

How did Oedipus solve the riddle of the Sphinx?

Author: Terence Rajivan Edward

Abstract. This paper presents two accounts of how Oedipus might have arrived at the answer to the Sphinx's riddle by proceeding methodically.

The Sphinx was a being with the head of a woman, the body of a lioness, the wings of an eagle and the tail of a serpent. She guarded the entrance to the city of Thebes and would pose a riddle to travellers who aimed to enter. If they could not answer it, she would devour them. The riddle is "What goes on fours in the morning, on twos in the afternoon and on threes at night?" When Oedipus travelled to Thebes, the Sphinx posed the riddle to him. He said that the answer is a human being, because a human being walks on all fours in early life, on two legs as an adult and with a walking stick in old age. It would seem that the Sphinx regarded the value of her life as bound up with having a riddle that no mortal could solve, for she killed herself because of his success. Oedipus was then appointed king because of his service to the city.

In Sophocles' play *Oedipus the King*, Oedipus talks about his achievement. He converses with the blind seer Tiresias, who understands the language of birds and uses this ability to predict the future. Oedipus says:

Her riddle was not something the first man to stroll along could solve – a prophet was required. And there the people saw your knowledge was no use – nothing from birds or picked up from the gods. But then I came, Oedipus, who knew nothing. Yet I finished her off, using my wits rather than relying on birds. (2004: 471-478)

In this passage, Oedipus criticizes Tiresias for not being able to help the city in its time of need, with the special way of knowing that he has. Towards the end of the conversation, Oedipus criticizes Tiresias in another way: for speaking in riddles.

Tiresias replies mockingly:

Well, in solving riddles, are you not the best there is? (2004: 532-533)

Oedipus responds as follows:

Mock my excellence, but you will find out I am truly great. (2004: 534-535)

From these quotations, it is evident that Oedipus is proud of his success in solving the Sphinx's riddle. But how did Oedipus arrive at the answer? You might judge that this is a pointless question, since his encounter with the Sphinx is surely a fiction and the myths and plays about him do not provide us with information about this matter. Nevertheless, we can try to imagine how he solved the riddle and that is what I shall do here.

One possibility is that he realized the solution in a flash of inspiration. However, the Oedipus of Sophocles' play, when faced with another puzzle – who killed Laius, the former King of Thebes? – tries to proceed methodically. The most interesting accounts, I think, are ones which also represent Oedipus as trying to proceed methodically in the case of the Sphinx's riddle. But it is not obvious how one would go about arriving at the answer methodically and to my knowledge there have been no previous efforts to explain how. In this paper, I present two accounts of how Oedipus arrived at the answer.

I present the first account as if Oedipus himself were providing us with it. Here is the account. "When the Sphinx told me the riddle, I stared into space waiting for the answer to arrive, but no answer came into my mind. I then decided that the

only methodical way to proceed is to consider each kind of creature that I knew of in the hope of finding one which fits the description in the riddle. I began with the kind of creature that I am: a human being. I observed that a human being goes on twos, but it goes on twos in the morning, the afternoon and the night. I was about to consider another kind of creature when I thought to myself that there is a stage of life when human beings go on fours. But in that stage they go on fours whenever they go at all. I then set aside human beings and considered other kinds of being.

But after I had gone through every kind of creature that I knew, I still had no answer. I reasoned that there were two possibilities: either the answer is a kind of creature unknown to me or else the riddle has no answer. There are some strange kinds of creature in the world. Before me was one of them: a creature with the head of a woman, the body of a lioness, the wings of an eagle and the tail of a serpent. Some other strange kinds of creature might not be known to me. So I could not rule out the first possibility. But I had no choice except to work with the knowledge I already had, which was little more than average. So I began to consider the second possibility.

Could it be that this riddle has no answer? That would make it no riddle at all. The only way in which I was ever going to make progress, I realized, is if I had grounds to reject the conclusion I had come to: that either the answer is a kind of creature unknown to me or the riddle has no answer. But how could I reject this conclusion, since I had considered every kind of creature that I knew? I took this question seriously. It occurred to me that there is a way of rejecting it. I had assumed that the description in the riddle was meant to be taken literally. The only way forward was to abandon that assumption.

The possible metaphorical interpretations struck me as potentially endless. But I am a determined person and was made even more determined by recognizing an

oversight in my reasoning. I returned to the kind of creature that I am: a human being. That was the closest I had come to solving the riddle. I realized that ‘morning’ in the Sphinx’s question could refer to the early stage of human life, ‘afternoon’ to the adult years prior to old age, and ‘night’ to old age, when a human being often uses a walking stick. That was how I solved the riddle.”

You might think that any reasonably intelligent person who makes the observations Oedipus does about human beings would not set aside this kind of being and proceed to consider other kinds. They would regard the observations as so promising that they would search for ways of interpreting the description in the riddle so that human beings fit the description. That brings us to the second account. It begins in exactly the same way as the first account, but when Oedipus makes these observations, he looks for a way of interpreting the description so that there is a fit and thereby solves the riddle.

In both accounts, there are three crucial steps that Oedipus takes towards solving the riddle. First, he decides to proceed by carefully considering each kind of creature that he knows. Second, he notes that a human being (typically) moves on fours at an early stage of life and on twos later. Third, he realizes the possibility of a metaphorical interpretation of the description provided in the riddle. Of course, taking these steps would not in itself be enough to solve the riddle, but we would expect a person who takes them and is determined to solve the riddle to arrive at the solution.

In Sophocles’ play, Oedipus talks as if most people would not be able to solve the riddle. In line with this appraisal, some commentators present Oedipus as a powerful intellect (e.g., Kitto 1950: 178; Segal 1981: 210; Knox 1998: 20). However, at least one commentator on Sophocles has called into question how great his achievement is. Philip Vellacott writes:

The Sphinx's riddle was not, after all, a very hard one; and Oedipus doubtless grew tired of being praised for ingenuity. (1964: 137)

Presumably, when Vellacott says that the riddle is not a very hard one, he means to imply that if each person could somehow be presented with it, solving it would not be an uncommon feat. Even if there are grounds for saying that it is not that hard, I doubt that this implication is true, at least if the riddle presented is the one formulated at the beginning of this paper. (Some versions add that the being always has one voice, which is of no great help.) On both of the accounts given above, the solution arrives by first deciding to consider each kind of creature that one knows, carefully comparing it with the description provided in the riddle. I doubt that most people would bother to proceed in this way.

Almost all people would begin by pausing for a bit, waiting for the answer to strike them. It is very difficult to obtain the answer like this, because whatever mental process is meant to deliver the answer will have to be sensitive to metaphorical interpretations. When the process does not deliver the answer, I think most people would either start guessing or give up. It is possible that they would wonder whether the answer is a human being and then, in a flash of inspiration, see that it fits. But I think it is unlikely that someone would focus on what is most near, because there is a presumption that very familiar material gets ruled out when one pauses and waits for the answer to come.

Vellacott also says that Oedipus would have tired of being praised for his ingenuity in solving the riddle. There are a number of objections to be made against this view or the grounds that are implied for it, but since the view is not directly connected to the topic of my paper, I shall make only one. The view is referring to the

Oedipus of Sophocles' play *Oedipus the King* (1964: 137). The Oedipus in that play is a major source of praise for his ingenuity.

References

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