

## A CONSTRUCT VIEW OF OEDIPUS AND *OEDIPUS REX*

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Psychoanalytic theorists have used the story of Oedipus, as told in the Oedipus legend and in Sophocles' play Oedipus Rex, as a cornerstone of their theory and have almost seemed to own the unhappy king, but the traditional psychoanalytic view of Oedipus will, I believe, seem limited and impoverished when contrasted with the view of both the play and the myth which can be developed through construct theory.

Not only has *Oedipus Rex* been a cornerstone of psychoanalytic theory but psychoanalytic thinkers beginning with Freud seem to have considered *Oedipus* and the oedipal complex necessary to understanding another fundamental drama – Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (Jones, 1954 [1910], 91-103). In a circular fashion, it seems that Freud's reading of *Hamlet* served as a key to his understanding of *Oedipus* in which he "discovered" the oedipal complex, while the oedipal complex then afforded the key to his understanding of *Hamlet*. As we shall see in this article and the next (Whitehead, 2016a) the similarities between the two plays and the characters of Oedipus and Hamlet are minimal while the differences are great. Psychoanalytic theorists seem to have erred by emphasizing the similarities between the two plays and their dramatis personae while failing to attend to the differences.

*Oedipus Rex* has survived as one of the most important dramas known to western civilization because the play embodies so many basic human issues, and therefore by contrasting a construct view of the play with the Freudian oedipal view we can open discussion on several vital theoretical points. Comparison of the two views offers for instance an excellent demonstration of the difference between the construct and psychoanalytic views of the philosophical issue of determinism. That difference is important to the *General Theory of Psychological Literary Criticism* stated in the first article in this issue of *Con-*

*structive Criticism* (Whitehead, 2016 b) which in turn underlies the *Construct Theory of Psychological Literary Criticism* (Whitehead, 2016c). This particular theory, which will be explicitly stated in a later issue of *Constructive Criticism*, will be sketched in broad terms in this article and in the article on *Hamlet* which follows (Whitehead, 2016a). Let us therefore now consider the psychoanalytic and the construct views of determinism as they impact upon *Oedipus Rex*.

The determinism which Kelly accepts is the determinism of the superordinate construct over the elements subsumed under it. In other words, as Kelly sees it, one chooses or creates the rubric under which one orders certain events, the events do not dictate the rubric under which they must be construed (Kelly, 1955, 1:21). For instance, one person might choose to see the shouting, jostling and flagburning of a group of protestors under a construct of justified political dissent, while another person might construe these events under a construct of anarchy.

The very fact that different individuals can see events differently indicates to Kelly that it is not the events which determine the construct through which they must be viewed; rather it is the chosen construct that will determine how the person who holds that construct will react to the events.

For the psychoanalytic thinker on the other hand determinism seems to work in the opposite direction: i.e., events seem to dictate the way those events must be viewed, and so the 'oedipal', i.e., the Freudian reading of *Oedipus Rex* has seemed to psychoanalytic thinkers to be clearly *dictated* by the elements of the plot or at least by the elements of the Oedipus legend. Those elements have seemed to Freudian theorists to demand a single, universal interpretation: that Oedipus is the prototype of all sons, and all sons inevitably unconsciously wish to kill their

fathers and sexually possess their mothers.

A construct theorist like Kelly, however, would argue that the events narrated in the Oedipus legend or in Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* do not dictate or determine the construct which one must use to subsume them. One may choose to construe them under what has come to be understood as 'the oedipal complex' if one wishes, but other constructs are possible which are at least as – possibly even more – valid. Alfred Adler, for instance, has chosen to view the real-life events which psychoanalytic thinkers have termed 'oedipal' as a part of a higher order abstraction which he called the 'Masculine Protest' (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1964 [1956], 45-75). The Kellyan construct theorist might choose to view these events under that construct or another of his/her own creation. The construct theorist would believe, as Adler believed of the *unconscious*, that Freud did not *discover* the oedipal conflict; he *invented* it, that is, he chose to subsume under that construct certain other constructs relevant to child development and family constellation.

The Kellyan construct theorist could not only view *life* without a construct similar to the oedipal complex but could even consider Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* without seeing it as a play about the oedipal complex. Freudian theorists and critics, if they are loyal to the oedipal interpretation of *Oedipus Rex*, must insist that the main events of the drama *Oedipus Rex* are (1) the murder of the old man (his father, Laius) by Oedipus, and (2) Oedipus' marriage to the murdered Laius' wife Jocasta (Oedipus' own mother). But, when we come to think about it, we realize that these events are not events in Sophocles' plot at all. They have happened before Sophocles begins his play, *in medias res*. Thus Freud and later psychoanalytic thinkers seem to wish to deal with the Oedipus myth or legend more than with Sophocles' play *Oedipus Rex*, except as the play can be made to seem a specimen of psychoanalytic therapy.

Psychoanalytic theorists have not seemed nearly so interested in the playwright's dramatic sequels to the play as in the precursory details of the murder and the marriage, and have made few if any comments about *Oedipus at Colonus*, created some twenty years after *Oedipus Rex* when

Sophocles was very near the end of his life, or about *Antigone* which in dramatic time follows *Oedipus at Colonus* but was written when Sophocles was a younger man. Although these three plays by the same author were not written as a trilogy they seem to form one, and Kellyan and Adlerian theorists/critics, in contrast to those of the psychoanalytic persuasion, will not be satisfied to ignore *Oedipus at Colonus* and *Antigone*. Adlerian theory will require an Adlerian critic to look for final cause and fictional finalism in the other two plays by Sophocles which continue the story of Oedipus and his unfortunate daughter, while Kellyan construct theorists will want to watch playwright and audience make predictions about the effect of the events in *Oedipus Rex* on the characters until they conclude their lives in *Oedipus at Colonus* and *Antigone*.

The Kellyan theorist and critic in contrast to the psychoanalytic critic will see the main events of Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* as the constructions of reality and predictions offered to Oedipus by Apollo and Tiresias and Oedipus' and Jocasta's reactions to them. The main events in a construct view would certainly include the main elements of Sophocles' plot, i.e., Oedipus' attempts – attempts that join the cognitive, emotional and conative elements of his personality – to get to the truth about the plague that infects Thebes and his struggle to know the reality of his identity and the part his personal history has played in the crisis which Thebes faces when the drama begins.

Oedipus' insistence on seeing reality and on knowing his own history seems to run counter to the psychoanalytic view expressed by Ernest Jones that all mankind, Oedipus and Hamlet included, are too cowardly to explore our innermost souls (Jones, 1954 [1910], 103). Oedipus' courage seems inconsistent with Jones' view but quite consistent with Kelly's view that each human will attempt to predict and control the events of his life through an elaboration of his construct system.

The Kellyan critic will of course see events which took place before the events of Sophocles' act 1, scene 1 as important, for those events must provide for the dramatic fictional character Oedipus, and for the audience experiencing *Oedipus Rex*, the basis for construction and prediction

of current and future dramatic reality, although they do not displace the importance of the action that constitutes the dramatic plot of *Oedipus Rex*. The most important of these prior events will be: the prophecy made to Laius that his son born of Jocasta will kill him and sexually possess his mother; the renewal of that prophecy to the young Oedipus; Oedipus' leaving his adoptive father and mother, King Polybus and Queen Periboea of Corinth, who he believes are his biological parents, in order to frustrate the prophecy; his guessing the riddle of the sphinx; and finally Oedipus' killing of Laius, and his marriage to Jocasta which will be dramatically revealed in the course of the play as a part of the unmasking of reality.

The construct theorist/critic will thus see that when *Oedipus Rex* opens, Oedipus must – based on the replication of past events – construe his situation and that of Thebes in a fairly optimistic light. He has, he believes, attained maturity and power without carrying out the dread prophecy that he would kill his father and possess his mother, and he has earned his kingship and his power in Thebes by his brilliance in solving the riddle of the sphinx. As Kellyan man-the-scientist he must see himself as an Einstein (if you will permit me that anachronism). No wonder that when the play opens Oedipus, describing himself to his subjects as “world renowned” and “glorious Oedipus” (Cook, 1957 [1948], 1. 8), seems confident, even arrogantly so, in assuring his people that when Creon returns with a message from Apollo he, Oedipus, will simply expedite the oracle's instructions for ridding Thebes of its plague.

This high opinion of his accomplishments and his prediction that he will be able to maintain his standard of performance do not constitute *hubris* which has so often been misunderstood simply as *pride* (Kaufmann [1968] 1969, 74-80), but results from, in a construct view, the universal *hamartia* – the human tragic flaw – which denies omniscience and omnipotence to humans. When Creon returns with what seems an ambiguous answer, Oedipus aggressively pursues clarity. As he begins to understand the significance of the information he receives from Tiresias and Apollo and others, one after another of his constructs and the predictions he has based

on them are invalidated until finally Oedipus understands that the old man he killed on the road years before was his real father and that the Queen of Thebes whom he has married is his biological mother. Oedipus' construct system is thus completely destroyed, and with it his ability to predict and control his future and the future of Thebes.

For generations students have puzzled over Oedipus' sense of guilt that leads him to blind himself when he learns the truth. Why should Oedipus at last feel such overwhelming guilt when he did not *know* that the man he had killed (and over whose death he had previously wasted no regrets) was his father nor that the queen he had married was his mother? Indeed in certain versions of the Oedipus myth, Oedipus does not seem to feel the intense guilt that Sophocles has foisted upon him. Psychoanalytic critics, delighted – for the wrong reasons according to the construct view – with Sophocles' version of the myth, explain Oedipus' sense of guilt by invoking the idea of the repressed unconscious. They insist that Oedipus feels guilt because he has unconsciously desired to do what he did in spite of his protestations that he wished to avoid doing it. They hypothesize that the recognition of self-blame occasioned by such an antisocial desire escapes the unconscious and, although it cannot be understood by the guilty one, is experienced as neurotic guilt. Psychoanalytic theorists then project that pattern of unconscious oedipal motivation onto all real and fictional sons including Oedipus, Shakespeare's Hamlet, and indeed Shakespeare himself (Jones, 1954 [1910], 115-43).

It seems naive to the psychoanalytic thinker, given the by-now-well-publicized Freudian view, that one should ask questions about why Oedipus and/or Hamlet should feel guilt. Oedipus and Hamlet are, in that view, in fact guilty, though they have deceived themselves into a denial so that the guilty wish has become unconscious while guilt feelings, occasioned by that unconscious wish, surface to disturb their psyches. The Kellyan construct theorist, however, would take seriously the question which the psychoanalytic theorist would consider sophomoric and would be willing to rethink the psychoanalytic conclusion. Why indeed should Oedipus

feel guilt when he did not know and could not realize what he was doing when he did it?

The Kellyan construct theorist or critic would approach the question of Oedipus' guilt from Kelly's position that "*guilt* refers to a condition of the person's construction system and not to society's judgment of one's moral culpability" (Kelly, 1955, 1:489). "Guilt is psychological exile from one's core role, regardless of where, when, with whom, or in what scenes the part has been played" (Kelly 1955, 1:502). Since Oedipus' core role at the beginning of the play led him to see himself not just as man-the-scientist but as superman-the-superscientist, his exile from that core role is devastating. He is of course horrified to realize that he has fulfilled the much dreaded prophecy and has murdered his father and married his mother, but it is the displacement from his role of wise man which is most destructive. When Oedipus blinds himself by striking out his eyes with the dead Jocasta's brooch, Sophocles in my favorite translation of the play lets him state it thus:

*Be dark from now on, since you saw before  
What you should not, and knew not what you  
should.*

(Cook, 1957 [1948], 11. 1273-74)

The Freudian theorist would concentrate on the words, "you saw before/What you should not," and would skip over the rest of the sentence. The Kellyan recognizes that Oedipus has seen what he should not (his mother as sexual partner), but concentrates on the "knew not what you should" passage, for it is that failure of knowing – an emotional and conative failing as well as a cognitive failing, that has brought about catastrophe. Oedipus is forced to face his limitations. If a man cannot recognize his own sire and dam – as an animal is commonly believed able to do; if he does not know who he is even in the most elementary biological sense, how can he know, cognitively, emotionally, conatively, the more esoteric, recondite reality of life? Like all other men, he is limited by *hamartia* – the universal tragic flaw – which is the inability to penetrate reality completely at any given time.

In addition to *hamartia*, Oedipus has further betrayed himself by *hubris*. The flaw which he,

the individual man, has taken unto himself is his hot temper which resulted in the killing of the unknown man at the crossroads. He has deprived another human of his right to live. Ironically it was the hubris of that same man, Laius, which set the whole tragedy in motion when he, out of fear of the prophecy and failing to correctly interpret the 'if' clause it contained, denied Oedipus his rights as a son by crippling him and abandoning him to die in the wilderness.

At this point we must pause to examine prophecies in general and must note that all prophecies and predictions contain an implicit 'if' clause. If the prophecy were not in some sense conditional, the only realistic response to it would be stoic resignation. But mankind, in spite of talk of fate, has for the most part behaved as if free will and some sort of self-determination exist, and as if human destiny were not immutably carved in stone. Prophecies, therefore, are as a rule treated as ambiguous and/or implicitly conditional and serve to set those concerned into action in an attempt to avert the tentative catastrophe or assure the hoped-for triumph of the prophecy. In real life, a prophecy or prediction may cause an individual to lose the will to circumvent it, leaving him/her wallowing in abject immobility, but immobility is not the stuff of drama, and it is the task of the playwright's protagonist or antagonist, and indeed of the heroic person in real life, to abandon apathy and try to understand the 'if' clause and respond to it in such a way as to avert the unwanted outcome or guarantee the desired fulfillment of the prophecy.

The sense of inevitability which is so much a part of tragedy might cause one to doubt the validity of the 'if' clause in prophecies, but that perceived inevitability does not arise so much from an unconditional prophecy as from the character (or better yet from the construct system) of the protagonist and/or the antagonist. Flawed by *hamartia* and/or *hubris*, the characters of tragedy fail to construe the prophecy and its 'if' clause accurately, and as a result they cannot rise to a higher level construct through which to view the prophecy but follow the path to the emergent end(s) of their superordinate construct(s), or perhaps rattle back and forth in the groove(s) between the two ends of their con-

struct(s) (Kelly, 1955, 1:128-29).

And now let us return to Oedipus and see how Sophocles permits him to respond to the conditional elements of the prophecies and auguries which confront him.

When Oedipus met the old man at the cross roads years of dramatic time before the play by Sophocles begins, he, in a fit of passionate temper, killed him and consummated, without realizing he was doing so, half of the terrible prophecy. Ironically, if one has the psychoanalytic reading of the play in mind, the passionate temperament which has been Oedipus' downfall in the commission of patricide does not seem to contribute much to his fulfilling the prophecy of incest. Far more passion seems to have been invested in solving the riddle of the sphinx than in wooing Jocasta who, it seems, was offered to Oedipus as a wife without his asking. Nowhere in *Oedipus Rex* does Sophocles imply that the marriage of Oedipus to Jocasta was driven by sexual desire. Nowhere does he dramatize an erotic passion between Oedipus and Jocasta, leading the audience to believe that Oedipus has been mad with love for or lust after Jocasta (as Shakespeare shows Claudius to be in regard to Gertrude in *Hamlet*); nor indeed is much attention given to the sexual relationship between Oedipus and Jocasta. Rather the marriage between Oedipus and Jocasta seems to have been simply a marriage of political convenience. The sexual relationship which has resulted has produced four children, but the basic attraction Jocasta has held for Oedipus seems to have been the stabilization of power, not the fulfillment of sexual passion.

When Oedipus has lost his intellectual and political power and is held prisoner in Thebes where he formerly ruled, and when he has physically blinded himself in order to symbolize his cognitive and emotional blindness, Oedipus' most fervent wish is to be allowed to leave Thebes. The construct theorist/critic would see Oedipus' desire for exile from Thebes, where he had won fame and power by solving the riddle of the sphinx and marrying the queen, as a symbol of his exile from his core role of superman-the-superscientist.

And in Oedipus' very name the construct theorist will furthermore see the dichotomous

construct (Kelly 1955, 1:59-64) which defines his destiny, for there are two possible meanings to his name: the first assumes the derivation to arise from the Greek words for *swell* and *foot*, i.e., swollen footed. Oedipus' crippled and swollen foot, which resulted from his father's piercing the infant's ankles and tying them together when he prepared to abandon him in the wild in order to thwart the prediction that his son would kill him, can be seen as a figurative statement of the crippling of Oedipus's construct system brought about by his father's *hubris*. The other end of the construct is represented by the other possible derivation (through punning) of the name Oedipus from the Greek word which means wise (*The Encyclopedia Britannica* 1911, 20:12; Knox, 1971 [1957], 183). When we consider this etymology, Oedipus' name seems to connote the sapient Oedipus who outwitted the sphinx. Thus in the name *Oedipus* the Kellyan literary critic would see a bipolar construct through which to construe the character – *wise* vs. (symbolically) *crippled* or *impaired*.

Before the Freudian reading of *Oedipus Rex* became dominant, the English adjective which was derived from the name of the play's protagonist was not *oedipal* but *Oedipean* and, according to the *OED*, it meant, "pertaining to, or like that of, Oedipus; clever at guessing a riddle." That meaning has unfortunately almost disappeared from modern English dictionaries as well as from popular usage. However, if the construct theory view of Oedipus ever gains popular understanding, it will certainly be necessary for dictionaries to carry an alternative to the common modern definition which defines oedipal in terms of psychoanalytic theory and talks of the son's hatred of his father, his unconscious desire to kill him, and find sexual gratification with his mother.

An alternative definition informed by construct theory might read:

*Oedipus Construct*, Construct theory. *The plight of the individual who, like Sophocles' Oedipus Rex, believes he or she construes, predicts and controls life events exceptionally well – even faultlessly – but finds that he/she has in fact failed to construe the most elemental reality, and has thus exiled him/herself from the core role of man-the-scientist and as a result suffers severe*

*debilitating guilt which is felt as alienation from self and society.*

The construct view of *Oedipus Rex* would acknowledge the horror of the incest theme, but would see the origin of the tragedy in the irrational fear Laius feels of his son Oedipus. If there is a universal father/son psychological theme in the story of Oedipus, it is perhaps to be found not in the son's wish to possess his mother sexually and to kill his father, but in the father's fear – not a concrete fear as Freud proposes, but an existential fear – that the son will in the natural course of events outlive him – bury him – thus in a sense will kill him. The implied 'if' clause in the prophecy which was offered to Laius which he failed to understand, might have gone something like this:

*Laius, if you do not care well for your son and treat him as your heir, accepting that as he grows stronger you will grow weaker with age – if instead you abandon him, your own natural propensities and his will, when you meet as strangers, lead to your death.*

The gods knowing Laius well could foresee Laius's characteristic construing of the prophecy of death and his failure to infer its silent 'if' clause; and indeed it is Laius' hostile actions which impel Oedipus into killing him when they meet, unrecognized, years after Laius has maimed and abandoned his son for dead.

Laius could (if he were a real person) have construed the prophecy about his son differently, but he chose to ignore the 'if' clause and construe it solely in terms of his own survival and in doing so set in motion, through the flaws in his own character, the events which would result in his death. His was indeed a foolish consistency of trying to match construed situation with construed prediction rather than construed prediction with reality.

Oedipus, the son, on the other hand, tried to understand the 'if' clause but misconstrued it because he did not have enough information. It seemed to him that he could not murder the man he construed as his father and possess the woman he believed to be his mother unless he remained in proximity to them. But his mind was not so nimble as he thought, and although his awareness of an 'if' clause made him cognitive-

ly, conatively, and emotionally a better man than his father, his inability to be omniscient would not allow him to overcome the evil situation his father had created. In betraying Oedipus, his father had betrayed himself into death at his son's hands. If Oedipus had known the old man as his father, societal mores if not sincere filial love would have caused him to forbear to strike, but through his sin against his son Laius has deprived himself of that protection and his characteristic violence and bad temper in attempting to thrust Oedipus from the path – his second violent action toward his son – assures his death.

To argue as Freud and his followers have done is to argue on the side of Laius against Oedipus (saying that indeed Laius' fear and the fear of all fathers that their sons wish to kill them is a realistic fear and that Oedipus does what he – and all other sons – really unconsciously want to do). To argue as the construct theorist would argue is to stand on the side of Oedipus, the hapless victim of his father, who in turn was the victim of his own fear which caused him to act in a way that assured the realization of those fears.

And to argue further as the construct theorist would argue is to say that Oedipus attempts to predict and control the events of his life and seeks to avoid both the prophecies of patricide and incest, but his inability to construe reality with certainty brings tragedy to him as it has so often done to us humans down through the centuries.

In the construct view, when we read *Oedipus Rex* or see a production of the play, we have a sense of elation in spite of the tragic outcome and mood of the play not because the emotions of pity and fear are aroused and then purged as Aristotle believed but because we are encouraged by seeing that we share our failure of omniscience with a personality as great as Oedipus. We are even permitted to feel somewhat superior to Oedipus because, through dramatic irony, Sophocles lets us know – or at least suspect – the nature of reality a little before Oedipus begins to understand, thereby giving us hope that we construe, predict, and control better than that noble but unfortunate king, and therefore can expect a happier denouement in the plots of our own lives.

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