

Tragedy, History, and Rhetoric in the Core: Sophocles and Thucydides

There are practical situations where the most exact knowledge is not available and where, upon reflection, we cannot say, “we should have known better.” Much of academia is dedicated to knowing better, yet interdisciplinary core courses rarely are matters of exact knowledge, for no teacher can claim to know all the subjects our texts address, and individual texts can rarely be learned to complete satisfaction. Hence, these core courses aim less at developing knowledge of students than at maturing their judgment. We academics, then, have to ask whether maturing judgment is worth the educational effort, and students, seeking specialized training, often ask the same question about core text courses.

For those who believe it is worthwhile to develop judgment, rhetoric, both the art and its products, is useful. Its short arguments can be taken in by students and appear in almost every genre we read. Its persuasive ends and oppositional character provide students direct paths to the deep probing of our texts. Consequently, rhetoric can become an instructional guide to the power of reason – its pitfalls, horizons, and useful applications. Oedipus’ decree speech in *Oedipus Tyrannus* and Pericles’ “Funeral Oration” in the *History of the Peloponnesian War* illustrate the seriousness and excitement in Athens when a state was actively debating the power and scope of reason.

Plays are instructions for interactions on stage, and this generic fact implies that what matters most in thinking about tragedies are the reversals, mistakes, discoveries, and suffering enacted before the audience. Shortly after the plague-stricken Thebans hear the command of the Oracle of Delphi to seek out the murder of Laius, Oedipus’ disastrous misfortune begins in his decree speech to the Thebans (Fagles, tr. ll. 245-314) instructing them on how to comply with

the gods' command. We judge the reversal begins here, since at the speech's onset Oedipus feels the pleasure of his confidence in facing the mystery and a few lines after the speech the pain of anger with Tiresias – pain which grows “step by painful step” (l. 283) out of the decree. Further, the speech contains the *hamartia*, the final, adumbrated misery of Oedipus. This placement of the reversal of Oedipus' fortune in that speech says something about what Sophocles thought the power of reason could do. The question is: how could reason lead Oedipus to err?

Oedipus structures his speech to induce deliberation in two audiences about how to comply with the gods' command. The first part addresses the killer, his family and friends. Oedipus presumes a conspiracy on their part, because he has rightly doubted the reliability of the sole report of Laius's death that thieves killed the king. The second part addresses the Thebans, who never seem to have realized why they should pursue justice. Oedipus discovers what unites the two audiences in action: the familial concern for a loved one. However, while the murderer seems to be protected by *his* family, Theban justice fails to avenge the death of a man, a vengeance which any family member would feel obligated to carry out.

So, the first half of the speech develops four stepped rewards or punishments in an attempt to drive a wedge between the killer and his family. First, Oedipus offers exile to the killer for a quick confession and, second, bounties to his friends for exposing him. His third step warns of banishment later, if no one speaks out now. More painful than exile, banishment prevents “friend or kin” (just *philous* in the Greek, l. 267) from providing any help at all – material, communicative, or religious. This punishment strikes at the love and concern Oedipus supposes the family has for the killer, since if the family acts immediately to reveal him, they can avoid this later, far more painful consequence.

The third step leaves Oedipus, at this point in his speech, right at the punishment that the Oracle of Delphi commanded – at banishment, or death, for the killer (l. 114). Why does Oedipus proceed to the curse to “let that man drag out his life in agony” (l. 283)? Is this intemperate anger, as students often suppose, or is this rationally planned? In selecting banishment over death, Oedipus knows from experience what the killer will be facing: banishment is precisely the experience that Oedipus had in leaving Corinth – destitute, shorn of princely expectations, cut off from “the greatest joy I know,” his parents (ll. 1094-96). Oedipus also knows that you can get it all back – family, wealth, kingship. And it is this possibility that the killer could escape a punishment decreed by the gods that Oedipus seeks to foreclose with the curse.

If the curse is the *hamartia*, the mistake, then, is not Oedipus’ ignorance. Oedipus is in a situation where, by definition, he cannot know and, thus, must think things through to a conclusion. And while it is true that the curse, overreaching in its punishment, shows that Oedipus exercises justice without equity, neither ignorance nor equity’s absence will produce this mistake. Instead, we have here judgment using every available means to weigh and accomplish what is supposed to be done. Oedipus deploys the curse only after other efforts have failed. He gets around the gods’ refusal to tell the Thebans who the killer is, for the curse is a *prayer* for justice to which the gods must respond. He models the gods’ unforgetting pursuit of the criminal in the curse’s inescapability. And, finally, Oedipus balances the curse’s severity for one criminal against the misery of all Thebans, for the gods made it clear that the plague was sent to Thebes, so that Thebans would drive the killer out. Until this is done, as Oedipus says, the killer “is the plague” (l. 275). In consequence, if through prolonged suffering Oedipus makes the killer show himself, Oedipus will eventually be able to end the misery of Thebes.

What is at stake, then, in Oedipus' judgment is the entire Theban society – a society which seems unable to see any connection between performing justice for its family members and its own survival. Oedipus shows it is appropriate for subjects to act as if they were sons in pursuit of justice (l. 301). Hence, he pressures those who might not follow his decree by threatening their own family's continuance through another curse, while he prays for the help of the gods for all who help him.

Ultimately, everyone tries to cooperate; so only the first curse does its damage. That curse, then, operates *entirely* through human agency. Not only Oedipus, but every single character and the peculiar traits of each build the destruction. The play's action horrifies because the way Sophocles uses *every* character is to indicate that the worst suffering is brought on by ourselves. And, specifically, deliberate human error – not divine retribution or chance occurrence but thorough concerned judgment – shapes the destruction of Oedipus' family and his greatest suffering. Oedipus' last words speak about losing his daughters: “don't take them from me, not now!” To have ruined and been cut off from the ones we love by what we have thought and done ourselves is to be banished, destroyed, indeed. But the destruction is worse when the judgment we rendered was the best that we, or anyone else, could do.

I mean best. To look back at Oedipus' judgment with a view of the actual facts and the terrible outcome and, then, to declare his judgment mistaken is an accurate assessment, but the declaration applies a standard that he could not have used and, unless we are careful, it misses a distinction we should not overlook. Some thought about Oedipus' choices will show that he is right about every factor that he considers as belonging to the mystery's solution: inaccurate witnesses, family conspiracy and love, banishment, the curse's utility, and the necessity of justice for family and state. He errs because in extending his thought to each of these factors, he

must arrange their implications and consequences according to probabilities instead of facts which he can only discover later. So, we must ask, by what standard could he do better, in what sense could he possibly know, I mean know with certainty, that he is mistaken? We must, then, allow that Oedipus' judgment, though mistaken, is best.

If Sophocles paints a picture of reason's destructive power in the possession of incomplete knowledge, Thucydides argued that reason governed by research could provide more exact knowledge than could chroniclers, poets, and rhetoricians. In history, independent sources, multiple proofs, and the sequence of events matter, for they make reliable conclusions about the past and help interpretations of the future (1.1. 21-22). From the first sentence of his book it is clear that because of previous research, Thucydides thought he knew what was going to happen. Before the war began, he was willing to document it because of his researched belief about its inevitability and impending magnitude (1.1. 23). Subsequent comments indicate Thucydides thought reason and research could be used to avoid destruction of a state, though perhaps not war itself. For Thucydides argues that had Athenians followed the spoken policies of Pericles, they would have avoided the actions that led to their destruction (2.7.65). But this very point, that historical evidence shows that Pericles' speeches were right, reveals an ambiguity in the use of reason when we compare rhetoric and history in Thucydides. For even if the genre of history can test the evidence of rhetoric (1.1. 22; cf. 3.9.38), it does not follow that the Greeks or any of us can abandon rhetoric for history as a guide to the future. Pericles, in the "Funeral Oration," gives a good explanation why.

After the first battle of the war, a democratic law compels Athenians to select a leader to eulogize the dead. They choose Pericles. Like Oedipus, Pericles faces two audiences. On the one hand, family and friends have probably already learned from comrades how their loved ones

died. So, a general speech will add nothing to the knowledge of their family members' death. On the other hand, skeptics who have no knowledge of war will find praise of the dead to be incredible. The basic rhetorical problem is to discover some facts that will uniquely characterize the soldiers while allowing family and skeptics to join in honoring them and, as we know, to support a war effort that has sundered their family or threatened them personally. Pericles discovers his solution in the common use of reason that marks Athenians.

Pericles' problem is intellectual and practical, but not historical in the researched sense given the term by Thucydides. For Pericles must act on the law and discover its wisdom, not by research but by trying to fulfill it. Pericles perceives the Athenian character in its freedoms and debates. Students readily see that Athenian freedoms – to govern themselves, to liberalize themselves through intellectual relaxation, to develop the opportunities of an open society – is the “stake in the struggle” Athenians wage (2.6.42). But students frequently miss that the essential means whereby Athenian freedoms become synthesized into a collective life are the rational discussions of citizens trying to decide collectively what to do.

We look to how Pericles regards his fellow citizens and discovers in their debates his model for praising the dead. For Athenians, rational discussion is an “indispensable preliminary for any wise action at all” (2.6.40) and, in consequence of such habits, Pericles knows the last minutes of each soldier as he faced the enemy on the battlefield. Each quietly weighed his “prospect[s] and his hope[s].” How should he act, now, in the moment of danger? Casting aside “personal blessings,” each man, Pericles says, “cho[se] to die resisting rather than live submitting” (2.6.40, 42). Thus, through the process of choice all Athenians share, Pericles turns the skeptics' and mourners' eyes from the death of loved ones to the city, honor, and, yes, empire they died for.

To appreciate what is involved here, let us contrast our students', the Spartans', and the historian's approach to such choices. Our students imagine such thought before a battle is "natural," and so it was – to the Athenian character. But Spartans took "painful discipline," not choice, into battle, and the researcher needs considerable institutional resources and time to make a decision. Whereas Pericles argued that because Athenians exercised individual and collective choice, they "were able to win all" that they saw around them (2.6.43). Thucydides condemned the power of collective judgment in a democracy on the grounds that it squandered its resources to point of losing the war (2.7.65). The researcher concluded the statesman was wise in his policies, powerful in his guiding words, but wrong about who best exercised choice in making decisions for the state and, thus, about the causes of successful action. If Pericles was mistaken, then his confidence in the reasoning of Athenians would be comparable to Oedipus' *hamartia*, his conclusions no less brought on by the character of the Athenian deliberative habits than Oedipus' conclusions were shaped by his experience.

We have, then, in these speeches and core texts a kind of matrix for thinking about reasoning: two origins of judgment, from one who is wise and from the many who debate; two speeches exemplifying and arguing reason's destructive and generative power; and two authors' scrupulously honest works which give to practical reason all they find due, while denying it, ultimately, beneficial results. Between this tragedy and history, we have a foundation of a ceaselessly controversial tradition about reason's power and scope – a tradition at the very heart of our core text programs.

We might conclude with Thucydides and Sophocles that practical reason is a trap. But an alternative, suggested by Pericles and elaborated by Aristotle, does offer itself. Pericles argued that deliberation was central to any Athenian judgment and action, for it brought the disparate

experiences of Athenians to bear on political problems. Aristotle in his *Politics* argued that though the wise man may know better than each one of the individuals who compose a deliberative body, nevertheless the state benefits from institutional, collective deliberations, precisely because no one man, even an expert, could bring to bear the many considerations that all parts of the state, collectively assembled for judging, could muster (3.11.1281b1-10). There is in this observation, then, something of a limit to individual wisdom – of the researcher or the prudential person – and yet at the same time an opening of reasoning for every individual.

As it is with states, so it is with persons, for we are better judges when we are exposed to the thought of others. There are situations where we cannot know better, but where such exposure matters. Typically, these turn on individual happiness, the family, justice, war, political foundations, and Providence. Another of these occurs when students judge the benefit of their baccalaureate. Though in fact they may know what is individually best for themselves, they cannot definitively know the best education has to offer. If liberal education aims to fashion free men and women, then there must be choice for them. But, too often, general education is constructed as if there were never any need to synthesize the wide experience and knowledge that a baccalaureate curriculum generates. Like the Athenian assembly where citizens examined individual judgment under the governance of debating peers, interdisciplinary core text programs function to make manifest what is educationally worthy of choice. Without such programs, students miss out on the synthetic scope that their own reason affords.

In interdisciplinary, core text programs, there are moments when speeches, such as Oedipus' or Pericles', are before of students. Contemplating and discussing them, students begin to debate the uses and benefits reason. Awakened by such debates to their own powers, to the ineluctable need to use reason in order to justify it, students begin to discover what is at stake in

their education. At such moments, they cannot know definitively whether it is better to pursue their education, but, I conclude, they begin to judge rightly, philosophically yet practically, why they should pursue their baccalaureate at all.

Sophocles. *The Three Theban Plays. Oedipus the King.* Trans. Robert Fagles. New York: Penguin Books, 1982, 1984.

Thucydides. *The History of the Peloponnesian War.* In *Great Books of the Western World.* v. 6, Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, 1952.