73). These lines indicate the passionate and sympathetic personality of a guardian of a state ought to be as suggested by Plato in his book, *The Republic*. Moreover, Oedipus fulfills his promise to the citizens of Thebes by banishing himself from the state and bringing justice to the murderer of Laius for the good of the state as he requests, "Send me away to live outside of Thebes"

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(1793). This sense of justice comes from the sense of viewing oneself with impartiality and fairness that Oedipus comes to possess after blinding himself. This act of justice and good corresponds to the idea presented by Plato, "Then the just man will not be any different from the just city with respect to the form itself of justice, but will be like it" (Book IV, 435b).

The ignorant and sinful life of Oedipus represents the immaterial world of the dark cave. The fire or the mission of finding Laius' killer represents the sun which gives light to ascent for higher knowledge and education. This ascension or Oedipus' search for his roots, leads him to the sun which represents the ultimate form of good and truth of the fate and destiny of Oedipus. The Form of the Good is important as Plato asserts in *The Republic*, "provided truth and intelligence—and that the man who is going to act prudently in private or in public must see it" (Book VII, 517c). After being acquainted with the purest form of good and truth, Oedipus not only acts in a sensible and good way with himself but also his family and the state for Oedipus blinds himself to in a way deliver justice for his crimes. Additionally, Oedipus urges Creon to look after and care for his daughters when he would not be around to aid them. Here, he accepts Creon as the guardian of Thebes. Oedipus benefits the state of Thebes by exiling himself to purge the city of its terrible plague and to atone for the murder of Thebes' former ruler, Laius.

Kant's Concept of Good.

Immanuel Kant who was born during the Enlightenment Age presented the concept of morality which states that moral values can only be achieved through acting upon the nature of categorical imperative, goodwill and the notion of duty. Imperatives are essential commands or maxims. For Kant, there exist two important imperatives namely 'categorical imperative' and 'hypothetical imperative'. The hypothetical imperative is based on thoughts as the individual is placed in front of the thoughts and ideas which make the individual more prone to corruption and self-interest. For example, when you say "I will tell the truth" and you have to pause and ponder about your actions instead of doing them. On the other hand, the categorical imperative or unconditional command is based on actions as the ideas are put in front of the individual which makes him less prone to corruption. For example, when you say "I must tell the truth" and you perform the act of good without thinking or delaying it. The categorical imperative is to be upheld at all times irrespective of the circumstances, meaning one must act in a good and ethical way regardless of the demands of the situation.

This imperative presents two important formulations; the universalizability principle and the formula of humanity. The universal formula states that you have to act and will as in such a way that it implies to the rest of the world equally. This

maxim state, "Act as if the maxim of your action were to secure through your will a universal law of nature". For example, telling a lie will result in all of humanity lying and deceiving whereas telling the truth will follow the universal rule of honesty. Whereas the humanity formula states that 'Act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or the person of another, always as an end and never simply as a means'. This illustrates the view that we should not assume people as a means of acquiring a use out of them but consider them as individuals who have their own sense of aspirations, goals and work ahead of them. This is consistent with the idea of always hatching a good example for others through righteous actions.

These formulations can be applied by the notion of duty towards oneself and the duties towards others which are self-preservation and strict obligations for performing the good acts. The good acts can only be performed from the will to be good. This will to be good if undertaken with free leads to morality. Basically, the acts based on goodwill performed with a free will comes from the virtue of oneself. The acts and work we do from goodwill and no other reason besides the intention of doing good matters. The actions we perform out of the respect for the moral values through free will are the actions reflecting goodness and virtue. Virtue is parallel to being happy and contented and this is the highest good that humans can attain. A virtuous person has the strength and self-respect to resist bodily inclinations

and act upon the good principles with free will because it is simply the right thing to do. Our moral reasoning is in constant conflict with our passionate desires and it is up to us to act on our goodwill. To lead a good life, our chaotic feelings of transcendental aesthetics should be transformed into logical thought or transcendental logic. This happens when we realize that our mind has the control over our body or as the phrase goes 'mind over matter'.

Relevance of Kant's Concept of Good to Oedipus the King

Oedipus Rex emerges to be a caring, concerned and compassionate ruler of Thebes as he appears to be solicitous for his subjects in their time of need. At his first arrival into Thebes, he fends off the dreaded sphinx and frees the people. He worries for his people during the plague as he tries to find a cure and to bring to justice the killer of the former guardian of Thebes, Laius. Later, he learns the truth about his parentage and exiles himself from the city as a form of justice.

When the people of Thebes lament in front of Oedipus about the terrible plague, Oedipus bemoans his own anguish and grief and feels deeply for the people and the ailing city in the words, "But the soul inside me sorrows for myself, and for the city, and for you-all together" (74-75). This feeling of affliction and despair is a testament to Kant's ideas of morality, righteousness and goodwill outside the aspect of religion. Oedipus who is the ruler and king of Thebes, can get whatever he

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desires but still feels the pain for his people in their time of desperation. In his quest to find the cure, though in ignorance, he vows to bring forth the murderer of Laius the pollutant that produced the plague. He assumes himself to be the son and heir of Laius that will fight on his behalf and get justice as he states, "So now I will fight on his behalf as if this matter concerned my father, and I will strive to do everything I can to find him..." (309-310).

This sense of justice and goodwill is, however, tainted with the hypothetical imperative as Oedipus does not only want justice for the sick city or the former king but also to save and protect his life from any possible future assassination attack on him. The sense of protection and self-interest of Oedipus, kingship and the power that comes from being the ruler of Thebes is a subsequent reason in unmasking the killer as Oedipus announces, "For whoever killed this man may soon enough desire to turn his hand in the same way against me, too, and kill me. Thus, in avenging Laius, I serve myself" (167-170). Moreover, by getting rid of the plague and uncovering the loose killer of a former king just as he once defeated the Sphinx, Oedipus Rex stands to assert and solidify his power and dominance once more in Thebes. This ulterior motive of Oedipus is hinted at through his words, "Then I will start afresh and once again shed light on darkness" (159).

Just as the truth is about to be revealed, Jocasta sensing the disastrous

repercussions, requests Oedipus to stop his relentless investigation into the matter in the words, "Listen to me, I beg you. Do not do this" (1275-1276). Moreover, the summoned Servant also hesitates in answering Oedipus' questions and does not reveal the information until he is threatened as he murmurs, "And if I do, there's an even greater chance that I'll be killed" (1398). This hesitation and reluctance in hiding and dissuading from finding the truth is a direct negation of the universal maxim of the categorical imperative of truth and honesty, and the notion of duty towards others.

Since Oedipus killed his father, although, in ignorance, he committed the act of murder and sin through his own free will. This is a direct contradiction of goodwill and the categorical imperative of good. As it becomes clear to Oedipus and the entire city that Oedipus was the one behind Laius' death and the cause of the plague, he must leave the city. Oedipus requests Creon for help in sheltering and providing for his two daughters in the words, "You are a relative of theirs- don't let them sink to lives of desperation like my own" (1778). Jocasta committed suicide and Oedipus is bound to leave the city for forever. This leaves their daughters who are young and cannot fend for themselves to be dependent on the mercy of their uncle Creon to care for them. Their father would always be a symbol of shame wherever they turn to in the society. They would be cast out of the social gatherings, people would talk behind their backs and no respectable

man would marry them due to the fact of their sinful birth. Oedipus understands and foresees all these misfortunes that would befall his daughters; therefore, he pleads with Creon to protect and provide for them. The very Creon whom Oedipus had once accused of betrayal and treachery. This concern and worry of the doting father represent the notion of fatherly duty and attainment of self-respect in regretting, recognizing and accepting the faults of one.

Oedipus entreats Creon to banish and expel him from Thebes by saying, "Send me away to live outside of Thebes" (1793). This utterance indicates humility and self-awareness that Oedipus has attained after the revelation of the truth and metaphorically attained the light of the wisdom. He is proposing to exile himself in order to get rid of the pollution that he is in the form of the plague from the city. It also signifies the fulfillment of the promise that Oedipus had made to bring justice to the murderer of Laius. Oedipus' acts of leaving the city and concern for his daughters implies the freedom of goodwill, notion of duty and commitment towards oneself and others, selfless act of good, the categorical imperative of fulfilling pledges and fatherly affection towards his daughters in line with Kant's philosophy?

The act of self-exile also reflects the spiritual growth in Oedipus Rex. He runs away from Corinth on a mere impulse without investigating the

prophecy that he heard. Then he slays Laius and his men in a glimmer of rage. He relentlessly pursues the investigation into his own parentage regardless of the warnings of Tiresias, Jocasta and the Servant as he declares, "I will not be convinced I should not learn the whole truth of what these facts amount to" (1278). This unabashed curiosity and impulsiveness result in his doom and banishment. Nevertheless, Oedipus' acceptance of the exile and the act of blinding himself is a reflection of his conversion of irrational desires and transcendental aesthetics into rational thought and transcendental logic.

Comparison of Plato's and Kant's Philosophies.

Plato and Immanuel Kant have presented unique and diverging approaches to morality and the idea of 'good'. Plato has associated the good with wisdom in attaining knowledge and understanding as the true form of goodness. This form of goodness further leads to other ethical and pure issues that could lead to truth and justice. Whereas Kant believes that the good comes from within a person when he or she performs good act from his/her own free will. This act of good is mainly a duty towards oneself and others while realizing self-respect and virtue.

Plato asserts that the good comes while moving from the physical realm towards the mental realm of understanding as illustrated by the example of the Allegory of the Cave.

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This process may take quite some time. While for Kant, the good is inherent and it is up to the person to do the right or wrong thing according to his understanding.

The ethical philosophy of Immanuel Kant is deontological and normative as it renders a set of rules to be followed universally. This conception neither takes into account the different circumstances that individuals have to face nor the distinct personality and different intentions that each individual possesses. This makes Kant's ideology quite idealistic, rigid, lacking in emotions, and at times hard to follow instinctively. Plato's philosophy is generally descriptive as it presents the moral and noble systems for groups and societies. Plato provides a guideline in the Allegory of the Cave and Theory of Forms for individuals to follow at their own pace.

Plato's philosophy is chiefly concerned with the individual and how an individual can lead a good life. Kant on the contrary focuses on the actions and deeds of a man. The two philosophies are concerned about morality, goodness and ethical aspects in leading a virtuous life. The two philosophers strive to ascertain man's reach into 'reason' and 'understanding' in their conceptions of 'good'.

Conclusions

The evaluation of the two philosophies has shown that Plato and Immanuel Kant differ in their perspectives and approaches. On the

whole, they focus on attaining the quality of "good" and the doing of what is right and moralistic. Both philosophies present a structural part for man's gradual reach and ascension towards 'reason' to attain the conception of morality, virtue and good.

This research is open for further study. Through the conducted research it is recommended that these ideologies should be studied in detail and applied to other literary texts for better understanding and gaining moral values to cultivate human thought and perception.

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