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Oedipus – Why Can't I Think

It seems to me that if I am to do justice to what I believe is Sophocles intent in writing Oedipus Rex, Oedipus at Colonus and Antigone, and if I am to be truly honest to the experience of being in this writing group and presenting to fellow colleagues, then I must try to think about my thinking, and my real difficulty in thinking about Sophocles' trilogy. I began to wonder if Oedipus Rex was about sexuality alone or about the difficulty in thinking and experiencing the conflict that is inherent in different ways of knowing. The capacity to experience conflict is a developmental event and achievement. (Mentalization) I began to wonder about thinking itself from a reflective position. One of Oedipus' real struggles seems to me to be his inability to maintain a self-reflective stance with regard to his own thinking; the moments when he shows his inability to think and those moments when he attributes to others his own disavowed thoughts. This would present a very different way to be Oedipal – it falls outside the realm of sexuality and into the realm of thought, knowing and not knowing what one knows – or more specifically – not knowing what one knows and the ability to tolerate that experience long enough to get to knowing it differently.

For a paper intended to be about thinking I have to say that I have had real moments of difficulty just having thoughts and then trying to organize and link

some of them. In fact what I am referring to is the collapse of my capacity to think because of an inability to find or hold my own reflective stance.

If one of the efforts of Sophocles' play is to engage the audience, involve the audience; then Sophocles succeeds by drawing the viewer in via their own experiential struggle. If we are to understand Oedipus at all it will be to approach his experience through our own unconscious, no matter what our rational perception of the play is. Something closer to apperception, the mind's capacity to reflect upon itself, will be necessary.

At a certain point while reading Oedipus Rex I gave free reign to what I felt, at the time, were rational objections as to why the play was so frustrating. Let me list them: Oedipus hears rumours that he is not King Polybus' true son so he travels to the oracle of Delphi to ask about his parent's identity and is told rather cryptically "Your mother is she whose lover and your father is he whose killer you shall be". (Priel, 2002, 435) Following directly on these words and believing he knows how to outthink this riddle Oedipus seeks to escape his fate. Yet, one of the first things he does is he kills an old man on the road and then he marries a newly widowed woman. Can any action be more dissociated and enacted? One would think that killing anyone might give Oedipus pause to think after his trip to the oracle, unless he lives in the belief that he can be complete master of his own world.

Later, Oedipus is told that Thebes is not thriving because of the un-avenged death of King Laius and Oedipus never wonders that the king disappeared with his own arrival in Thebes. The events that follow upon Apollo's injunction to find and punish the murderer express Oedipus' attempt to answer his original question to the Delphic Oracle – his search seemingly for his parentage is actually the showing of his dissociative knowledge. Lear stated that we show what we can not say. (Lear, 1999, 13) Oedipus Rex is the showing of Oedipus' knowledge. The dramatization of Oedipus Rex provides the reflective stance from which we can see what Oedipus the subject can not see. And yet we as the audience are equal subjects with Oedipus in as much as we can only see what we can tolerate knowing.

When I was less irrationally rational I had to wonder at my own impatience and the underlying disturbance the play created. How could he be so "blind" was one of my first thoughts, how could he be so truly unknowing. I think I did not like to have the irrational so clearly marked and disguised in the same gesture that follows Oedipus' choices throughout the play.

I was finally able to get to this thought. We can't get why he can't think, if we can't get what we ourselves don't get about our own pre-oedipal experiences with our mother. This is where Sophocles throws his audience, or at least where I was thrown.

I am coming to this conversation from many perspectives, all of them in lively conflict, conflicts I have sometimes been unable to bear in mind. I am at a crossroads of competing and demanding interests. In mid November I was giving a lecture about sexuality, gender and sexual orientation and about the Oedipal Conflict as developed by Freud and elaborated and extended by many other thinkers, by December I was thinking about and experiencing my own mother in a very intense way, and in an ongoing way I am fascinated by the rapidly developing theories of mentalization and their intersection with my older interest in different theories about transference, counter-transference and dissociation. What has this to do with Oedipus and being Oedipal?

I will address my simplest conflict first. It was with some surprise that I read Sophocles' trilogy and the myth upon which it rests. Having been steeped in Freud's theories of the oedipal experience of boys and his somewhat less developed theory of the oedipal experience of girls¹, reading Sophocles was a rude awakening. I very clearly remember wondering – how did Freud get from this play to his theoretical developments? Most of what Freud addresses is the part of the play that occurs off stage before the play even begins. By off stage I mean that part of the myth that is already part of the cultural experience of Sophocles' audience. His audience is steeped in Greek mythology and the myth of Oedipus. So they “know” before the play begins that Oedipus was abandoned to death by his biological parents, that he bears the scars of having his feet

¹ Reference Appendix : summary of Oedipal Complex. Lecture – Sexuality, Gender and Sexual Orientation. Centre for Training in Psychotherapy, 19-25, November 15, 2008.

bound and that his name is a testament to and a memory of that experience. Oedipus means swollen foot. They are aware of his later adult discovery that he might be adopted and his realization that his fate is to kill his father and sleep with his mother. They do not need to be told of his eventual confrontation with his father and of actually killing him in a state of rage. At the plays opening scene Oedipus is already married to his mother and his sexual relationship with her has already resulted in the conceiving and birthing of their four children. I believe that this is an important feature of the play because it required the audience to hold imaginatively the underpinning story of trauma in Oedipus' life. The final part of the play that occurs offstage is the suicide of Oedipus' mother in reaction to her realization of who Oedipus really was. She hung herself at the scene of all crimes – the bedroom – where she slept with Laius to conceive Oedipus, where both parents abandoned Oedipus when they continued to sleep where they could no longer hold their parental responsibilities, and where Oedipus and his mother conceived their own four children. What occurs off stage seems to me to be the realm of the unconscious and the antechamber of the imagination of the audience. It is here that we may be gripped unconsciously and imaginatively – off stage is not out of mind.

As the audience we hold and elaborate the experience – not only within the real time of the play's action – but in the unconscious time that the play imaginatively requires and in the time of our own unconscious experience of our own family dynamics, relational interactions and desires – that period in our own life when

we were pre-oedipal. Freud's conception of unconscious time is neither linear nor does it shy away from contradictory positions. I find remembering this now helpful because reading this play, being with my mother and trying to think about the effect of both on my mind – was for a time imaginatively impossible.

It was helpful for me to read *Open Minded: Knowingness and Abandonment: An Oedipus for our Time*, by Jonathan Lear, because his discussion of Oedipus suggested to me that Oedipus was not Oedipal. In other words, the oedipal conflict was Freud's imaginative construction. It has laid the foundation, both restrictive and rich, for many theoretical reconfigurations of the experiences of boys and girls as they navigate the elaboration of their sexual development and the acquisition of their sense of gender and sexual orientation. But, if Oedipus was not oedipal – except after the fact - then what was he doing in this play?

Let me ask you to think about the purpose of the Oedipal Complex? Not the theory, but the experiential process of it. *Oedipus Rex* shows us how the Oedipal Complex becomes narrowed towards sexuality alone. The Oedipus Complex is actually so much more.

In one sense it helps a child move from an auto-erotic into an allo-erotic sexual life.

In another sense, it helps the child, through their sensual experiences and multiple identifications, to form a sense of how to relate to a larger world as an agent in that world.

As an agent a child develops a capacity for self reflection through the development of a sense of subjectivity and as a subject the ability to hold the self as an object of consideration. This is the foundation for self-reflectivity.

In yet another sense, it helps the child establish a sense of their gender as related to how they claim, inhabit and move in their own body.

Also, it helps the child orient their sexuality to those others for whom they feel an erotic attachment and from whom they feel a welcoming response.

Finally, it teaches a child to hold out for a future by tolerating the pressures and frustrations of a present without relapsing into erotic withdrawal.

Oedipus moves from an auto-erotic into an allo-erotic sexual life but he misses the developmental experience that would send him out into the larger world to form a sexual and emotional relationship with another love object. He remains trapped within the sexual domain of his parents. Oedipus never really relates to the larger world except through his grandiose sense of having saved his parents from his destruction of them and having saved Thebes from theirs.

In both of these instances Oedipus believes in the power of his thinking to outwit the oracle and the sphinx. His exchanges with anyone whose thoughts contradict his own are angry, dismissive and arrogant. He lacks a self-reflective stance from which to consider his own thoughts and actions as well as the thoughts and actions of others as motivated by their own minds and not by the motives he attributes to them. This is more than projection. It is an inability to hold his own thoughts in mind and understand that other minds have different and separate thoughts and motivations.

Oedipus' sensual world was corrupted when he was sent to his death and when his feet were bound. He can not make use of his own bodily experience in order to know himself.² With the same sentiment that his feet were bound he takes out his own eyes. He can not stand on his own feet or see where he is going; as the sayings go. And finally, because he cannot tolerate the frustration and pressure of what he does not know how to think – he is forever enacting and corrupting his own freedom.

What I would also like to touch on here with respect to sexuality and Oedipus Rex is the understanding of Oedipus' traumatic sexual solutions and where he finds he can no longer use the Oedipal Complex to become himself or to find his own way. Oedipus never gets to be Oedipus because he is always caught in a reaction to his earliest trauma and to his fate as foretold by Delphic Oracle.

² Jody Messler Davies has a wonderful and helpful discussion of the place of the body as the underpinning of experience in her paper "Love in the Afternoon – a relational reconsideration of dread and desire in the countertransference" (1994). *Psychoanalytic Dialogues*, 4(2), 153-170.

Thomas Ogden points out that the disruption of relationships between a child and their mother or father would result in traumatic, angry and unsatisfying object relationships. Ogden states: if “Oedipal love is the foundation of healthy and whole-object relations” (Ogden, 1989, p. 113) then failure, defectiveness, anger and resentment are not the foundation we would wish the child to be building the edifice of their future erotic sense on and I would argue not the scaffold on which we want to completely rest our theories of sexual development. Oedipus’ foundation rests on neglect and abuse.

The Oedipal Myth as written by Sophocles is based on Oedipus’ traumatic childhood – the rejection of Oedipus by both his parents and their subsequent attempt to have him bound and killed. In looking at that sequence of events in Oedipus’ life we could employ some of Fairbairn’s assertions. Fairbairn believed that the dissonance between the mother and child early on leaves the child feeling that it is his or her way of being and loving the mother that endangers the mother to the point of her rejection and refusal of the child’s early love. We may extend this to include the father’s responses to the child. The child’s ensuing sense is of themselves as dangerous in their loving and their desires. Oedipus very clearly understands himself as dangerous, and more specifically that his desires will come to create great harm. He is told this by the oracle and so he never comes to discover his own version of his erotic desires. He never desires a mother or father who will seduce him out of his auto-erotic state and into a

world of erotic engagement with them and who then will gently refuse him and turn him towards a larger world of others, a world where he can express those desires. He appears unable to even use his adoptive parents in this way. When the soldier comes to tell him of the death of Polybus, Oedipus is struck by the thought that the old king could and would extend his generosity towards a son who was not really his own. Oedipus remains trapped. He enacts what appears to be the erotic destiny of a male child as Freud suggested was a universal phenomenon. But enactment is not the same as self-discovery. Enactment prevents discovery in so much as it keeps Oedipus always showing what he cannot let himself know – the trauma of his early life and abandonment. As such the play is about sexuality as a traumatic solution – not the discovery of what one's sexuality actually is or could be.

Doris Brothers presents a similar point of view regarding sexuality as trauma. In arguing that a boy child must dis-identify from his mother, or shows disgust at the sight of the female genitals, or rigidly hold a view of what masculinity is; or that a girl comes to feel shame about her clitoris and envy of the penis, or disappointment with her mother, or inadequacy; Brothers suggests that we may be seeing signs of what Kohut referred to as the “breakdown products of a fragmenting self”. (Brothers, 2008, p. 88) Rather than seeing these responses as the universal and inevitable aspects of sexual development, we may actually be seeing signs of a troubled early experience and the use of sexuality as one of the organizers of experience following an early trauma. This perspective

questions the ordinary assumptions about responses from either a male or female child that are understood as a regular part of oedipal experience. What Freud describes as ordinary sexual development is actually traumatic sexual development and the use of sexuality as a way of organizing experience that prevents trauma from being known from a position of being able to reflect upon it. This is what I believe Oedipus Rex shows us.

In a reaction to his earliest life and the realization that he is adopted Oedipus does not pause. The play explores what this foreknowledge does to Oedipus because he cannot pause to understand or reflect on what he is feeling or on how he reacts. When Oedipus is told by the oracle what his fate is – this seems to me to be the equivalent of a parent who tells a child that the reason they are being abused is because they are inherently bad. The oracle circumvents Oedipus' initial inquiry as to why he was sent off to adoption in the first place. This was his reason for first visiting the Oracle. Instead his sexual path is foretold to him.

It seems to me that the Oracle acts something like the unconscious in that it delivers a message that Oedipus thinks he can understand; but a message he is actually incapable of holding long enough and with enough help to get to the meaning of it. He shows this when Tiresias tries to interpret his oracle to Oedipus and Oedipus rejects his help as the irrational rantings of an old man. The irrational is beyond Oedipus' ken. The irrational needs to be given meaning,

through what Donnel Stern describes as the translation of unformulated experience into meaningful awareness. Any kind of “knowing” devoid of the input of the irrational is different from creating meaning from within troubling mental states.

We might pause to consider that Oedipus’ parents wanted him killed because they themselves were unable to reflect on the oracle’s prediction. They too reacted cruelly.

This transgenerational transmission of trauma is what I would like to take up a bit later. In order to approach that theme I would like to proceed by way of example.

As with many theories, the psyche of the theoretician is involved in the thinking. Each of us here today, and each of us in this reading and writing group are bringing our own psyche to bear on how to read Oedipus Rex as more than just the foundation of Freud’s theories of psychosexual development and in an effort to pay attention to where this play can take us experientially and thoughtfully. I would like to focus now on three parallel and intersecting directions.

This is the story of where the play took me and it will contain the interweaving of my interest in mentalization, transference and counter-transference, dissociation and my own temporarily locked down mental state – which to be truthful

sometimes still threatens to find me. This is how I entered as the audience of the play, with the antechamber of my own cordoned off imagination.

In “Minds and Yours”, Elliot Jurist defined mentalization as “the skill that allows one to interpret other’s minds, which in turn fosters the ability to read and understand one’s own mental states”. (Jurist, 2008, 90) For each of us the experience of being held in the mind of a caregiver teaches us that we have an interesting mind of our own. We also come to learn that the minds of others are different from our own minds. We learn to hold our own mind as a subject of our own interest and we begin to be able to reflect upon the various mental states we experience as representational and motivated. In other words, we learn to think that what we think is motivated and meaningful in the context of our affective experiences. We learn to pause in varying degrees to catch up with ourselves. We also learn to hold another’s mind as differently motivated from our own. These experiences give depth, meaning and intentionality to our understanding of ourselves and others.

I had been unable to see or even reflect upon my own mental states. Not that I could even let that knowledge enter into awareness for quite some time. Since November I have experienced this as an inability to engage any enthusiasm for reading and reflecting on theory or about this play. Usually, reading theory and literature acts like a stimulus for me, as I read my thoughts bounce around from idea to idea, thoughts interact and eventually generate a desire to write and talk

to myself while writing. My mind shied away from any such engagement or aliveness. All I could register was a kind of vague and opaque despair and a fear that comes when I can not think. But thoughts themselves, even about what might be happening for me or about why I felt so uneasy, were unavailable.

Then, during one of our recent reading group discussions Frank asked “can you imagine the horror of sleeping with your mother”? It was one of those starkly candid questions that will leave a large emotional gap in the conversational atmosphere. My initial response was that I thought that would be a horror for men but a different question was needed to generate that horrific experience for women. Leaving aside for a moment that I am a lesbian, a fact I seemed to have temporarily forgotten at the time of the question, I said I thought the equivalent question for a woman would be the horror of imagining sleeping with her father.

But my failure of imagination here is telling. My inability was to place myself within the central struggle of intimacy with the mother that is at the heart of Oedipus Rex. We must all do this regardless of our gender, in order to really understand the destabilizing effect of the play. Much of the pre-oedipal world is thus engaged.

It was precisely my own blind spot; that bit of dissociated self just off to the side and barely visible from the corner of my imagination that led to a very necessary collision. (Bromberg, 2008) Frank’s question jarred me into reflecting on just

how much I had been in my mother's world those many months. It was as if in those moments in my reading group I was able to approach what Donnel Stern refers to as unformulated experience. He describes it thus: "On the evidence of our experience of them as they emerge into awareness, the perceptions, ideas, and memories we prefer not to have, the observations we prefer not to make, are often murky and poorly defined, different in kind than they will be when the process of articulation has reached the level of words. The moments of confusion may be quite brief, barely noticeable, or they may be lengthy, becoming either deeply intriguing or disturbing. 'Unformulated experience' is the label I have chosen to refer to mentation characterized by lack of clarity and differentiation". (Stern, 1997, 37)

These are the words that eventually formulated themselves in the presence of my reading group – if such a dry description can do justice to the experience of learning to think and know differently in the presence of others. This is what I came to know as the underpinning of my difficulty with Oedipus Rex.

With my mother's decline over the years the interactions with her have become more basic and intimate – feeding her and helping to clean and change her. This places me in a realm of intimacy – both old and new – she fed, held and bathed me – now I do these things for her. But these intimacies are part of an old and vitally sensory world, a world where words did not exist and all "thinking" was in the medium of the sensorium.

As my mother is now approaching her death the vitality and force of these sensations become more vivid. It had made it impossible for several months for me to think about Sophocles' play or Oedipus' experience of intimacy with his mother.

It was Frank's question and the presence of others in our reading group that set my reflection in motion. Actually, it shook me and helped to clarify my personal restrictions and the "thinking" I had been trying unsuccessfully to engage in, in order to prepare this writing.

It was not so much that I could not think – but that I could not mentalize – could not find a reflective stance. I could not find a place from which to integrate my own experiences past or present as they were activated through being with my mother and reading the play. If Oedipus were a client of mine I would have been in the receptive position of an unconscious communication. If we understand transference as the unconscious communication of our clients, counter-transference is our receptive organ. Counter-transference, or my active transferences to the play were what Heinrich Racker would describe as complementary. I was far too close to identifying with Oedipus' unconscious. In order to get anywhere I had to find my thoughts, or as Racker would say I had to "find the resonance of the exterior in the interior, ... [the] recognition of what belongs to another as ... [my] own (this part of you is I) and the equation of what

is ... [my] own with what belongs to another (this part of me is you)". (Racker, 1968, 134-135) Understanding resonance and recognition are important aspects of the beginnings of differentiation as part of the capacity to think.

Jurist wrote: "Mentalization ... relies on our ability to put ourselves in the 'mental shoes' of others ... [and] is a matter of imagination and the suspension of our own reactions" (Jurist, 2008, 96) I was quite incapable for a time of placing myself within Oedipus' emotional shoes because my own struggle with intimacy with my own mother was so unavailable for reflective understanding, my own imagination was off-line. But it takes a while to gather the whole picture and I was still gathering as I wrote this. As I came to this section I went for a walk and I began to remember and understand something more about the plays way of drawing me in and drawing me out.

I went to visit my mother recently. My partner and I came into the room to find her trying to speak. I think at some point she has had a stroke that has nearly wiped out her verbal skills and these are hampered further by the medication she is on. When she saw Dana and I she started to cry. We could not understand whether or not she was in pain so we adjusted her in her wheelchair to make her more comfortable and then took her down to the window so that she could get some sun. After a while she seemed to settle and I asked her if I could cut her hair. We spent our time in a pleasant and warm silence based mostly on touch. After a while she became sleepy and I helped the attendant put her to bed.

Later that night I woke sobbing from a dream. The part that is relevant here is that in the dream my partner was telling me that we were going to end our relationship and yet I still wanted to be with her. I could not encompass the degree of pain I was in and so I woke up, or thought I had – but the pain continued and I could not fully shed the dream. Dana woke me from the dream finally by holding me and letting me tell her my fear that we were separating. When we spoke about my dream the next morning I told her that I thought the dream was about my mother's loneliness and isolation; that I thought she could not cry until we arrived because she could not understand her fear until we were there. My mother has always been afraid that she would be left – abandoned. She could not say this in our recent visit though I have long sensed that her fear of going into the nursing home was that she would be left there alone to die. I think I sensed her fear without really being able to know it directly during our visit, but I believe it communicated itself to my unconscious. My dream gave it back to me in achingly personal terms and my conversation with Dana gave me a place to think about it from.

As I wrote this paper I saw again from yet another direction where Oedipus Rex took me – into the pain of being abandoned and left alone to die, as he was. There is an unspeakable knowledge that resides in his mindless effort to find out who his parents were. That my mind is a bit freer of late I attribute to both my experience with my reading group and their collective willingness to help me

know what my struggle with the play was about and Dana's willingness to help me think about my dream and my mother. These experiences with others are precisely what I believe Bromberg is describing in the following quote: "The child's experience of "me-ness" ... is most sturdy when his states of mind are experienced and reflected upon by the mind of an other, particularly during moments of intense affective arousal. ... If the other's behavior, ..., shows that his state of mind is emotionally and cognitively responsive to what is most affectively immediate in the child's mind rather than tangential to it ... the engagement constitutes an act of recognition that allows the child to accomplish the developmental achievement of taking his own state of mind as an object of reflection." (Bromberg, 1998, 10)

This capacity to hold the self up as an object of interest worthy of attention and reflection lies at the heart of my understanding of my own experiences with my mother and my unconscious apperception of Oedipus' struggle. This knowledge could not be found without the reflective attention of others.

Jacosta and Laius did something more than tangential to Oedipus, they cast their fear of him completely out of their own minds and abandoned him to murder.

The more telling lapse of Jocasta's inability to help Oedipus to think occurs at the moment in the play when she begins to understand who he is and tries to discourage him from speaking to and questioning the old shepherd. She does not want him to "know", she does not want that "knowing" to be made conscious

to either of them – the fact that she sent him to his death and that she is his mother. Oedipus thinking she is afraid of finding out he might be of lowly birth, can not respond to her urgency or terror, could not take her state of mind in to reflect upon it – in a state of denial or dissociation he pursues his questioning until the shock of knowledge hits him. Standing alone in his thoughts, alone in the terror of realizing what he has done, he rushes to find – not his wife - but his mother; only to find she has abandoned him one last time. She is dead and he is left to hold his own reality alone. He takes out his own eyes with her broach. If he can not gaze upon a mother who will help him understand – he will in desperate measure take out his desire to see.

Reading Oedipus Rex has been an effort to deepen my understanding of the effects of the play on my psyche and to emerge from those effects through the effort to find a reflective position from which to think and write. The experience of encountering theories about mentalization and the depth that drama could take me has given life to reading, but not without encountering that dead zone within which thinking and liveliness could not occur. Not being able to think or even understand why thinking was so impossible left me feeling quite bereft. When all else has failed, the capacity to think has kept me afloat. You can imagine my dismay perhaps, when that life raft was starting to take in water. It is humbling perhaps to understand yet again that thinking, better yet knowing where my own mind has gone astray, could never have occur without the very real and tangible help of other dear and respected minds.

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