

## THE OEDIPUS COMPLEX

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The Oedipus complex is one of Freud's most well-known concepts. You will all know of Freud's description of a child's incestuous wishes towards a parent, particularly a parent of the opposite sex: a little girl's wish to marry her father, for example, or a later version of such a wish, a man who marries a woman with characteristics of his mother; or a woman who has an affair with an older married man. You will likely know too that the Oedipus complex centrally includes, as well, the idea of murderous wishes towards any rival, the little boy who wants his father to go away so that he can have his mother to himself; or the woman whose greatest wish is to triumph over the wife of her married lover, rather than to have a sexual affair in itself.

Since Freud's time, the Oedipus complex has come to hold a very central place in the psychoanalytic understanding of psychic development, and the many and complex ramifications of it are too great for me to describe in one lecture. But what I would like to try to do is to describe something more to you of Freud's original discovery of the universal nature of unconscious oedipal wishes - and it is important to remember we are talking about *unconscious* wishes – and about the anxieties they

generate and the defences against them. I'll follow that with something about later developments from Freud's original thinking, particularly by Klein and her followers. And finally, I will bring some clinical material.

I want to emphasize that these exciting elements of forbidden sexual feeling to parental figures, the simultaneous hostile wishes towards perceived rivals and the working through of all this turmoil of feeling, albeit unconscious, is an absolutely crucial part of normal psychic development and of the structuring of the mind itself. It is so crucial because the course of each individual's oedipal feelings is intimately related to the nature of his or her internal object relationships, and in particular to the superego, the guilt-inducing part of the mind which is the internal representation of parental authority. Related to this, the working through of the Oedipus complex involves the acceptance of conflicting feelings of love and hate within oneself, and the psychic acceptance of the knowledge of the difference between the generations and the difference between the sexes. In other words, the Oedipus complex and the whole mix of feelings it generates is centrally connected with the gradual dawning recognition of psychic reality, of parental authority and relationships, and of important capacities like thinking and the toleration of separation and loss. This is a psychically demanding

struggle, ongoing internal work, which although started in early childhood continues off and on throughout the whole of life.

Let me start with an outline of two cases of well-known oedipal problems, that of Little Hans, written up into a case study by Freud and that of Oedipus himself.

In 1908, the father of Little Hans approached Freud with his concerns about his son, who, aged five, had suddenly developed a fear of leaving the house in case he might be bitten or knocked over by a horse in the street. Questioned by Freud, Hans' father reported that Hans had been very preoccupied with his so-called 'widdler' recently, and was very concerned about whether his mother and new baby sister had widdlers too, and concerned about how they would manage without one. He was especially worried about losing his own widdler. About the same time Hans had been expressing a very strong wish to sleep beside his mother, and to do what he called 'coaxing' with her. For this 'coaxing' with his mother, Hans absolutely insisted that his father should go away, and go away permanently. Preferably, Hans wanted that his father should die.

However, despite this hostility to his father's presence, *at the same time* Hans continued to have a very affectionate and playful relationship with his father.

It seemed to Freud that Hans' fear about losing his widdler, his wish to coax with his mother, his wish to get rid of his father and yet at the same time his continuing good relationship with him had been troubling the little boy and were combining in some way to make him fearful of horses. He formulated the problem in terms of his newly developing theory of the Oedipus complex: he understood that Hans had powerful and conflicting feelings for *both* his parents individually, loved and hated them both, but was more dominated at the present time by positive erotic feelings for his mother, and a negative hostile wish towards his father. Freud thought this generated a terrible feeling of guilt in Hans, and unable to contend with this conflict within himself, Freud understood that Hans displaced the murderous impulses towards his father on to the horse, leaving him more free to enjoy his father's presence in its positive aspect in a less conflicted way. The phobic feeling about horses was seen as a displaced expression not only of Hans' murderous feelings towards his father – the horse would fall over and die – but also as his phantasy of his father's retaliation for Hans' 'coaxing' with his mother. In Hans' mind, Freud thought, this retaliation was going

to be in the form of castration – hence his worry about losing his widdler, experienced in the most intense, but displaced, way in relation to the horse, which he feared would either bite him, in particular his penis, or fall on top of him.

With some indirect help from Freud, Hans' father was able to talk to Hans, and the matter was resolved in a satisfactory manner. But there was a rather less satisfactory outcome in the story of Oedipus, an old Greek myth written into a powerful play by Sophocles and taken up by Freud as an account of universal unconscious truth.

Oedipus was born to the King and Queen of Thebes, Laius and Jocasta, who had been told by an oracle before his birth that their son was destined by fate to kill his father and marry his mother. Attempting to defy the oracle, they left their baby on a hillside to die, but he was rescued by a shepherd and taken to the court at Corinth. He was brought up as the child of the King and Queen in Corinth, Polybus and Merope, without knowledge of his true parentage. However, gossip eventually reached his ears as a young man that he was adopted, and he himself consulted the oracle. Disturbed by what it told him – the same as it had told his parents – he left Corinth and made his way back to Thebes. On the way, at a place where, significantly, three roads met, he had a fight

with a man who got in his way, and he killed him. Apparently unperturbed, he carried on to Thebes, where he soon met and married a recently widowed queen, Jocasta, with no questions asked by either bride or bridegroom. They had a settled marriage for many years until Thebes became affected by a serious epidemic of the plague. Unexpectedly, a soothsayer blamed Oedipus for the epidemic because, he said, there were past events in the life of Oedipus which were corrupting the town. Oedipus denied all knowledge, but the truth finally emerged from the shepherd who had rescued Oedipus as a baby: only then did it become clear that the man Oedipus had murdered seventeen years previously was his father, King Laius, and the queen he had married was Jocasta, his father's widow - that is to say, his mother. Unable to live with this knowledge, Jocasta killed herself, declaring as she did so her love for Laius, and Oedipus blinded himself – symbolically castrated himself – with her brooch.

The traditional understanding of this story is that Oedipus was an unwitting victim of circumstance, and that it was fate that made things work out the way they did, in the way our unconscious determines our oedipal development without our conscious knowledge or awareness. This is undoubtedly one aspect of the drama, the drama of our minds as well as that of the play, and it is certainly a tribute to the power of

unconscious forces, but it is, at the same time, hard to think that Oedipus – or indeed Jocasta – could be quite so unquestioning about the man he killed as he approached Thebes and the circumstances of his subsequent marriage, given that both he and she had separately spoken to the oracle. This interpretation – that they both rather turned away from the truth, turned a blind eye to what they could have known – is a tension in the play itself and also contributes to a later psychoanalytic understanding of the myth which I'll come back to later on.

These two stories, of Hans and of Oedipus, contain most of the elements which Freud used over many years to develop into the theoretical concept of the Oedipus complex, assigning it progressively more and more significance until he saw it, by the mid 1920s, as the central structuring force of human psychic development. His starting point was the dawning realisation that not all of the hysterical women patients he had been seeing had been seduced in childhood by their fathers as they claimed, but that instead they were in the grip of a powerful wish-fulfilling phantasy, which he came to realise was innate and universal.

Turning his attention to the sexual development of small children – and this to the horror of the Viennese public - Freud came to understand that each child, girl or boy, has an impassioned relationship to each parent,

mother and father, and that these powerful but intensely contradictory relationships contain strong loving and erotic elements as well as strong hatred. For a little boy, like Hans, Freud thought that the more dominant sexual wish was to his mother, a wish that excluded the father. For a little girl, Freud thought that to begin with the dominant relationship was also to the mother, and that something momentous had to happen before a little girl turned to her father as her main love object.

Although not many people would view it like this today, Freud thought that the single momentous event that brought an abrupt shift to these powerful internal feelings was, for a little boy, the recognition that not everybody has a penis. For a little girl, recognition that she does not have a penis, recognition that she is already, so to speak, 'castrated', means to her that her mother has not endowed her with the instrument of sexual power that her brother and father have.

A hundred years' later, it's easy to laugh at what an old fashioned phallogocentric view of gender politics and sexual identity this is. But for Freud, and for society at the time, the penis was *the only* meaningful sexual organ. You had one or you didn't, in which case you were identified by lack. And whether, actually, it's a penis, or a vagina, or white skin or money, or anything else, for a child, recognition that the world is divided

into an absolute order of those who have one and those who don't, is a cataclysmic moment. For the little boy, he has to recognise that if there is such a thing as a person with no penis, then it means that he could lose his – in his phantasy he could be castrated by his father as punishment and retaliation for his incestuous wishes towards his mother, just as Freud described for Little Hans. The little boy then has no choice but to respond to this realisation by giving up his wishes for his mother, in order to preserve the organ that structures his identity, his penis. He deals with the problem of his supposedly revengeful father – that is to say, the father who in the little boy's mind is revengeful - by identifying all the more strongly with him. He does this by setting up the father inside his mind as an internal figure invested with critical authority, what Freud called the superego. The superego is therefore, at this point in the child's psychic development, a very important and completely new structure in the mind, which Freud saw as the 'heir' to the Oedipus complex, and which by stirring up massive guilt, powerfully inhibits and desexualises any lingering incestuous wishes.

For the little girl, in Freud's conceptualisation, the moment of recognition of sexual difference comes with the thought, 'in a flash' as Freud puts it, that she knows she wants a penis, and hatefully blames her mother for her lack. This wish is what Freud called penis envy, and in its

wake, full of conflicting feelings, the little girl turns from her disappointing mother to her exciting father, seeing him as providing what she does not have, and as fulfilling a feminine instinct to have a baby, and to have it with him.

Importantly, because she has to accept herself as already 'castrated', Freud felt that there was less potential for punishment for incestuous wishes in the little girl. He thought this meant that the absolute imperative need to set up the superego, the critical agency in the mind, was less. He therefore felt that the superego was less developed in girls - something further we might take very definite issue with today!

It is important to grasp that the superego becomes a permanent structure in the mind – the place where powerful infantile imaginings of destructive retribution and critical intent are located. But these imaginings are just that, phantasies, and the notions of parental punishment and chastisement that the superego contains are not in any way necessarily externally true. The superego is not, in its quintessential existence, related to any actual punitive or critical behaviour of the parents and benign loving parents do not mean one does not have a critical superego.

[I think you have to think of this stage of development, the whole Oedipal denouement, as being a bit like the way a caterpillar turns into a butterfly: a complete internal restructuring of all the pre-existing elements, from which there is no return. The mind now knows what it didn't know previously and in the light of this awful knowledge it has to be completely restructured, now and forever with the superego function in place.]

Now, Freud's theories about the Oedipus complex and its consequences were largely based on his understanding of instinct theory and the biological development of infantile sexuality through set stages of development – oral, anal, phallic and genital – and so there tends to be an emphasis on the Oedipus complex in relation to the development and manifestations of actual sexuality. He did have another very relevant concept however, that of the 'primal scene' – the image of the sexual relationship between the parents as perceived and imagined by the young child from their position of being excluded – and as he developed more about the concept of the superego, he saw that the consequences of the primal scene, of the Oedipus complex, and of the superego itself were linked together and went far beyond overt sexuality. But largely it has been left to later analysts to develop these ideas further.

Coming from a point of view where relatedness to another mind, rather than instinctual satisfaction, dominates the psychic landscape, Melanie Klein believed that infants of both sexes are not only innately unconsciously aware of both the penis and the vagina, but also most importantly that they fundamentally and innately understand that there is a link between the two, as they have already experienced a similar fitting-together-ness in the prototype of all relationships, the mouth with the nipple. For Klein, while it is true that a little girl may indeed wish to have the exciting penis her brother has, the little boy also now has to accept that he in his turn cannot have a baby as his sister can. Klein also saw parental sexuality and the notion of the primal scene as much more central to the Oedipal situation than Freud did.

As you will likely know, Klein also fundamentally believed in the concepts of the life and death instincts and thought that the destructive aspects of the psyche, under the umbrella of the death instinct, caused the infant immense anxiety and fear of annihilation. In a desperate attempt to preserve a life-giving aspect of himself from destruction and disintegration, to keep life forces away from death forces, Klein thought the infant split his mind into separated parts and attributed either the hostile intent or the loving intent to the objects and parts of objects in the world around him, a world now full, from the infant's perspective, at

any given moment, of breasts with loving intentions or breasts with murderous intentions, and, later, penises similarly.

In this split and at times - from the infant's point of view - utterly hostile world, Klein thought that the oedipal situation began much earlier than Freud's classic description, but she thought it began in a much more primitive form, with phantasies, including on the one hand loving and on the other hand very hateful and violent phantasies, of the relationship between the part objects, that is between either aspects of the breast itself, or between aspects of the breast and the penis. Klein saw the way in which these primitive concrete aspects of the parents relate to each other and to the child, in the child's mind, as very significant in terms of the capacity to bring ideas together, and later to learn. And as the child develops, the phantasy of connected breast and penis gradually gives way to the more classical idea of the parents' sexual relationship from which the child is excluded, and the terrible sense of exclusion and loss this generates has to be tolerated in order for development to proceed further.

For Klein, the resolution of the Oedipus complex – to the extent that it ever is resolved – comes with the acceptance of the reality of the parent's sexual relationship and of the child's own exclusion from it. This

is an acceptance of the sexual reality, but also an acceptance that psychically, and at many different levels, the relationship between the parents is a relationship from which one is fundamentally excluded. Ron Britton, a Kleinian analyst, talks about this in terms of the family triangle and third position.

Drawing on Henri Rey's notion of the world of the infant conceived of as continuous in space and time, Britton describes how this undifferentiated world can be given very meaningful structure by the oedipal configuration.

The primary family triangle, as Britton describes it, provides the child with two links, connecting him separately with each parent, but it also confronts the child with the existence of the link that the parents have with each other, the link which excludes the child. Initially, this parental link is experienced in primitive part object terms, as I have just described in Klein's thinking, and is full of hatred and envy, expressed by the infant in the language of orality and anality. But if over time the parental link can be felt as containing love as well as hate, and both the love and the hate can be tolerated in the child's mind, then this provides for the child the prototype for an object relationship of a different kind, one in which - for better and for worse as an experience - he is an observer but not a

participant. Britton terms this the third position, the position in which one is an observer - and from which one can therefore also envisage being observed. Very importantly for further psychic development, this provides for the development of the capacity for internally standing back and seeing oneself in interaction with others, for better and for worse, with love and with hate, and for entertaining another point of view whilst holding still holding on to one's own.

I think this is an important development from the Klein's notion of the fundamental relationship between mouth and nipple, breast and the penis, and which is taken further conceptually by Bion describing the model of the container and the contained. In those relationships, the infant is a participant. In the triangular notion that Britton describes he is not, and this is the further work of the Oedipus complex – separateness and separation, and the awareness that the nature of the relationship between the parents is different from that between the parent and himself: the parents can make a baby together, the parent and the child cannot.

These psychic developments are a big ask for a small infant, requiring a certain constitutional capacity, and of course the right environmental

provision in the form of emotional care from the parents to help with the internal turmoil. What happens when this is not available?

Britton has a well-known and often quoted clinical example on just this point. I want to describe it, because I think it shows how post Freudian ideas have developed from Freud's original understanding of the child's erotised relationship to each parent in turn, and the devastating blow that comes for the child when he recognises that the other parent is a righteous rival who will mete out terrible punishment. In these further developments the oedipal constellation is seen as necessary for thought.

Britton is describing his work with Ms A, a patient who had externally recovered from a psychotic breakdown, and he describes how impossible he found it in the sessions to disentangle himself from the patient in order to consider what was happening between them. He felt that he desperately needed a mental space where he could move sideways from the patient to view their interaction, but found that if he tried to force himself into such place by asserting a description of her in analytic terms, she would become violent, sometimes physically, sometimes by screaming. Later, when she could manage to describe her response to what he was doing in words, she would shout 'Stop that fucking thinking'. And it's this that I want to highlight – as does Britton –

because what he understood was that Ms A detected her analyst's efforts to consult with his analytic self as a form of internal intercourse with himself: the thinking wasn't 'thinking', something that might be helpful and containing for her, but was instead 'fucking thinking', corresponding to the parental intercourse, something that excluded her and threatened any sense of her existence.

Britton found that the only way he could manage to find a place to think that was in the least bit helpful was to articulate the experience to himself, keeping it within his own mind, whilst at the same time communicating to the patient his understanding of her experience. In this way, some movement and thinking became possible, and it seemed there could be a model where parental intercourse could take place if the knowledge of it did not force itself in an intrusive way into the child's mind. When it did, it seemed the patient felt her link to her mother was completely annihilated, internally and externally.

And this links to the very final point I want to make before turning to clinical material, going back to something I mentioned earlier about the myth of Oedipus: the question of how Oedipus could manage not to know, and apparently not even to wonder, about who it was he murdered on his way to Thebes and who was the recently widowed

queen he married. John Steiner takes up this point, and suggests that we have to think that Oedipus, and Britton's Ms A, could not bear to face the notion of parental sexuality or the existence of a relationship which excluded them, so they turned away from the truth: carried on without questioning who Jocasta was, in the case of Oedipus, shouting down her analyst in the case of Ms A. Later, Oedipus was forced for a moment to see, but then blinded himself, literally and symbolically, to avoid ongoing seeing. And Ms A was helped to see just a bit, as long as it wasn't too much in her face.

And how each individual works out these conflicts for himself, including how one decides what one can bear to see, is the work of the Oedipus complex, and these conflicts are all part of normal development and psychic structure. Neither Freud nor Klein, nor any other analyst, saw these conflicting unbearable wishes as a pathological condition. What can make it become pathological is not the existence of the oedipal feelings and conflicts *per se*, but the way one does, or does not, manage to negotiate a way through the complicated turmoil of mixed emotion and anxieties to the eventual acceptance, or not, or acceptance to some extent, of the parental sexual couple and the differentiation of both generations and sexes.

Now I want to leave the theory there and tell you some clinical material.

I will call my patient Ms P. I want to tell you about a dream Ms P had, which I will explain in terms of the central oedipal conflict I think it contains.

Ms P was in her late fifties at the time of this dream, and she had suffered from episodes of depression throughout her adult life. She came for analysis after developing a serious auto-immune disease, following which she had developed writer's block that prevented her from continuing her work as a writer.

Ms P's preoccupied and chronically unwell mother had died when Ms P was ten. Already closer to her livelier father, she had then, throughout her adolescence, developed a yet closer bond with him, partly forged out of their joint grief, but partly also out of the further development of the pre-existing and exciting closeness between them. This closeness then ended abruptly when her father remarried when Ms P was eighteen, shortly after they had been on holiday together to Italy. Although Ms P did know at one level that her father had been seeing his new partner for some years by the time they got married, she nonetheless felt utterly jilted by her father, suddenly and completely unexpectedly abandoned

by him. Never recovering from this very deep hurt, on top of the earlier loss of her mother, she turned to a long series of relationships with much older men, many of them married and some of them also very eminent in their field of artistic or professional life.

At the time of the dream I am going to tell you, Ms P, who had very little money, had just started a course of very expensive treatment for her deteriorating physical condition, treatment which our health service did not at that time pay for. The money for the treatment had come from a writer's benevolent fund that she had applied to, and which had made her a large award – many thousands of euros – specifically to pay for this treatment. However, as it so happened, after she had had the first three injections, which she had paid for herself, and just as she then received the money from the benevolent fund for the further treatment, our health service was suddenly and unexpectedly forced, following a private legal challenge by somebody unrelated to my patient, to provide the necessary funding for the treatment to all sufferers of this condition. This meant Ms P was now eligible for public funding for her treatment.

Telling me about this in the session that day, Ms P said she did not want to give the money back to the benevolent fund, even though she no longer needed it for its original purpose. She felt the money was now

hers and she wanted to keep it, and this led us on to familiar material about how she felt no amount of money was adequate compensation for the loss of her mother when she was ten. But what also became clear in a more meaningful way in the session was that money was very associated in her mind with her business-man father, and she felt that she should be able to have absolute access to it, and to him, when she wanted it.

In reality Ms P did then ring the benevolent fund after the session, and she was told quite straightforwardly that she had applied in good faith, the money had been allocated to her, and that it was indeed now hers to use as necessary. Although this may have been entirely proper in terms of external reality, and entirely in keeping with the benevolent society's rules, in her mind I think Ms P felt she had triumphed over a sort of silly analyst/mother/me who appeared to have suggested to her that the money, identified with her father, did not belong to her. I thought however that somewhere in her mind she was uncomfortable and guilty about the outcome and that in a way she knew it would have been more psychologically correct or truthful if she had been asked to return the money.

That night she had the dream I want to tell you about. In the dream, she was going to see someone at a charity commission, something to do with sorting out a loan, whether it was OK or not, the outcome was uncertain. She was accompanied by a woman, probably it was me, and by a man, and the three of us had gone to the charity commission together. Then the scene changed, and she was in a tiered lecture theatre, sitting next to my husband and talking to him in a very animated way while waiting for the lecture to start. She was worried that I would mind, would be angry, but looking round, she saw I was sitting in the row above and behind her, and she was relieved to see that I didn't seem to mind at all.

I think it is clear to see that the recent events in relation to the benevolent fund get represented in the dream by a visit to a charity commission. And although it is manifestly about sorting out a loan, I think this can be better understood unconsciously as being to do with her belief that it is OK for her father, represented by the money, to be on loan to her – preferably permanently. I think taking the two people with her to the charity commission, a man and a woman, perhaps in her mind me and my husband, mother and father type people, does indicate however that she knows somewhere in her mind that this isn't quite right, and that the charity commission was going to be questioning this.

This internal scenario continues and is crystallized in the second part of the dream. Here she is more overt about being with my husband, the current transference representative of her father. I think the fact that she puts me behind her but in a higher tier and therefore looking down on her, in a superego position – or, you might say from heaven - does indicate that somewhere she is worried about it, but she allows herself to be reassured by the fact that I appear not to mind, that I, in effect, stand down in relation to my husband and give her permission to be with him.

In the session, after talking through some of these issues, I said to her what seemed to be lacking was any idea of a proper parental couple, which she was not allowed to disrupt or break into, but which was nonetheless there to protect her, to think about her and to help her work out what she could have, but also what she could not have.

In response she told me something I had not heard before: when she was a teenager, after her mother died, she used to accompany her father to parties of various friends of his. She hated these occasions, where she was present not as her father's partner, but not quite as his daughter either. She told me that every time she went to one of these parties, she suffered from a crippling anxiety that her face was covered in snot and

that everybody could see it. This anxiety was at times so great that she was constantly going to the bathroom to check.

I think one way to see the snot is to do with a snotty tearful child, unable to cope without her mother – and indeed she told me once again in this session how much she had missed her mother when she was a teenager. But more immediately relevant to the dream seemed to be the idea of the snot being the guilty evidence of an illicit imaginary sexual relationship with her father – as if the real unconscious phantasy, I think, was that her face was covered in semen. When I put this to her in the session, I think she was quite relieved, feeling that I had understood both the excitement and the guilt in her relationship with her father, and expressed in the dream via her relationship to me and my husband.

I think Ms P had powerful oedipal wishes in relation to her father, starting from a time in her younger childhood after he returned from a period working away, and they had quite a fun-filled relationship for a number of years. In Ms P's mind she had a free access to her father, and I think in her mind she had aggressively disposed of her frail mother well before her mother actually died. The situation was then enormously compounded by the actual death of the mother: on the one hand it strengthened Ms P's belief that her exciting father was hers, and on the

other, it equally strengthened a guilty feeling that she had killed her mother off. Nobody was available to help her with these powerfully contradictory feelings, and after being jilted by her father I think the outcome has been the series of many relationships with men of the - so to speak – ‘wrong’ generation, as well as episodes of depression, which I think are the mark of her unaddressed guilt.

For any child it is clearly a catastrophe that their mother dies when they are ten years old, but I want to finish by emphasizing that the Oedipus complex and the conflicts that surround it are not just to do with the external absence of a parent or the presence of an exciting one, though these factors of course compound difficulties. Nor is it just to do with a little child’s wish to marry one of their parents, and the feeling that the opposite parent is a rival. The Oedipus complex is to do with the way in which the mother, the father and the relationship between the two of them, and between the two of them and oneself, are represented in the mind, the responsibility that one assumes for what one has done to them internally and the help that is given by available good relationships to assist in coping with that. The Oedipus complex is the whole gamut of mixed internal impulses, phantasies, defences and anxieties about oneself and one’s two parents, and if you remember one thing from today, I would like you to remember that the Oedipus complex is not just

about incestuous and murderous wishes but also about complexity of feeling, internal awareness and the capacity for thinking and facing psychically the difficult knowledge that important relationships exist from which one is excluded.