

Oedipus Revisited

A REVIEW ESSAY BY MICHAEL L. PENN

AMONG the most significant works published in the twentieth century is Dudley Fitts' and Robert Fitzgerald's translation (first published in 1939) of *The Oedipus Cycle*, a trilogy by the Greek dramatist Sophocles.¹ Although the plays that constitute *The Oedipus Cycle*—*Oedipus Rex*, *Oedipus at Colonus*, and *Antigone*—long predate the twentieth century, such a review is warranted because the story of Oedipus, reintroduced to twentieth-century readers by the stately translation of Fitts and Fitzgerald, captures a dimension of life and of the human spirit that was obscured at the end of the nineteenth century when Sigmund Freud chose Oedipus to serve as the root metaphor for the theory of mind that would animate the birth of modern psychiatry. Inasmuch as no theory of the mind has had a greater impact on shaping modern views of the human condition, a post-twentieth century analysis of *The Oedipus Cycle* and of the uses to which the story was put is illuminating.

In formulating his influential theory of psychoanalysis, Freud was captivated by two aspects of the story of Oedipus. The aspect best known to most readers emerged after the death of Freud's father in October 1896. Although Freud's father was by then an old

man, and although his death was not unexpected, during the year following his father's death Freud found himself in a state of inner conflict and unanticipated turmoil. During that year he also had what he came to regard as a significant dream. He dreamed that he was late for his father's funeral. In his attempt at self-analysis, Freud arrived at the disturbing conclusion that at some level of his personality, he was not unhappy about his father's death. Indeed, he was to confess to himself that his father's death represented the fulfillment of a long-standing wish that had begun in childhood—a wish that his father would be out of the way so that he would be the sole possessor of his mother. As Raymond Fancher, one of Freud's biographers, has noted, it became apparent to Freud that this pattern of wishes paralleled the plot of Sophocles' play *Oedipus Rex*, in which Oedipus discovers that he has unwittingly slain his father, Laois, and married his mother, Iocaste, Queen of Thebes. At the same time, as the enthroned King of Thebes, Oedipus brings down the wrath of the gods on his kingdom. "The play," writes Fancher, "portrays the agonizing process by which Oedipus realizes the nature of his deeds," a terrifying self-appraisal not unlike Freud's own self-analysis. When Oedipus learns the true nature of his deeds, he is so horrified that he puts out his own eyes. In Freud's view, Oedipus' horror was symbolic of "the dread that always accompanies the revelation of repressed ideas and wishes."²

The second aspect of the Oedipus story that captures Freud's imagination concerns the way in which it depicts the power of a

Copyright © 2001 by Michael L. Penn.

1. Dudley Fitts and Robert Fitzgerald, *The Oedipus Cycle* (New York: Harcourt, 1977).

2. Raymond Fancher, *Psychoanalytic Psychology: The Development of Freud's Thought* (New York: Norton, 1973) 142.

person's past to determine his or her future. It is this dimension of the story of Oedipus, the dimension that would come to embody Freud's notion of "psychic determinism," that is of concern here. For it was, in many respects, the notion of psychic determinism that rendered Freud's theory of the mind pseudoscientific and that enabled the mind to become a legitimate object of empirical study and clinical concern.

Oedipus as Root Metaphor in the Birth of Psychoanalytic Psychiatry

IN the nineteenth century, medicine—as a professional discipline—was just beginning to be consolidated. There were only three firmly established branches of medicine: internal medicine, surgery, and neurology. One of the notions that was to appear early in medicine and that was to pave the way for a complete reconceptualization of the mind and the subsequent birth of psychoanalytic psychiatry was the concept of *Functional Delta*.

Functional Delta can be explained by noting the difference between a *symptom* in medicine, which is some kind of verbal or behavioral report of physical dysfunction or distress, and a *medical* or *pathophysiological sign*, which is some pathophysiological evidence that stands in causal relation to the reported symptom and accounts for it. If, for example, Mrs. Yamaguchi enters the hospital and reports that she has blurry vision and a bad headache, she has reported two symptoms. If upon physical examination it is found that Mrs. Yamaguchi has a tumor growing in the occipital lobe, the tumor is the pathophysiological sign that accounts for Mrs. Yamaguchi's reported symptoms. Under normal circumstances, there is a causal and logical relationship between the severity of symptoms that are reported or evidenced by patients and the pathophysiological signs that are discovered upon physical examination. If patients manifest a variety of symptoms but evidence no pathophysiological signs, the

discrepancy between their reported symptoms (or illness-related behavior) and the observable signs is referred to as a Functional Delta.

At the turn of the nineteenth century it was believed that patients could manifest a high Functional Delta in two ways and for two reasons: when pathophysiological signs were minimal or absent but the intensity and range of symptoms and illness behavior were high, patients were often accused of being malingerers who were playing the part of a sick person for some gain; conversely, when pathophysiological signs of disease were high but symptoms and illness behavior were absent or relatively low, patients were said to be, for whatever reason, unaware of the severity of their actual disease.

In the 1800s, however, medical science began to identify a particular configuration of symptoms—without corresponding pathophysiological signs—that could not be understood by invoking either malingering or a patient's unawareness as sufficient, logical explanations. This constellation of symptoms was known as *hysteria*; and while these symptoms had been observed in women for many centuries, they had not been understood as constituting a legitimate medical disorder. It was the meticulous observational and diagnostic work of one of the great physician-teachers of the time—Jean-Martin Charcot—that led to the acceptance of hysteria as an authentic medical illness and that precipitated an intense clinical search for its natural cause.

Charcot carried out his work at a massive hospital complex in Paris known as Salpêtrière, which, by the end of the nineteenth century, had become a well-established asylum for the poorest of the Parisian proletariat. Among the ill seeking refuge in Salpêtrière, no patients were of greater interest to the leading physician-intellectuals of the time than the many women who suffered from this newly recognized functional somatic syndrome, or hysteria.

For more than two thousand years hysteria had been considered an incomprehensible disease the cause of which was explained at various times by invoking a variety of mystical entities and processes—such as evil spirits and wandering uteri. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, however, when medical science was becoming increasingly suspicious of mystical forces as adequate explanations for disease, neurologists began to search for the causes of hysteria, and all other diseases, in natural, observable processes.

The understanding of hysteria advanced greatly at Salpêtrière, due in large part to the meticulous clinical work of Charcot. Judith Herman, one of the foremost authorities on the history of trauma-related disorders, has affirmed that Charcot's approach to hysteria "was that of a taxonomist. He emphasized careful observation, description, and classification. He documented the characteristic symptoms of hysteria exhaustively, not only in writing, but also with drawings and photographs."³ Because Charcot was one of the most entertaining lecturers of his time, every Tuesday afternoon, when he held his public lecture-demonstrations on hysteria, many distinguished physicians would make the pilgrimage to Salpêtrière to behold the great master at work. Among those visitors were two young neurologists, Pierre Janet and Sigmund Freud.

As Janet, Freud, and a variety of fascinated male physicians looked on, Charcot and his interns performed the public, grand-rounds examination that was intended to reveal the symptoms of a convulsive hysterical attack. After witnessing many of these exami-

nations, Freud returned to Vienna and resumed his practice with a new mission. He set for himself the goal of going beyond a mere description of hysteria to demonstrating, unequivocally, its cause.

For nearly a decade Pierre Janet in France and Sigmund Freud and his collaborator, Joseph Breuer, in Vienna were to search for the causes of hysteria. Their search, however, would be conducted in a manner wholly different from the usual way of proceeding in nineteenth-century medicine. Rather than examining their patients' bodies for pathophysiological signs, the three neurologists, operating on little more than a hunch, undertook their search by examining the stories that their patients told about their lives.

In listening to such stories, Janet, Freud, and Breuer came to affirm the dualism Descartes had proposed more than two centuries before—but they argued it in a completely new way. As had Descartes', Freud's description of the human reality suggested that it consists of two dimensions—a somatic dimension and a psychological one. Each dimension, though related to the other, was said to have its own anatomy, its own dynamics, and its own set of illnesses. Freud was the first to describe the anatomy of the psyche—which he conceptualized as being the by-product of biological processes, inextricably linked to the body in functional ways and thus wholly contingent upon the body for its functioning and existence. By rendering the psyche dependent upon biological processes, Freud's model provided a partial solution to the problem of Cartesian dualism. Furthermore, Freud's conceptualization would prove acceptable to the leading European intellectuals of the time as it embodied a materialistic notion of the psyche that held that the body produces psychological phenomena in much the same way that it produces heat. Thus no special entity, process, or force was necessary to explain the psyche's existence, nature, or function.

3. Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence—From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (New York: Basic Books, 1992) 11.

In 1896 Freud announced to the world the results of his study on hysteria. In his report, entitled "The Aetiology of Hysteria," he wrote:

I therefore put forward the thesis that at the bottom of every case of hysteria there are one or more occurrences of premature sexual experience, occurrences which belong to the earliest years of childhood, but which can be reproduced through the work of psycho-analysis in spite of the intervening decades. I believe that this is an important finding, the discovery of a *caput Nili* in neuropathology.⁴

Notwithstanding Freud's subsequent retreat from this thesis, the discovery of the etiology of hysteria was revolutionary in that it contained the idea that human pathology may originate not only from diseased tissue, organs, and pathophysiological processes but also from unhealthy ideas, experiences, and human relationships.⁵

Thus Freud's redefinition of the psyche, as well as his adumbration of its role in human disease, revolutionized the practice of medicine and launched a century of study on the nature of the psyche and the impact of biological and social processes on its health and development.

4. Sigmund Freud, "The Aetiology of Hysteria," quoted in Herman, *Trauma and Recovery* 14.

5. In *Trauma and Recovery* (14), Judith Herman observed that within a year of the publication of his work Freud had reluctantly repudiated the traumatic theory of the origins of hysteria: "His correspondence makes clear that he was increasingly troubled by the radical social implications of this hypothesis. Hysteria was so common among women that if his patients' stories were true, and if his theory were correct, he would be forced to conclude that what he called 'perverted acts against children' were endemic, not only among the proletariat of Paris, where he had first studied hysteria, but also among the respectable bourgeois families of Vienna. . . . This idea was simply unacceptable. It was beyond credibility."

The Eclipse of Metaphysics in Psychology

DESPITE Freud's revolutionary contributions, two significant problems with his somato-psychic conceptualization can be identified. Inasmuch as he, and most of those who followed him, conceptualized the psyche as nothing more than the byproduct of biological and social processes, Freud's bipartite theory rendered the human reality wholly and completely natural. Thus, while proving successful in rescuing the study and treatment of mental illness from the superstitious ideas that had plagued the field for centuries, Freud's theory also made human beings ontologically equivalent to all other mammals. In addition, in conceptualizing the psyche as an epiphenomenon of somatic processes, human consciousness was reduced to a mere effect and was given little or no causal role in the calculus of human action. In brief, it could be said that modern psychiatry emerged in Europe through sacrifice of the soul.

A soulless psychology must lead to the withering of that special type of hope that can be experienced only by human beings; for in the absence of a theory of mind that allows the possibility of transcending the influences of natural and social processes, an individual's present and future must be seen as an inevitable result of the past. In terms of psychoanalytic theory, this hopelessness is captured succinctly in the story of *Oedipus Rex*, the first play in *The Oedipus Cycle*, which serves as Freud's root metaphor in the development of psychoanalysis.

Indeed, an enduring idea in psychology since the days of Freud is the notion of psychic determinism. Adherents to the principles of psychic determinism—whether they be *soft* (nurture-centered) determinists or *hard* (nature-centered)—suppose that human action can be explained using roughly the same causal principles that underlie the actions of other advanced mammals. According to determin-

ists, just as the biology and history (the nature and nurture) of baboons and chimpanzees are sufficient to explain and predict their actions, in like manner can we understand and predict the psychological and social lives of human beings.⁶ Karl Popper, an authority on the history and philosophy of science, discussed this notion as the problem of *historicism*. Historicism is the doctrine according to which sociohistorical events are as fully determined by their antecedents as are physical events by theirs.⁷

From an historicist perspective, metaphysical processes are irrelevant to human life because they can have no meaning within a purely deterministic framework. Metaphysical processes become relevant only when one

6. In his hugely popular work *An Elementary Textbook of Psychoanalysis* (New York: Anchor Doubleday, 1974) 2, Charles Brenner renders this point sufficiently clear: "Two . . . fundamental hypotheses which have been abundantly confirmed are the principle of psychic determinism, or causality, and the proposition that consciousness is an exceptional rather than a regular attribute of psychic processes. Let us start with the principle of psychic determinism. The sense of this principle is that in the mind, as in physical nature about us, nothing happens by chance, or in a random way. Each psychic event is determined by the ones which preceded it. . . . In fact, mental phenomena are no more capable of . . . a lack of causal connection with what preceded them than are physical ones. Discontinuity in this sense does not exist in mental life." Commenting on this assumption, the noted psychiatrist and philosopher, Thomas Szasz, observed: "It is obvious . . . that not only psychoanalysis but also much of traditional and modern psychiatric theory assumes that personal conduct is determined by prior personal-historical events. All these theories downgrade and even negate explanations of human behavior in terms such as freedom, choice, and responsibility" (*The Myth of Mental Illness: Foundations of a Theory of Personal Conduct* [New York: Harper, 1974] 5).

7. Karl Popper, *The Poverty of Historicism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1957).

admits to the existence and operation of powers that can influence the trajectory set in motion by the forces of nature and nurture, but which are not, in themselves, the mere by-product of these forces. Before the human psyche was reduced to a material function, these metaphysical forces were assumed to find expression in the operation of the human soul.

Oedipus Rex serves Freud as a root metaphor because it demonstrates the power of biology and history to fix the destiny of even the most sincere and high-minded among human beings. Oedipus is a good and noble lad, who, upon hearing the terrible prophecy of the Oracle at Delphi, flees his home to avoid it.

The prophecy was given in two parts—the first was that Oedipus would murder his father, marry his mother, and sire a child who would be his sister; the second was that he would be buried in Colonus. Despite Oedipus' efforts to escape his destiny, he unconsciously and unwittingly fulfills the prophecy precisely as the Oracle had given it. Thus Oedipus' intention to do good ultimately has no influence whatsoever on his fate.

Oedipus Rex opens with a crowd of suppliants who have brought the king branches and chaplets of olive leaves and who "lie in various attitudes of despair":

Great Oedipus, O powerful King of Thebes!

. . . Your own eyes

Must tell you: Thebes is tossed on a murdering sea

And can not [*sic*] lift her head from the death surge.

A rust consumes the buds and fruits of the earth;

The herds are sick; children die unborn,
And labor is vain. The god of plague and pyre

Raids like detestable lightning through the city,

And all the house of Kadmos is laid waste.
All emptied and all darkened; Death alone

Battens upon the misery of Thebes.
Therefore, O mighty King, we turn to
you. . . .

Thebes suffers, one later learns, from "an old defilement" that is sheltered there—a defilement that must be expelled from the land if it is to be healed. This defilement is the result of the deeds of Oedipus, who, in a fit of rage many years earlier, had murdered King Laois and was enthroned in his stead. At its heart *The Oedipus Cycle* symbolizes the movement from childhood to maturity. As such, Sophocles' trilogy begins by affirming the power of biology (nature and the passions) and of family history (nurture) in shaping an individual's early life.

The story of Oedipus is the story of every human being, for every person begins this life as an unwitting slave to nature, in "the abode of dust." Oedipus' being a slave to nature's passions is symbolized by the reckless abandonment with which he slays his father, King Laois. Oedipus describes this moment to his wife (and, as it transpires, mother), Queen Iocaste:

I will tell you all that happened there, my
lady.

There were three highways
Coming together at a place I passed;
And there a herald came towards me, and
a chariot
Drawn by horses, with a man such as you
describe
Seated in it. The groom leading the horses
Forced me off the road at his lord's com-
mand;
But as this charioteer lurched over towards
me
I struck him in my rage. The old man saw
me
And brought his double goad down upon
my head

As I came abreast.

He was paid back, and more!
Swinging my club in this right hand I
knocked

Him out of his car and he rolled on the
ground.

I killed him.

Inasmuch as Freud's theory of the psyche is fundamentally a theory of the psyche in childhood, it was fitting for him to invoke the story of Oedipus Rex as a root metaphor. But the other two plays in *The Oedipus Cycle*—*Oedipus at Colonus* and *Antigone*—do not fit into Freud's concept of psychic determinism.

Sophocles wrote *Oedipus at Colonus* as sacred theater in the late evening of his life. At eighty-nine years of age, he was certain that this mystic drama would represent his final work. It is no wonder, then, that, for his wise and surrogate voice, Sophocles has old Oedipus, his body blind and bent with age, address the people of Colonus about the life that is so quickly fleeting and the life that is to come.

Sophocles shows through *Oedipus at Colonus* that the former king, having been in exile for many years, and having, in willing fulfillment of the Oracle's second prophecy, arrived finally at the city of Colonus, has matured and has submitted his will to the will of the gods. In this ironic moment of contentment, Oedipus, like the Apostle Paul who was to follow this same mystic path, begins his final address with a prayer directed both to Apollo—who had guided him mysteriously to that hallowed ground—and to the people of Colonus, that he might fulfill his destiny, which called for him to be buried in their venerated and sacred city. Oedipus has thus arrived at Colonus after a long and painful journey, not merely as an exile, a refugee, and a fallen king, but as a noble, chastened, and illumined spirit in service to the gods:

Ladies whose eyes
Are terrible: Spirits: Upon your sacred
ground

I have first bent my knees in this new land;

Therefore be mindful of me and of Apollo,
For when he gave me oracles of evil,
He also spoke of this:

A resting place,
After long years, in the last country, where
I should find home among the sacred Furies:
That I might round out there my bitter
life.

Conferring benefit on those who received
me,

A curse on those who have driven me
away.

Portents, he said, would make me sure of
this:

Earthquake, thunder, or God's smiling
lightning;

But I am sure of it now, sure that you
guided me

With feathery certainty upon this road,
And led me here into your hallowed wood.

How otherwise could I, in my wandering,
Have sat down first with you in all this
land,

I who drink not, with you who love not
wine?

How otherwise had I found this chair of
stone?

Grant me then, goddesses, passage from
life at last,

And consummation, as the unearthly voice
Foretold;

Unless indeed I seem unworthy of your
grace:

Slave as I am to such unending pain
As no man had before.

Hearing the words of this strange traveler,
the people of Colonus recognize that he is
none other than Oedipus of Thebes, fallen
king, disgraced in all the world. To the plea
of Oedipus and Antigone, his faithful daughter
and sister, they reply that, because Colonus

is sacred ground, one such as Oedipus cannot be buried there.

In that hour of searing and final disappointment, Oedipus reaches deep into the reservoir of the human spirit and delivers to the people of Colonus words inspired by the gods. As he persuades the people of Colonus to grant him, in their compassion, a final resting place, he breathes into them the spirit of life; and as he takes his last breath, they take within themselves that vitalizing force necessary for resurrection and renewal. The people of Colonus are revitalized because in caring for Oedipus and in helping him to realize his destiny, they rediscover the noble qualities in themselves that had made the people of Colonus so great.

Through the second drama in *The Oedipus Cycle* one learns that Oedipus' entire life, though stitched together by apparently senseless pain, was also preparation for a final hour of service in which he would be honored by the gods and used as their redeeming instrument. In other words, one learns that the apparent injustice that Oedipus suffered in childhood and youth was actually a more refined form of justice that made possible the maturation of his faculties.

Despite Sophocles' conviction that *Oedipus at Colonus* would be his final work, he followed it with *Antigone*, the final play in *The Oedipus Cycle*. *Antigone* covers the period after Oedipus' burial at Colonus and represents, in part, the biological, social, and spiritual heritage passed from Oedipus to his faithful sister/daughter, Antigone. But it also represents the spiritual qualities that Antigone wins for herself as she struggles, in her own way, to fulfill her responsibilities to that which she believes is right and good. In the ultimate act of freedom, Antigone chooses to sacrifice her own life so that Polyneicês, a brother whom she loves and honors, might be properly buried.

The play opens in front of the palace of Creon, the new King of Thebes. Creon, whose

kingdom had been rendered secure after the successful defeat of the Argive army—an army led by Antigone's brother, Polyneicês—orders that no one should bury Polyneicês and that no one should mourn him. Rather, must his body “lie in the fields, a sweet treasure for carrion birds. . . .”

Though well aware that she will have to die for it, Antigone decides, nevertheless, to bury her brother's body. In witnessing this noble act, the reader notes that, although in his youth her father slew a man in blind rage, in her youth Antigone sacrifices herself, in full consciousness, that something of transcendent value—namely, human honor and dignity—might live. In this manner does Sophocles, in his final play, describe the journey of the human spirit from “the abode of dust” (or the world of nature) to “the heavenly homeland.” It is this transcendent dimension that was lost in Freud's deterministic theory and that is now being rediscov-

ered in the discipline that he founded a little over a century ago.

Sophocles' name for his central character of the trilogy signals the journey, for Oedipus, in Greek, means “swollen feet.” Inasmuch as the feet are the means whereby one advances physically in the world, Sophocles is telling us from the outset that Oedipus' advancement will be painful and hard won. That is the way that it is with all real advancement—it is painful and hard won. If the advancement of humankind can be likened to the advancement of a single individual, that advancement must take place in stages and must be accompanied by pain and struggle. But just as Oedipus's daughter, Antigone, inherits the fruits of her father's spiritual striving, so also will the generations that are to follow us be made the nobler for the spiritual battles we fight and win today. Bahá'u'lláh, the founder of the Bahá'í Faith, captures the spiritual principle in the following verse: “O SON OF MAN! My calamity is My providence, outwardly it is fire and vengeance, but inwardly it is light and mercy. Hasten thereunto that thou mayest become an eternal light and an immortal spirit. This is my command unto thee, do thou observe it.”⁸

8. Bahá'u'lláh, *The Hidden Words*, trans. Shoghi Effendi (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1939) AHW 51.