

JONATHAN LEAR

*Knowingness and Abandonment:
An Oedipus for Our Time*

This conference is not only about what psychoanalysis can contribute to culture, but about what culture can contribute to psychoanalysis. This is a relief. For the psychoanalytic profession has for too long clung to a defense which is, by now, outworn and boring: namely, the stance that psychoanalysis has a special secret to give to culture. For about fifty years, the profession acted out its own identification with Oedipus, pretending to have solved the riddle of the unconscious. This is ironic because this stance is an *exploitation* of the transference—analysts putting themselves forward as possessors of esoteric knowledge—whereas the whole point of analysis is to *analyze* the transference. Analysts portrayed themselves as “already knowing” the secret, whereas what makes analysis special is its unique form of not already knowing. No wonder the culture became suspicious. And analysts, for their part, fell into confusion and frustration that their “message” was not being received with awe, wonder, respect. In retrospect, one can see that this exploitation of the transference had self-defeat built right into it.

Analysis is not essentially a body of esoteric knowledge; it is a peculiar form of mental activity, a peculiar form of speaking and listening, a peculiar form of life. Above all, it involves a certain form of listening: listening to oneself, listening to another. And if we listen to the culture with an analytic ear, we can gain insight both into the culture and into our fundamental

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psychoanalytic myths. It is in listening to the culture that I have found a way to reinterpret the Oedipus myth, the archaic myth of psychoanalysis.

If one reads the newspapers, follows the news, one can quickly come to see that there is a crisis of knowingness in the culture. I shall begin with the current flap over campaign finance, not because it is fundamental in itself, but because it is happening this week. It is the cultural equivalent of what an analysand brings into a session on any given day. No matter when this conference occurred, there would be something in that week's newspapers which was symptomatic.

In the campaign-finance scandal, one can watch the culture slowly waking up. Before the election, it was virtually only William Safire who had the audacity to intimate a corrupt "Asian connection"; then other journalists joined in as ever more instances of corruption were brought to light; but political commentators are baffled, and somewhat irritated, that—to this date, at least—President Clinton's standing in the polls has not been dented. Of course, that may well change. But so far, Clinton can still stand before the nation and do his bring-us-all-together, focus-on-the-larger-issues shtick; he can even righteously call for campaign-finance reform; and, though he drives Maureen Dowd wild, he can, for the moment at least, get away with it. How come? Basically, the public feels it *already knows* that campaign finance is corrupt. The public attitude so far has been: so what's new? Here we can see how the stance of "already knowing" functions as a defense: if you already know, you do not need to find out. And Clinton is masterful in exploiting this defense. It is often thought that we have *discovered* that Clinton is a bit of a con man, but this cannot be the whole truth. Clinton *presents himself* as a bit of a con man—and this is enormously reassuring. For if *he* is willing to let us know that he's conning us, then, in an odd sort of way, he emerges as trustworthy: we can *count on him* to engage in a bit of sleaze when our backs are turned. And when some bit of sleaze does emerge, the public has a sense of "already knowing" he was up to some such thing. And I suspect the Clinton campaign thought it could get away with its dubious fundraising because it knew that the public "already knew"—and thus wouldn't care.

If this defense is going to collapse, it will be around anxious intimations that we don't "already know." Here are two places where one can see anxiety starting to break through: First, in the idea that this is an *Asian* connection. For beneath the legitimate surface concerns that a foreign country may have been trying to affect electoral outcome, there is the cultural phantasy of the inscrutable Oriental. And this image has its own *phantastic a priori*: it's built into the very idea of the Inscrutable Oriental that we couldn't possibly "already know" what they are up to. That's what it is to be inscrutable. And

that's why Clinton's blanket reassurance—you know me, I'm just an honest con man, trying to get by—can't possibly extend to cover an Asian connection. A priori, we cannot possibly “already know” the inner workings of an Asian connection: this is part of the logic of the inscrutable.¹

The second moment of anxiety comes in the revelation of an active disruption in the flow of knowledge between the FBI and the White House. FBI agents informed two lower-level members of the National Security Council of an investigation into an Asian connection, but told them not to inform anyone higher up. Here the public cannot possibly assume it “already knows” what is going on: for this is a scenario which dramatizes *not* already knowing. No one can say with any confidence who “already knows” what is going on—indeed, if there is anyone who “already knows.” This has to provoke anxiety and fascination that the order of knowingness has been disrupted.

Here I am reminded of that rapidly receding moment of public fascination with Dick Morris' adultery. The moment passed quickly—Morris was able to command a two-million-dollar advance yet not able to sell any books—but, still, it is worth thinking about why there was any moment at all. On its own, the idea that a political consultant holed up in a Washington hotel suite, with his wife tucked safely away in Connecticut, should have an affair with a prostitute is hardly news. It can almost be deduced a priori from the idea of a political consultant. On its own, it is one big yawn. What fascinated press and public was that in this incident there was confusion as to who was already in the know. The prostitute was not merely a prostitute; she was a prostitute keeping a secret diary. Even before her toes dried, the incident was being recorded unbeknownst to a man whose job it is to be in the know. And, of course, the political consultant was keeping his own diary, unbeknownst to the president he was supposedly serving. And the president ... well, who knows? It seemed as though there were unplumbable depths of broken trusts. And the established order of knowingness was disturbed in countless ways.

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Now when the order of knowingness is undisturbed—when the culture can rest in its phantasy of “already knowing”—there is a widespread sense of boredom and irritation. One has only to read the political columns in the newspapers leading up to the last election: columnists registered crescendos of frustration that this was a campaign designed so that there should be no surprises.² What bothered the commentators, I suspect, was a sense that their boredom was the product of a successful campaign.

But if journalists are bored silly by already being in the know, hell hath no fury like journalists who discover they are not. Here is one delicious symptom. In 1995 Random House published *Primary Colors*, a political novel about a southern governor's campaign for president. The novel, whose author was Anonymous, shot to the top of the best-seller list, and there was much fascinated speculation about who Anonymous might be. Anonymous even wrote an essay for the *New York Times Book Review* explaining why he or she had decided to be and to remain anonymous. In the winter of 1996, *New York Magazine* published an article by an English professor at Vassar claiming that, on the basis of linguistic analysis, Anonymous must be the political commentator Joe Klein. Klein energetically denied the charge until the summer, when the *Washington Post* ran a story saying that the handwritten corrections on a galley proof of *Primary Colors* matched Klein's handwriting. He then 'fessed up.

The immediate result was a firestorm of moralizing denunciation in the press. The *New York Times*, for example, deemed it fit to run a major editorial on the subject titled "The Color of Mendacity." Here is a selection from that editorial:

it is shameless of Mr. Klein to excuse his falsehoods as similar to the protection of confidential sources. "There are times," he said, "when I've had to lie to protect a source, and I put that in this category."

In fact, principled journalists do not lie to protect sources. They rely on constitutional and statutory guarantees of journalistic privilege. Scores of reporters have maintained silence, sometimes to the point of going to jail, and their publications have spent a lot of money to defend the confidentiality guarantee in court. But they do so without lying. To try to stretch a noble doctrine to excuse a duplicitous book-selling scheme is irresponsible and disreputable ...

Mr. Klein wants his colleagues to view his actions as a diverting and highly profitable whimsy. But he has held a prominent role in his generation of political journalists. For that reason, people interested in preserving the core values of serious journalism have to view his actions and words as corrupt and—if they become an example to others—corrupting.³

Strong words. Strong feelings. But they don't altogether make sense. I have no interest in defending Mr. Klein, and there is no doubt that Mr. Klein did not handle the whole situation well, but I find this reaction startling. First,

we may want to make it a tautology that “principled journalists do not lie to protect sources,” but this pompous moralizing covers over a wealth of complex relations which journalists regularly maintain with the truth. Of course, there are a handful of cases in which a journalist went to court, and even to jail, to protect the confidentiality of a source. But in the world of political journalism, it is a commonplace that not only can politicians, advisers, lobbyists speak to journalists “off the record,” but the very fact that they have had “off-the-record” conversations, “deep background” briefings, and so on is itself kept “off the record.” As a result, stories regularly appear which look as though they are a general surveying of the political scene when in fact they are a reaction to and outgrowth of a few privileged conversations. This is a form of misleading the reader about sources which everyone knows about and few mind. It is an everyday form of deception which the *New York Times* tolerates, if not encourages.

But, second, when Mr. Klein lied it was not about any journalistic fact, source, or story, but as an expression of his desire to protect his anonymity as the author of a novel. Why should we expect an author who publishes a book anonymously and who writes an essay explaining his desire to protect his privacy to tell the truth when he is asked about his authorship? From what pulpit can one so *clearly* see that the public’s right to know, or a journalist’s right to a straight answer from a fellow journalist, always trumps the right to privacy? In normal social life, we recognize that if we don’t want our friends and neighbors to lie to us, there are certain questions we just don’t ask. By and large, we don’t ask people how much money they earn or whether they have satisfying sex lives. And there is only one person in the country about whom we feel we have the right to ask whether he is having an affair: the president of the United States. (Incidentally, I have been told that a number of Mr. Klein’s friends refrained from asking him whether he was Anonymous because they didn’t want to put him in the embarrassing position of having to lie to them.)

Suppose Mr. Klein had added a prefatory remark to his book: “Because I want to protect my privacy I have decided to publish this book anonymously. This has the unfortunate consequence that should you ask me directly about it, I shall have to lie. I am sorry about that, but one solution is: don’t ask!” Would *that* have made everything all right? And, implicitly, isn’t that what he *did* do, by publishing the book anonymously?

I mention this example because I think that the moral outrage about Joe Klein’s lie is serving as a rationalizing defense, hiding emotions that are less well understood. If boredom and irritation accompany the claim to already know, the violation of the presumption to already know is met with moralizing fury. It seems almost as though a taboo has been violated.

Of course, these examples are anecdotal and by themselves prove nothing, but if you look around for yourselves I think you will see that other examples abound.⁴

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I hope enough has been said to suggest to you that there is something funny going on with “knowingness” in the culture, something we do not understand very well. With this puzzlement in mind, I think we can go back and read *Oedipus Tyrannus* as the fundamental myth of knowingness. Before offering an interpretation, I should like to make two preliminary remarks.

First, a word of warning. It is a symptom of our age that there is what one might call *the fundamental transference-trap of interpretation*. This manifests itself as a sense that, in offering an interpretation, there is no escape from making one of two choices: either one presents oneself as offering the real truth, about Oedipus, say; *or* one says that one’s interpretation is one among many good-enough interpretations. On the first choice, one is forced to imitate Oedipus, and pretend to guess and reveal the secret of the text. Shrinking from that absurd fate, one feels compelled to adopt a wishy-washy relativism, and try to put a brave or playful face on it. Must life be so impoverished? Obviously, I think the answer is no. The sense that this is our only choice should show us that we are living in a constricted universe of possibilities. The interpretation which follows should be thought of as falling on neither side of this false dichotomy. The point is neither to reveal the hidden secret of Oedipus nor to add one more interpretation to the good-enough pile, but to invite one to see something which is right there in the text.

Second, it might help to open up the space of interpretation if we begin, in true oedipal fashion, by killing off Freud’s Oedipus. We cannot begin to appreciate the meaning of Oedipus if we continue to think that Oedipus was oedipal.⁵ According to Freud, Oedipus acts out unconscious childhood wishes which we all share—to possess one parent and get rid of the other. And the fact that we all have such wishes accounts for the deep resonance the play has for us—according to Freud.⁶ The proper response to this reading is embarrassingly simple: there is no evidence for it. Oedipus does kill his father, marry his mother, and have children with her. But none of this can be used to support Freud’s reading; these are the facts his account is supposed to explain. Freud needs to show that these events occur *because* Oedipus has oedipal wishes. Not only does Freud make no effort to do so—he simply points to the Oedipus myth—there are in the text no hints of oedipal wishes. Of course, if one is already convinced of the oedipal reading of the Oedipus myth, one will see the entire play as providing evidence. And

it will seem satisfactory simply to point to the play. However, as soon as one takes one skeptical step backward and asks the question “How do we know that in acting this way Oedipus is acting out *oedipal* phantasies, as opposed to some other phantasy?” one comes to see that the surface evidence of the text points in another direction.

This in no way counts against the psychological reality of the oedipus complex; just the opposite. It is precisely because the oedipal configuration is so prominent in so many that it has been possible for a generation of readers to see Oedipus as oedipal. And it is a virtue of Freud’s account that it attempts to explain why the drama continues to move us.

People tend to be at their most parochial when they speculate about the human condition. For it is here that they challenge themselves to wander over all of human being, and in the effort make it clear how incapable they are of doing so. Freud thought he had found something universal about the human condition, and he took it as evidence in favor that the same universal could be found back in Sophocles’ play. But Freud assumes that this universal is *psychological*—a configuration of wishes *inside the psyche*—and he here shows himself to be a child of the modern world. For Sophocles, “the human condition” did not point inevitably to the human psyche, but to the objective conditions in which humans had to live. It is the human condition to have to live out a fate. And—at least, from the ancient tragic perspective—fate is part of the basic fabric of the world. It is taken to be as fundamental an aspect of the world as we take gravity to be—only, unlike gravity, fate is impossible to defy. Sophocles was wrong that fate is basic to the world, Freud was wrong that the oedipus complex is a psychological universal, and I do not intend to enter a mug’s game of trying to come up with some other candidate for the human condition. Rather, there are certain themes in the Oedipus drama which reverberate with our age, and we would do well to listen to them.

Oedipus is not the king. He is *the tyrant*. This is a crucial distinction. It is reflected in Sophocles’ title *Oedipus Tyrannus*, and it is flattened in the Latin translation *Oedipus Rex*, and then in the English *Oedipus the King*. For Oedipus to be king, he and the Theban citizens would have to understand that he is the son and heir of King Laius. His claim to the throne would then *run through his blood*. The actual claim he makes on the throne *runs through his mind*. It is he who solved the riddle of the Sphinx and saved Thebes from disaster. Thebes lacked a king, and they thought there was no heir, so the citizens made Oedipus tyrant by acclamation. The king is dead! Long live the tyrant! For the ancient Greeks, “tyrant” did not only have the negative meaning it has for us today; it also referred to a leader who did not inherit the throne along traditional bloodlines.⁷ In the case of Oedipus, the fact that he is tyrant means that he comes as close as was possible in ancient Thebes

to being its democratically elected leader. And he gains his position on the basis of his achievements—of *what he does*—rather than on the basis of any given sense of *who he is*. In the modern world, the very idea of an inherited claim to rule has fallen into disrepute—though when one observes the public fascination with JFK Jr. one can see that though the cultural superego disapproves of the *idea*, the impulse is still there. In ancient Thebes, the idea had not been challenged, but Thebes had nevertheless been thrown into a proto-modern situation: it had to devise some *other* form of legitimate rule. The riddle of political legitimacy is more puzzling than the riddle of the Sphinx, but Oedipus solves both for the Thebans at one blow: in solving the riddle of the Sphinx, Oedipus becomes Thebes's savior. There is no further question of who should rule.

Oedipus' legitimacy flows from success. Oedipus solidifies his position by marrying the queen and having children by her, but, at bottom, everyone knows that his only real claim on the Thebans is his ability to protect them. And so, when, a generation later, Thebes is struck with miasma, it is only natural that the citizens should turn to him, "the first of men, both in the incidents of life and in dealing with the higher powers" (lines 33–34).⁸ Now, the only evidence of divine favor is his practical success. It is not as though prophets have come forward saying the gods have ordained that Oedipus should rule; nor have the oracles been properly consulted to determine whether it is a good idea for Oedipus to marry the queen and assume the throne. In effect, the Thebans have taken practical success to be a sign of divine favor. They *think* there are two conditions which make Oedipus first among men—worldly success and divine favor—but there is only one. Should Oedipus start to flub the incidents of life, there is no way he could say, "Well, yes, but I'm *still* first in dealing with the higher powers."

Oedipus is clearer about this than are the citizens of Thebes. When he gets into a quarrel with the prophet Tiresias, he says angrily:

Why, come tell me, how can you be a true prophet? Why when the versifying hound was here did you not speak some word that could release the citizens? Indeed, her riddle was not one for the first comer to explain! It required prophetic skill, and you were exposed as having no knowledge from the birds or from the gods. No, it was I that came, Oedipus who knew nothing, and put a stop to her; *I hit the mark by native wit, not by what I learned from birds.* (390–398; emphasis added)

Oedipus takes his success with the Sphinx to rest entirely on his ability to think things through. He accepts the responsibility as well as the praise: for

Oedipus, his triumph has sprung full-grown from his own mind. But if his mind is the source of his legitimacy, that inevitably puts him in a delicate position, for he has nothing else to fall back on other than his own resources. So when the citizens of Thebes make this plea, "Best of living men, raise up the polis!" (49), there is an implicit "or else." Oedipus' position rests on his ability to deliver Thebans from harm. Much has been made of Oedipus' steadfast determination to solve the riddle of the miasma, as though it reveals his strength of character—and it may well do so. But it is also true that if he cannot do so, he has little other claim on them.

More than any other figure in the ancient world, Oedipus is the self-made man. At birth he is abandoned by his parents, given to a shepherd to be exposed to die on a mountain. Later he abandons what he (mistakenly) takes to be his natural family, social position, and inherited claim to the throne in Corinth, and, through solving the Sphinx's riddle, he thinks his way into a new family, new social position, new throne. The very first word of the play reveals how far Oedipus thinks his mind can go in creating the world around him. "Children!" Oedipus addresses the suppliants assembled in front of the palace. Oedipus has made them into his "children" by becoming tyrant of Thebes; he has made the polis into his family. From Sophocles' perspective, of course, this is outrageous impiety: the family is part of the natural order, a sacred unit, and it is hubristic idiocy to assume one can simply make one, like an artifact. But looking back from this perspective, Oedipus looks like an intimation of postmodernity, refusing to take any category, even the family, as simply given. The bitter irony, of course, is that, unbeknownst to him or the Thebans, these are his "children," the polis *is* his family: Oedipus ought to be recognized as the king, the blood ruler, not merely as the tyrant he and the citizens take him to be. As it is, Oedipus, with some plausibility, takes himself to have got where he is by the clever use of human reason.

Oedipus also displays a "knowingness" eerily reminiscent of contemporary culture's demand to already know. When Oedipus asks a question, he takes himself to know the answer. So, for example, when Oedipus asks his "children" why they have come, and they describe the miasma which has overcome the city, he says, "I am not ignorant of the desires with which you have come; yes, I know that you are all sick" (59–61). He expected their plea and has already sent his brother-in-law, Creon, to Delphi to consult the oracle. But there is a sickness in this "knowingness": reason is being used to jump ahead to a conclusion, as though there is too much anxiety involved in simply asking a question and waiting for the world to answer. On the few occasions when someone challenges Oedipus' claim to already know—the prophet Tiresias, Creon, and the Messenger—Oedipus explodes with anger and suspicion.

Consider the dustup with Tiresias. Creon returns with the message that the murderer of Laius is alive and well in Thebes, and that until he is found and expelled, there will be pollution in the city. A practical task has now been set. The prophet has been summoned for help, but he will not speak. "You will find it easier to bear your fate and I mine," he says to Oedipus, "if you do as I say" (320–321). A puzzling remark; but instead of following the advice or inquiring into its meaning, Oedipus explodes. There is, for Oedipus, no imaginative space to envisage the situation as anything other than a practical problem; and, as they say, if you're not part of the solution, you're part of the problem. Tiresias is blocking his way, refusing to let him "knowingly" leap to a practical conclusion. Oedipus interprets it as an aggressive act and strikes a retaliatory blow: "I am so angry that I will leave unsaid nothing of what I understand!" (345). In other words, anger breaks down Oedipus' inhibition—and what pours forth is a paranoid delusion that Tiresias himself had a hand in the murder and then conspired with Creon, for mercenary reasons, to blame Oedipus. Nothing could be more absurd than to charge this otherworldly prophet with such crass and mundane motives, but Oedipus finds his own phantastic way of leaping to this conclusion anyway. *Inside* Oedipus' phantasy, the charge looks reasonable: so not only can Oedipus feel righteous in his anger; he can also attack the challenge to his claim to already know.⁹

But whatever Oedipus *says* about his *reason* for anger, what he *puts on display* is the same movement of soul which led him to kill his father. Laius blocked his physical path to Thebes, Tiresias blocks his mental path to a conclusion, and in each case Oedipus strikes a retaliatory blow. In his attack on Tiresias, Oedipus *acts out* the murder of his father even as he inquires into it. On each of these occasions, he is under so much pressure to get to his conclusion that there is no time to grasp the full meaning of what he is doing.

Here we can see one way in which the determination to know can be used to obscure any possibility of finding out. Oedipus does not have to inquire into Tiresias' silence, because he already knows. And what he purportedly knows is that Tiresias is a fraud. There is no room within this delusion to see Tiresias as a vehicle of a meaning he doesn't yet grasp, no room for the possibility that the world is different from what he takes it to be. The delusion turns Tiresias into a "crafty beggar, who has sight only when it comes to profit" (388): it paints him not only with base, but with *mundane* motives. The space of inquiry has collapsed, it has imploded into one point: that which Oedipus, in his "knowingness," takes himself already to know. And there is no place for a challenge to Oedipus' "reasonableness" to take hold. Oedipus admits as much himself. Creon pleads with Oedipus to hear him out, and to think about how unreasonable the conspiracy charge

laid against him is. Oedipus responds: “I am a poor listener to you, for I have found you to be a bitter enemy to me” (545). Because he has already “figured out” that Creon is part of the conspiracy, Oedipus doesn’t have to listen to what he says.

Even when he isn’t angry, there is a flatness in his reasoning. With the Sphinx, Oedipus may have “hit the mark by native wit,” but he didn’t understand it. He treats the Sphinx’s riddle as a straightforward puzzle—though one in which the stakes are very high (as though it were set by an archvillain)—ignoring any sacred dimension or oracular meaning which would require interpretation. And he therefore fails to see that if “human” is the solution to the riddle, *he is not part of the solution*. The Sphinx had famously asked: “What walks on four legs in the morning, two legs in the afternoon, and three legs in the evening?” But Oedipus walked on three legs in the morning (because his legs were pinned together), limped in the afternoon, and walked on four legs in the evening (blind, he is led by his daughter Antigone). Oedipus is someone who can jump to the conclusion of a riddle and still not get it. If he grasped the riddle’s irony, he would recognize that he is a perversion of “human.”

Consider Oedipus’ own account of how he got to Thebes. As he explains to his wife, Iocaste, Oedipus was brought up in Corinth, the son of King Polybus and Merope. He was “the greatest of citizens” until this chance occurrence: at a dinner party a drunk told him he was not his father’s child.

I was riled, and for that day scarcely controlled myself; and on the next I went to my mother and my father and questioned them; and they made the man who had let slip the word pay dearly for the insult. So far as concerned them I was comforted, but still this continued to vex me, since it constantly recurred to me. Without the knowledge of my mother and my father I went to Pytho, and Phoebus sent me away cheated of what I had come for, but came out with other things terrible and sad for my unhappy self, saying that I was destined to lie with my mother, and to show to mortals a brood they could not bear to look on, and I should be the murderer of my father who had begotten me.

When I heard this, I left the land of Corinth, henceforth making out its position by the stars, and went where I could never see accomplished the shameful predictions of my cruel oracles. And I will tell you the truth, lady! When I was walking near this meeting of three roads, I was met by a herald and a man riding in a wagon, such as you describe; and the leader and the old man himself tried to drive me from the road by force. In anger I struck the driver,

the man who was trying to turn me back; and when the old man saw it, he waited till I was passing his chariot and struck me right on the head with his double-pointed goad. Yet he paid the penalty with interest; in a word, this hand struck him with a stick, and he rolled backwards right out of the wagon, and I killed them all. But if this foreigner had any tie with Laius, who could be more miserable, and who more hateful to the gods, than I. (779–816; emphasis added)

In other words, Oedipus goes to Delphi because he is troubled by remarks impugning his parentage, but as soon as he hears the oracle he treats it as a simple fact that Polybus and Merope are his parents.

I have daydreamed about meeting Oedipus on the road from Delphi to Thebes. Somehow I am able to avoid his blows, and I get to ask him this question: “Given that you went to Delphi because you were troubled by a remark that Polybus wasn’t really your father, why do you respond to the oracle by fleeing Corinth?” Oedipus can give no coherent answer. If he wasn’t troubled about who his father was, he had no reason to go to the Delphic oracle; if he was troubled, he shouldn’t simply have assumed that Polybus was his father. Note that his acts are incoherent not only from our point of view; they are incoherent from what would be his point of view, if only he could focus on the problem. Oedipus is suffering *reflexive breakdown*: he cannot give a coherent account of what he is doing. But he can’t focus on the breakdown—and thus remains unconscious of it—because he is too busy thinking. He assumes he *already knows* what the problem is; the only issue is how to avoid it. What he misses completely is the thought that his “knowingness” lies at the heart of his troubles: what he doesn’t know is that he doesn’t know.

When Oedipus hears the oracle, he has no reason to move in any direction at all. But he assumes he already knows the geography of his sorrow: where in physical space his troubles are located and where he can get away from them. Oedipus decides to flee Corinth as a strategy for evading the oracle. Of course, from an ancient Greek perspective, it is absurd for Oedipus to think that if he just plays his cards right, he can avoid his fate. But Oedipus remains a haunting figure *for us* because, for a moment at least, his thinking propels him out of that ancient outlook. And into disaster.

What Oedipus *does* have reason to do is to avoid killing any older man and to avoid having sexual intercourse with any older woman. Of course, the first thing he does on hearing the oracle is to kill a man, old enough to be his father, who looks a lot like him.¹⁰ He then goes directly to Thebes—“without passing go”—a state in which the king has recently and

mysteriously gone missing—it is not even known whether he is dead—and he takes in marriage the *possibly* widowed queen, a woman old enough to be his mother, a woman who does not know what happened to her previous husband, a woman who cannot give a full account of what happened to all of her children. If Oedipus wants to avoid his fate, he's certainly off to a good start! Oedipus' acts are so ridiculous that, were his fate not horrific, this would be the stuff of a hilarious comedy.¹¹

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I do not intend to second-guess Oedipus. It is fatuous to speculate what Oedipus might have done instead. Oedipus is a fictional character, and in the ancient Greek world from which he sprung, there was no such thing as escaping one's fate. Insofar as there is something Oedipus might have done, but didn't, that something wouldn't have led him out of his fate; insofar as there is something which would have blocked fate, that something was not a real option for Oedipus.¹² The point, however, is not to give Oedipus retrospective advice, but to lay out the drama of Oedipus so that we might learn something about ourselves. After all, we do not take ourselves to inhabit a world inexorably ruled by fate. So if we feel some resonances of Oedipus in ourselves, even if *Oedipus* couldn't have done other than he did, *we* may be able to.

So when we ask “Where does Oedipus' ‘knowingness’ come from?” we are not trying to psychoanalyze Oedipus—as though he were one of our acquaintances whose motives we were trying to figure out—but to trace a certain movement in the human soul whose outcome is a “knowing” stance with respect to the world. Sophocles is offering a diagnosis of “knowingness”: both a critique of its thinness as a way of being in the world, and an account of how it comes to take over a culture. And insofar as this “knowingness” presents itself as reason, Oedipus the tyrant becomes—as Plato long ago recognized—Oedipus tyrannized—tyrannized by what *he* takes to be the reasonable movement of his own mind.

Oedipus Tyrannus is a tale of abandonment. Oedipus is abandoned by his parents, and in response he abandons himself to thinking. *He thinks with abandon*. If Descartes ushers in the modern world with the dictum “I think, therefore I am,” Oedipus offers this anticipation: “I am abandoned, therefore I think.” He acts as though thinking could compensate him for his loss, but since there can be no compensation, the thinking has to become so enthusiastic, and so thin, that it blinds him to any recognition of loss. Thus “knowingness” comes into the world. The powers of the human mind are glorified at just the moment when it becomes too painful to recognize that

the mind cannot do all that we would wish. In this sense, Sophocles is offering a critique of *impure* reason—which is all he thought human reason could ever be.

Aside from the fact of Oedipus' abandonment, there is much evidence in the play that this is a big deal for *Oedipus*. We have already seen that one drunk's remark—which anyone else would have taken as seriously as "your mother fucks slaves"—leaves Oedipus with troubling and repetitive thoughts. His reaction is startling. It is one thing to be contemptuous of a drunk's appalling behavior; it is quite another to lose control of one's thoughts and emotions, to leave home never to return. Oedipus here *acts out* his abandonment. Just as the infant Oedipus was expelled from home and state in order to be exposed to his fate on a mountainside, Oedipus the young man expels himself from home and state and exposes himself to his fate by going to Delphi.¹³ From there, as we have seen, he reasons his way into incoherence and disaster.

Of course, for Oedipus to have recognized his abandonment, all he had to do was look down. The wounds through his ankles emblazon abandonment in his every step. But the wounds are too painful—psychologically, if not physically—to think about. When, just before the dénouement, the Messenger brings them to his attention, Oedipus says, "Ah, why do you remind me of that ancient grief?" (1033). He calls it "a dreadful brand of shame that I had from my cradle" (1035). And he is indeed *branded*: as the Messenger explains to him, "it was from that occurrence that you got the name you bear" (1036). All Oedipus had to do was to think about the meaning of his name, wonder why anyone would have named him *that* and looked down at his feet. He would have been en route to discovering who he was.

Instead Oedipus displays a stunning lack of curiosity. He is able to go through life with a name which describes an all-too-suspicious wound without pursuing the thought that the meaning of the name might have something to do with him. That is, he uses the naming function of names defensively, to ignore the meaning of his name. Suppose your name were Abandoned Smith. Would you be able to get through life treating your name as just a name, without a serious wonder whether it had descriptive import for you? And when Oedipus, as a young man on the run, arrives in Thebes, he is remarkably incurious about the missing king. Oedipus marries Iocaste, assumes the throne, has four children with her, and raises them to young adulthood. Only then, when the polis is struck with miasma and the Delphic oracle says that Laius' murderer is in the state and must be expelled, does Oedipus seriously inquire into the fate of his predecessor (102–131). "How long is it now since Laius ... vanished from sight by a deadly stroke?" he asks

(558–560). Does it make sense that Oedipus should be asking this question about twenty years after the event?¹⁴

If there is evidence in the text of Oedipus' phantasies, they are not oedipal, but phantasies of lowly birth. Oedipus is worried that the drunk's taunt is true, that his mother *did* have sexual relations with a slave—that he is the offspring and *that* is why he was abandoned. When Iocaste begs Oedipus to cease his inquiries, he responds, “Do not worry! Even if I prove to be the offspring of three generations of slaves, you will not be shown to be lowborn!” (1062–63). And as she rushes from the stage, Oedipus interprets this as a flight from the recognition of his base origins. “Leave her to take pride in her noble family!” he says bitterly (1070)—and he defiantly concludes (1076–85):

May whatever burst forth! Even if it is lowly, I desire to learn my origin; but she, for she is proud in woman's fashion, is perhaps ashamed of my low birth. But I regard myself as child of good fortune, and shall not be dishonored. She is my mother; and the months that are my kin have determined my smallness and my greatness. With such a parent, I could never turn out another kind of person, so as not to learn what was my birth.

In the same breath in which he vows to uncover the circumstances of his birth, he declares that, really, he is the child of fortune. On the surface, he is saying that fortune has made him into the kind of person who must find out the truth. But just below the surface is the claim that he owes his real identity to fortune—she is the true mother—so anything he might find out about his biological mother could only have secondary significance. The claim to already know pervades the search to find out.

Oedipus takes the same “knowing” stance with respect to the oracles. As soon as he hears an oracle, he assumes he already knows what it means. So, when Creon comes back from Delphi, he treats the oracle merely as information for practical reason to take into account. This is just the way he treated his own oracle: if he is fated to kill his father, he'd better steer clear of Corinth. Indeed, Oedipus takes the oracle to have “cheated” him, because it did not directly answer his question. And in response Oedipus tries to use his own practical reason to “cheat” his fate. Of course, from Sophocles' point of view, all of this is outrageous impiety: oracles are vehicles of sacred meaning, which are necessarily opaque to human reason. For Oedipus, by contrast, the sacred is treated as a simple extension of the domain of practical reason. The oracle is treated like a hot tip from a very good source.

Oedipus is living a life which denies the possibility of tragedy. He cannot recognize any dimension of meaning other than the one he already knows. It's fine, he thinks, to consult oracles and prophets if they can give useful advice; otherwise they're worse than useless. His way of life shows that he does not take seriously the idea that there may be meaning opaque to human understanding. He even says as much.

When he hears the news of Polybus' death from old age, he says to Iocaste: "Ah, ah, lady, why should one look to the prophetic hearth of Pytho, or to the birds that shriek above us, according to whose message I was to kill my father? ... Polybus lies in Hades, and with him have gone the oracles that were with us, now worth nothing" (963–972). Of course, from a religious perspective, this news could not possibly count against the oracle: it would have to signify that the oracle was somehow not understood and required further interpretation. Oedipus draws the opposite lesson: that there is no point to the activity of interpretation. No sooner does he hear the news than he already knows its significance. In short, Oedipus' confidence in his powers of practical reason shields him from recognition of another realm meaning—and, thus, Oedipus cannot recognize the possibility of tragedy until he is overwhelmed by it.

It has sometimes been claimed that Oedipus is the first philosopher: because of his determination to find out the truth, because of his reliance on human reason in his pursuit, and because he abjures mysticism and obscurantism.¹⁵ But this misses the point. Philosophy, Aristotle says, begins in wonder, or awe. If so, Oedipus cannot get started: he is too busy figuring things out to have any such experience. He is too busy thinking to experience the terror of abandonment, the awe of fate. One may well ask: is that why Oedipus is thinking so hard? Philosophy becomes impossible because the originating act of wonder is too terrible. What takes its place is ersatz: a thin "pragmatism" which purports to offer a solution to any problem. Within this pragmatic outlook, every problem does look solvable. Even the miasma can be attacked "by careful thought" (67). The joker in this deck is that in seeing the miasma as a practical problem, Oedipus remains blind to its divine meaning. Oedipus' practical reason can solve every problem, because it cannot see the problems it cannot solve. They are so meaningless, they cannot even be formulated: thus even dismissal becomes impossible.¹⁶ Oedipus is not the first philosopher; he is the first ersatz-philosopher.

* * *

For Sophocles, the point of this tragedy is to beat the audience into submission. The strategy is simple. In the Sophoclean universe there are only

two possibilities: *either* one relies rigidly on human reason *or* one submits to a divine realm. In neither position is there room for philosophy, that peculiarly thoughtful response to awe. Before the catharsis, awe is impossible because, like Oedipus, one “already knows”; in the catharsis, one experiences awe, but submission is built in. The tragedy is meant to terrify us out of self-confidence and into religiosity.

It’s an emotional one–two punch. First, the audience is softened up with pity. We can feel compassion for Oedipus because he is so human: we can see ourselves reflected in his puffed-up self-importance. But pity also requires a sense of distance. We can see the absurdity in Oedipus’ movement of thought, in a way which he cannot. That is one reason why an audience is able to take pleasure in watching a tragedy performed onstage. On the face of it, one might wonder why anybody would want to see the portrayal of human disaster. One reason may be that humans simply enjoy watching dramas of other people being destroyed; but there is also a deeper reason. When we pity Oedipus, we can indulge the illusion that we know how things *really* are. It is *Oedipus*, not we, who is stuck with the partial and distorted perspective. Being in the audience, it is as though we are looking on the world from an absolute perspective.

Then comes the second punch. There comes a moment when we recognize that our pity rests on illusion, the illusion that we know absolutely. But we don’t. On this occasion we may well be right that Oedipus is making some disastrous mistakes in his thinking and in his emotional life, but overall we are not fundamentally better off than he is. We each must rely on our own sense of what is reasonable and unreasonable. We can, of course, test our views against those of others, but, then, so can Oedipus! There is always the possibility that our “tests” are as distorted as the views we are trying to test. Of course, this does not mean that anything goes, that one test is as good or as bad as another; nor does it mean that there are no practical steps we can take to test our thoughts and emotions. But it does mean we have to give up the illusion of an absolutely independent perspective from which to check how well our reasoning is going—and this should encourage a certain humility. The luxurious sense of distance required for pity vanishes. And fear becomes real. Precisely because of our humanity, we too may bring down catastrophe.

But there is a crucial difference between the Athenian audience for whom this play was written and ourselves: catharsis has become impossible. The Athenian audience was able to experience what Aristotle called “a catharsis through pity and fear.” Tragic fear purged the narcissistic temptation to make inflated claims for humanity, but *only* because the audience had a well-worn path of retreat—to religious awe. For fifth-century

Athenians, tragic consciousness consisted in the recognition that humans lived their lives in the intersection of two realms of meaning, one human, the other divine and opaque. These divine meanings had profound, sometimes catastrophic, consequences for humans, but these meanings were all but humanly incomprehensible.¹⁷ In other words, tragic consciousness takes human life to be powerfully affected by unconscious meaning. For the Greeks those meanings were part of the basic order of the universe—the gods were on Olympus, fate was embedded in the natural order. Formally, this is the same structure as Freud's topographical model, though Freud continues a tradition which begins with Plato of placing this other realm of meaning inside the human psyche. What the Greek poets took to be the castrations and devourings of the gods, Plato took to be artistic representations of lawless, unconscious desires. But this is a difference which makes all the difference.

Catharsis was possible for the Athenian audience because there is relief in submission. Oedipus was abandoned by his parents, but he and his audience were surrounded by the gods. And there is profound comfort in being able to move almost automatically from hubristic overconfidence in human "knowingness" into humble religious submission. But for us that path is blocked. There is no obvious retreat from "knowingness," for there is nothing clear to submit to. We have been abandoned by our parents *and abandoned by the gods*. Since the Enlightenment, modernity has constituted itself around the idea that there are no categories which are simply given—that even the most basic categories like fate, family, nation must be legitimated before the tribunal of human reason, and cannot simply be handed down as part of the basic moral order of the universe. There seem to be no fixed categories which are simply handed down from beyond. There seem to be no meanings to our lives, no values, which are exempt from our critical scrutiny. This is what Nietzsche meant when he had his madman proclaim that God is dead.¹⁸ How can there be relief when everything is up to us? We seem thus to be trapped in the Oedipal position of "knowingness," with no place to go.

That is one reason, I suspect, we hold on to "knowingness" in spite of our boredom and irritation with it: the "alternative," if there is one, is nameless. This, I think, is one of the more profound reasons that Freud-bashing has recently become so popular in our culture. Of course there are other reasons, some of them good ones: a reaction against a previous hagiography of Freud and inflated claims for psychoanalysis; the demand for cheaper and more biochemical forms of treatment; and so on. But it is striking that none of the Freud-bashers tries to give an account of the fundamental human phenomenon to which all of psychoanalysis is a

response: the fact of motivated irrationality. Humans regularly behave in ways they do not well understand, which cause pain to themselves and others, which violate their best understanding of what they want and what they care about. And yet, for all of that, there is, as Shakespeare put it, method in their madness. These behaviors are not simply meaningless intrusions into ordinary life: they express some motivational state, they have a “logic” of their own. Once you recognize the phenomenon of motivated irrationality, you are committed to there being some form of unconscious meaning. This is a fact which is recognized by Plato and Aristotle, by Augustine, Shakespeare, Proust, and Nietzsche. Freud’s originality lies only in the systematic ways he worked out this fundamental idea.

Freud-bashers act as though once they have killed Freud, they have no further problem: as though there were no such thing as unconscious meaning which needs to be accounted for. In this way, Freud-bashers are like latter-day Oedipuses, blind to the realm of unconscious meaning, confident that any real human problem can be both posed and solved by the transparent use of practical reason. We can, as Oedipus put it, “hit the mark by native wit,” not by what we learn from the birds. In short, Freud-bashing retraces Oedipus’ steps, partaking of a manic, Enlightenment defense which does not even acknowledge the problem which psychoanalysis sets out to address.

But this manic defense is collapsing even as I speak. The movement from modern to postmodern consciousness can, I think, be seen as a recreation of the oedipal drama, but without any fixed denouement. Modernity constituted itself with a manic, oedipal defense: even though the gods have left, human reason can take their place. The human mind can create and legitimate all it needs or should want. That is, in response to abandonment, Enlightenment consciousness abandons itself to thinking. One might view the postmodern consciousness as originating in the collapse of this defense. No matter how strident the Freud-bashers, no matter how insistently the culture clings to its “knowingness” and its boredom, oedipal confidence is breaking up before our eyes. Of course, one response to this collapse is pathetic, not tragic: the attempted flight back to postmodern, fundamentalist forms of religious engagement. Another response is the playful, even mischievous, breaking up of traditional forms which one finds in so much postmodern literature, art, and philosophy. Tragedy begins with the recognition that neither response will work for long: that flight is not possible, that breaking up past orthodoxy is itself a defense which will eventually collapse. It is in such intimations that ancient Oedipus, Oedipus the tyrant, still has the power to reverberate deeply in our souls.

NOTES

1. There is another fantasy about Asians which is significant: that they are going to engulf us. They will engulf us by sheer numbers—as Secretary of State Dean Rusk intimated in the early 1960s with his classic “a billion Chinese by ...”—or the Japanese will engulf us by taking over our economy, taking over Hollywood, taking over Rockefeller Center, and so on.

2. For example, on election day A. M. Rosenthal wrote: “Am I better off than I was four years ago? No. In a way important to me I am not only worse off than in 1992, but worse than ever before in my adult life. I have been cheated of the opportunity to make a decision satisfactory to me in the choice of President, the single most important privilege of citizenship ... For the first time in my voting life neither major party offered us a choice that pays suitable honor to our intelligence and citizenship”; “Am I Better Off?” *New York Times*, November 5, 1996.

And on the day after the election, Frank Rich wrote:

“Don’t you feel better already? Or as a politician might put it: are you better off today than you were 24 hours ago? Here at last is one question the entire nation can answer in the affirmative. Had the election lasted a single moment longer, the country might have started to get nostalgic about Phil Gramm....

“Whom and what did we not get sick of? Aside from the voters, the only people worthy of sympathy in ‘96 are the candidates’ children ...

“What could have made election year ‘96 more exciting? The year is littered with what-ifs. What if Lamar Alexander, the jes-folks millionaire, had switched from red plaid to silver lamé? ...

“Still those who say the year of campaigning was completely worthless are wrong. If nothing else, I discovered that the year’s political rhetoric could be a better cure for insomnia than either counting sheep or playing ‘Six Degrees of Kevin Bacon.’ Once in bed, eyes shut, the trick is to take the empty yet incessantly repeated candidates’ phrases and squeeze as many of them into a single sentence as possible.” Frank Rich, *New York Times*, November 6, 1996.

3. Editorial, *New York Times*, July 19, 1996.

4. Or, to take a final example, consider the hoax which NYU professor of physics Alan Sokal played on the editors of the literary-critical journal *Social Text*. What makes this hoax a milestone in the history of academic hoaxes is not that Professor Sokal publicly declared his article to be a hoax the moment it was published, but that the hoax was right there on the surface of the article. *Anyone* who read the article with understanding would have to recognize it as a joke. (Paul Boghossian and Thomas Nagel made this point in a letter to *Lingua Franca*.) The article mentions “the axiom of choice” as though it were part of feminist set theory, when anyone who had taken even the first weeks of an introduction to axiomatic set theory would know that the axiom of choice was simply an elementary axiom concerned with forming sets by selecting members of other sets. It has everything to do with set theory, nothing to do with politics; and that is a flagrantly obvious fact. That is what made this hoax so embarrassing. For the editors, who have long taken a knowing stance with respect to the world, to be able to publish the article, they *could not have known* even the most elementary facts about the areas in which they were publishing articles. The editors were hoist on their own petard of knowingness.

5. For an extended critique of the Freudian reading of *Oedipus Tyrannus*, see Jean-Pierre Vernant and Pierre Vidal-Naquet, *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece* (New York: Zone Books, 1990).

6. Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, SE 4: 262–263; Lecture XXI, “The Development of the Libido,” *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, SE 16: 331. See Letter 71 to Fliess, October 15, 1897, SE 1: 265.

7. See Bernard Knox, “Why Is Oedipus Called Tyrannos?” *Classical Journal* 50 (1954).

8. Sophocles, *Oedipus Tyrannus*, ed. and trans. Hugh Lloyd-Jones (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994), lines 33–34. All translations in the text are based on this source.

9. See, e.g., Aristotle, *Rhetoric* II.2.378a31 ff.

10. As Iocaste tells him at 742–743.

11. Note Socrates’ demand, at the end of the *Symposium*, that poets ought to be equally good at comedy and tragedy.

12. Thus all such claims of the form “If *only* Oedipus had ____ed, he would have escaped his fate” are either false or empty. See Bernard Williams, *Shame and Necessity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

13. He will, of course, expel himself again when he learns of his original abandonment. For Oedipus, “remembering” does not replace, but rather occasions, repetition.

14. I have heard it objected that this is just dramatic license, a device to let the audience know the passage of time. My response: Sophocles is a better poet than that. If all he wanted to do was impart that information, Oedipus could easily have said, “Yes, of course, it’s twenty years now since ...”

15. J. Goux, *Oedipus, Philosopher* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993).

16. To borrow Lacan’s ironic reading of the second chorus in *Antigone*: nothing is impossible for man; what he can’t deal with he ignores; Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan*, Vol. 7: *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, 1959–1960*, trans. Dennis Porter (London: Routledge, 1992). p. 275. Cf. the modern descendants: in verificationism, Popperianism, ordinary-language philosophy, these problems are meaningless.

17. See Vernant and Vidal-Naquet, *Myth and Tragedy*, p. 27.

18. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. W. Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1974), 125.