

TURNING A BLIND EYE: THE COVER UP FOR OEDIPUS

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My dear, I am sorry to say this, but no-one has understood before now that 'Oedipus' is not about the revelation of truth but about the cover up of truth. Everybody knows who Oedipus is from the start and everybody is covering up. Just like Watergate. Just like all through history—the lie is what societies are based upon. And it has nothing to do with the Oedipus Complex because Oedipus never had a complex (Pilikian, 1974).

In recent years it has become evident that our contact with reality is not an all or none affair and psychoanalysts have become particularly interested in situations where reality is not simply evaded but is in addition distorted and misrepresented (Money-Kyrle, 1968; Bion, 1970; Joseph, 1983). In this paper I want to consider one such situation, namely that in which we seem to have access to reality but chose to ignore it because it proves convenient to do so. I refer to this mechanism as *turning a blind eye*¹ because I think this conveys the right degree of ambiguity as to how conscious or unconscious the knowledge is. At one extreme we are dealing with simple fraud where all the facts are not only accessible but have led to a conclusion which is then knowingly evaded. More often, however, we are vaguely aware that we chose not to look at the facts without being conscious of what it is we are evading. These evasions may lead to a sense of dishonesty and to various manoeuvres which deny or conceal what has happened by creating a *cover up*.

We are familiar with the idea of gradations in our sense of awareness because we recognize that different mechanisms of defence affect our contact with reality in different ways. In repression for example, a symbolic connexion with reality is

retained even if the actual material which led to the conflict is unconscious. With projective identification, contact may be completely lost or may be vicariously retained through the reality sense of another person. In some instances knowledge of reality may be fragmented through pathological splitting and in others the very structures required to perceive reality are attacked and impaired (Bion, 1957). Turning a blind eye seems to be more complex and tricky and probably involves the operation of several mechanisms which I will only be able briefly to touch on later in this paper. I will mostly be concerned to show how it operates in the drama of Oedipus and how we can learn to recognize it in our clinical work.

Acknowledgement of the reality behind the Oedipus complex involves the recognition, first of the parents as a sexual couple, and then of the consequent jealous feelings which in phantasy lead to murderous and incestuous impulses. The traditional view is that we are unconscious of these impulses just as Oedipus was unconscious of his actions. If, however, insight is available but turned away from and misrepresented we have a very different situation. It is then not only the oedipal configuration of impulses and anxieties, but also the cover up through which these are

¹ This phrase seems to date from the occasion during the Baltic campaign of 1801, when Lord Nelson refused to obey Sir Hyde Parker's signal of recall in the middle of battle. He put his telescope to his blind eye and declared that he could

not see the order to retire (Hannay, 1911, p. 357). The phrase, *turning a deaf ear*, seems to be considerably older (O.E.D., 1927).

evaded, which has to be examined and understood.

The quotation at the beginning of this paper was taken from a newspaper interview with a rather unusual theatre director. It made an impact on me because it seemed to represent a new view of the play which exactly paralleled a view of the Oedipus complex in which turning a blind eye plays a significant role. I later discovered the study of Oedipus Tyrannus by Philip Vellacott (1971), which presents a similar but more subtle and scholarly view and which forms the basis of the present paper. Before discussing the play in detail I will briefly describe some clinical material. I hope to be able to show that a study of the mechanisms at work in the play helps us to recognize similar mental mechanisms as they appear in the consulting room and deepens our understanding of the Oedipus complex.

CLINICAL MATERIAL

My patient was a 40-year-old doctor who presented himself as an innocent victim dominated by forces which he could neither understand nor control and which led to repeated experiences of failure and humiliation (Steiner, 1982). As the analysis progressed it became clear that he understood a great deal about his situation and knew what he was getting himself into. This insight, however, made no difference to his propensity to repeat actions which led to familiar painful outcomes and I was forced to conclude that he was ignoring the insight he had.

He was talented and intelligent but led an isolated and impoverished life. Much of the time he presented himself as successful, always about to have a break-through in his work or with a girl-friend, and he treated me with superiority and condescension. It was clear, however, that he knew that this view of himself was false. He could sometimes admit his sense of loneliness and could describe how he was excluded by his own desperate shyness from the things he valued in life. This latter view seemed to correspond to a psychic reality which he mostly found intolerable and which he consequently decided not to look at.

Some way into the analysis an exciting but platonic relationship ended when his girl friend told him that she was having a serious affair with another man. He continued to be interested in her

and would imagine what she was doing and wonder if she still thought of him. *He then reported a dream in which he broke into her flat, knowing where the key was kept, and got into her bed while she was out. When she returned with her boy-friend, he called out to warn her of his presence and the boy-friend came into the bedroom. The dream faded out with the feeling that he knew that he would soon be asked to leave.*

In the dream both views of himself were represented. On the one hand he was aware of the existence of a couple from which he was excluded and where his presence was not wanted, like a small boy conscious of his parents' relationship with each other. On the other hand, when I interpreted this, he became evasive and defensive, not so much denying the existence of such feelings as denying their significance, so that they became something he could ignore. He had many such dreams and also many phantasies with a similar structure, and from these I knew that he would tell himself that when his girl-friend found him in her bed she would realize how desirable he was and what a mistake she had made, so that she would send her lover away and welcome him back. He knew this was false, but he used the remote possibility that it could happen as a comforting argument to cover up his awareness of the reality of his loneliness and this seemed to help him cope with his feeling of exclusion.

Such phantasies were associated with excitement both in the moments of triumph which he argued might after all materialize despite the odds, and in the experience of humiliation when as inevitably happened, the triumph collapsed. In the transference this would be experienced as an excitement when he felt he had drawn me into a collusion with his view of himself as successful and desirable but also if I helped him to accept the reality of the actual world. He would then claim that I was trying to humiliate him by expelling him from the dream world where he could at least enjoy comforting phantasies.

These phantasies made it difficult for him to learn from experience. For him the real world was a quite awful place which he was ready to ignore under the sway of powerful and persuasive arguments. One could not, however, say that he was completely ignorant of the reality he was evading, and I do not think mechanisms such

as splitting or repression were at work. I think he turned a blind eye and then tried to maintain a cover up as he became superior and morally righteous. It was therefore of great interest to me to discover that Sophocles seemed to recognize something similar at work in his hero Oedipus.

THE STORY OF THE PLAY

You will remember that the tragedy of Oedipus begins when Laius, King of Thebes, is told by the Oracle of Apollo that his fate is to die at the hand of his son. In order to avoid this prophecy, Laius and his wife Jocasta pierce the feet of the new-born baby and give him to a shepherd to be left to die in the neighbouring mountains of Cithaeron. The shepherd takes pity on the child, and saves his life so that Oedipus finds himself brought up in the royal court of Corinth as the son of the childless King Polybus and his Queen Merope. As a young man, he attends a banquet where someone drinks too much and suggests he is not the true son of his parents. Oedipus, not satisfied by their reassurance, goes to seek the truth from the Oracle at Delphi.

The Oracle is evasive over the question of his origins, but, instead, repeats the prophecy made earlier to Laius, and warns Oedipus that he is fated to kill his father and marry his mother. In order to avoid this fate and to preserve Polybus and Merope, he decides never to return to Corinth, and, setting off in the opposite direction, he comes to a place where three roads meet, and there confronts a carriage preceded by a herald who pushes him out of the way. In anger he hits back, and when the occupant of the carriage strikes him, he retaliates by killing the man and his four servants; one man only escapes to take the news back to Thebes. Oedipus continues on his way and arriving at Thebes he finds the city tyrranized by the Sphynx who strangles all those who fail to guess her riddle.

The riddle goes as follows: 'There is on earth a thing two footed and four footed and three footed which has one voice ... but when it goes on most feet then its speed is feeblest'. Oedipus accepts the challenge and solves the riddle, perhaps helped by the fact that the word for two footed is *di-pous* while his own name *Oedipus* means swollen feet, and refers to the injury inflicted by his parents. The answer he gave was that a man crawls on

four feet as an infant, walks on two as an adult, and hobbles with the help of a stick in old age. The defeated Sphynx commits suicide and the grateful city offers Oedipus the recently-vacated crown of Thebes and the recently-widowed Jocasta as Queen.

Oedipus rules Thebes for some seventeen years until the city is once more afflicted with disaster in the form of a plague, and once more the oracle is consulted. This is the point at which Sophocles' Oedipus begins. It opens with the people pleading with Oedipus to help them in their suffering from the plague. Jocasta's brother, Creon, interrupts them with the long-awaited message from the Oracle which states that the city is polluted by the continuing presence of the murderer of Laius. Oedipus swears to find and banish the wrong-doer, and the ancient soothsayer Teiresias is sent for to identify the guilty man. This he at first refuses to do, but when Oedipus becomes childishly abusive, Teiresias gets angry and tells him in plain terms first that he, Oedipus, is the killer of Laius and next, by clear implication, that he is not the son of Polybus and Merope as he claims, but of Jocasta and Laius. It is he, therefore, who is 'the unholy polluter of the land ... living in shameful intercourse with his nearest of kin'.

To these accusations Oedipus replies with more abuse and begins to accuse Creon of plotting to overthrow him. Jocasta enters and Oedipus heeds her appeal and becomes more reasonable. When she discovers that he is accused by Teiresias of killing Laius, she reassures him that prophets are not to be trusted, as was clear in the prophecy given to Laius, which she explains was evidently false because first, Laius' son was exposed and left to die, and second, Laius was killed by bandits at a place where three roads met. Oedipus is disturbed and begins to question Jocasta about the details of the King's death. How was he attended? What did he look like? Who brought the news back to Thebes? Then, explaining his forebodings, he gives an account of his origins in Corinth, his doubts about his parentage, his message from the Oracle, and finally a description of the slaying of the man at the place where three roads meet. If the man he killed was Laius, he is doomed. The witness, at the time, however, stated that Laius was killed by a band of robbers, and although the evidence pointing to

Oedipus seems inescapable, there is just a chance that the witness will stick to his story of robbers and everyone agrees to suspend judgment until they have interrogated him. The issue of Oedipus' parents is also left unspoken, despite Jocasta's account of the prophecy given to Laius, Oedipus' account of that given to him, and the unspoken evidence known to Oedipus and surely to Jocasta of the scars on his feet.

These are only brought into the open with the arrival of the shepherd from Corinth who announces the death of Polybus. Oedipus and Jocasta rejoice at this news as if it should be a source of reassurance, proving again the falseness of prophecies. Oedipus then raises the absurdly remote danger that he may still inadvertently marry the aged queen of Corinth and Jocasta repeatedly tries to reassure him. The Corinthian shepherd, apparently amazed that they know so little of the truth, explains his parentage to Oedipus, having himself been the man who handed over the baby to Polybus. Finally, the Theban shepherd who witnessed the killing of Laius appears and proves to be the same servant who saved Oedipus as a baby.

Jocasta now realizes the whole truth and, becoming increasingly distraught, pleads with Oedipus not to pursue the matter further. Oedipus, however, continues with the denial and even introduces a new argument. If he is not the son of Polybus, he is possibly not royal at all, probably the son of a slave girl, and that is why Jocasta is making such a fuss. Jocasta rushes out and under the threat of torture the shepherd tells the whole story. The mood changes and Oedipus in a truly heroic acknowledgement proclaims, 'All true, all plain, fulfilled to the last word. Oh light of day, now let me look at you for the last time. I am exposed, a blasphemy is being born. Guilty in her I married, cursed in him I killed'. This is the climax of the play, and is followed by a description from a messenger of events which took place out of sight within the palace. Oedipus finds Jocasta has hanged herself and taking her brooches, he blinds himself with them. The play ends with Creon in control and Oedipus expecting to be banished.

VELLACOTT'S INTERPRETATION

Phillip Vellacott suggests that in this play, which must rank among the half-dozen master-

pieces of world literature, the playwright offers his audience two simultaneous interpretations. The first or traditional interpretation is that Oedipus is an innocent man caught in the trap of relentless fate. Oedipus himself offers this view when he says, 'Then would it not be a just estimate of my case to say that all this was the work of some cruel unseen power?' You will recall that this is the view asserted by my patient. It is also the view espoused by Freud when he discovered the *Oedipus Complex*, and described it in terms of moral conflict. Unconscious instinctual forces, like the fate prescribed by the gods, drive us in ways which seem incomprehensible. In this view, the play is about the gradual uncovering of the truth as Oedipus ruthlessly searches to expose it, and Freud himself has likened this to the course of an analysis where the unconscious is gradually revealed to the patient (Freud, 1917).

Although this classical interpretation of the play is undoubtedly the one most easily accessible to the audience, Sophocles at the same time, intends another interpretation to be available which is perhaps only obvious to the careful reader, although influencing all of us, and accounting for the dramatic power of the play. In this interpretation, we see Oedipus as having been aware of his true relation to Laius and Jocasta ever since the time of his marriage. There is evidence in the text to suggest that certainly Teiresias, but also Creon, and even Jocasta, knew, or at least suspected that it was Oedipus who killed Laius, and perhaps also that he was Jocasta's son and about to marry his mother. I believe one can argue further that each of the participants in the drama, for their own reasons, turns a blind eye to this knowledge, and that a cover up was staged which held for seventeen years until the plague erupted to reveal the corruption on which the society of Thebes was based.

On the traditional reading, the play, in fact, hardly qualifies as a tragedy, since it is little more than an account of a sensational disaster falling upon an innocent man. If, however, Oedipus was aware, then the tragic qualities of this masterpiece become understandable. I believe one can suggest that the fascination of the play derives from the exposure of the cover up for Oedipus rather than from the exposure of the crime of Oedipus.

Sophocles may have expected us to recognize that Oedipus acted with knowledge, but this view would not have been accepted by the majority of those who saw his play and indeed seems not to have been accepted by most of the scholars who read Vellacott's book. To me, however, it is most convincing, but as a theme which is to coexist with the traditional view, not to replace it. We are meant to accept the idea that *both* can be simultaneously true, that he knew and at the same time did not know. It is this which I mean to convey when I suggest that he turned a blind eye to the facts.

In the same way a modern view of the Oedipus complex would not replace the classical Freudian view but complement it. Put very crudely, the complex can be thought to result from the moral conflicts which arise when murderous and incestuous impulses are evoked in a child's relationship with his parents and siblings. I am emphasizing here that these conflicts are universal and do not in themselves account for the pathological forms of resolution of the Oedipus complex. We have, in addition, to look at those situations which arise when the psychic reality of these impulses is denied and a cover up of a perverse kind is staged.

I will explore this theme further by using Vellacott's observations of the play to examine the role which the principal characters may have played in such a cover up. I shall then try to link them back to the mental mechanisms at work in the individual patient when he is struggling with the conflicts surrounding the Oedipus complex. I will emphasize the way *chance* is used to justify turning a blind eye to the evidence, and how collusion between individuals enhances the power of the resulting evasions and misrepresentations.

The observer who stops to consider the events of the play is likely to ask himself first of all, 'Why, if these things can be brought to light now, were they not discovered seventeen years ago?' Oedipus himself asks why there was no enquiry and is told that the preoccupation with the Sphinx led the elders to turn their eyes away from such mysteries as the murder of their king. 'What about Teiresias? Why wasn't he summoned and asked to identify the murderer then? Why did he stay silent for seventeen years if he knew all the time?' Creon simply answers, 'I don't know. In matters I do not understand I prefer to say nothing'. There was a witness, but he says

they were attacked by a band of robbers, and as soon as he saw Oedipus offered the crown and the hand of Jocasta, he asked the queen to send him to the country as far from Thebes as possible. It is clear that we are meant to realize that he recognizes Oedipus and fears that the truth may be got from him.

THE ATTITUDE OF OEDIPUS

Vellacott points out that from the play, it is easy to reconstruct the state of mind of Oedipus as he arrived at Thebes. As he walked the streets he must have heard everyone talking about the death of Laius. He had just killed a man together with his servants, and it is hard to imagine that he did not ask where King Laius had been killed, how he was attended, whether there was a herald, whether the king rode in a carriage, what age he was, and what he looked like. If he received answers to these questions, could there have been any doubt in his mind? When he hears these details seventeen years later he can only say, 'Alas, now everything is clear'.

The text indicates even more self-knowledge to have been almost inevitable. The memory of the words of Apollo's priestess: 'You shall marry your own mother and breed children from her, and your own father who gave you life, you shall kill', might be expected to be still very alive. This is the fate he was trying to avoid, so that we are surprised if he killed a man that his thoughts did not connect the murder with the prophecy, and if he did not ask, 'Could this man be my father?' Of course he argues that he believed Polybus to be his father, but he very recently had reason to question this, and had had his doubts reinforced by the Oracle. After his triumph over the Sphinx, Oedipus married the widow of a man, similar to the one he killed, who was old enough to be his father, and he did this within a very short time of being told by the most impressive of all authorities that he was destined to kill his father and marry his mother. And the man who acted in this way was no fool, but gifted with adequate reasoning power.

The tragedy of the play is made poignant, not only by the fact that he was led first by rage, and second by ambition, to these two crimes, but that he was persuaded to turn a blind eye to what he was doing. How could he have lived with such knowledge? Sophocles and Vellacott show us the

plausible façade which he erected to cover up the truth, and which he persuaded himself and others to accept.

This version said that on hearing the prophecy his one concern was to get as far from Corinth as possible to avoid his parents; the knowledge that Polybus was probably not his father was suppressed. This version said that when he reached Thebes, it did not occur to him to connect the man he had killed on the road with the King of Thebes, in spite of the herald; or to connect the widowed Jocasta with the widowed mother Delphi had assigned him as wife, in spite of the doubt cast on his parentage in Corinth. The version said that he had never thought of comparing his age with the time that had passed since Jocasta had married her first husband, and insisted that the one thing that he must fear was going back to Corinth, killing Polybus and marrying Merope.

Vellacott shows how easy it must have been to get away with this story because we too are able to read and see the play, and accept it uncritically. We collude in the cover-up as did the other characters in the drama. What allows us to do so is the element of chance. All the evidence points to Oedipus, but the case is not yet proved; it is just possible that we are mistaken. Perhaps Oedipus himself argued in the same way. When a homeless young man is offered a kingdom and a wife, he might well be persuaded not to ask too many questions.

JOCASTA'S ATTITUDE

Let us briefly consider what Jocasta's state of mind might have been when Oedipus arrived at Thebes. She had, a few days earlier, been told of the death of her husband, and all we know of their relationship is that, because of the prophecy, he avoided her sexually, and when she did have a child, he cruelly ordered its death. In the play, she repeatedly expresses her anger and contempt of prophecy, and is obsessed with a hatred of oracles. She is more emotional and less logical than Oedipus, and some of her attempts at reassurance are quite foolish. For example, she seems to say, 'Even if you are proved to have killed Laius and hence will be accursed and banished from Thebes, take comfort in the fact

that the 35-year-old prophecy that he would be killed by his son is false'. If Oedipus was born in Corinth, this can be of little interest to him, but the queen is clearly preoccupied with the fateful prediction, because again when they hear that Polybus is dead she tells him, 'At least your father's death is a comfort'.

It is interesting to look at the way she propounds the philosophy of chance. She asserts that: 'Our mortal life is ruled by chance. There is no such thing as foreknowledge'. Her reassurances all seem to reveal the dream world she inhabits, and she is even led to say, 'To live at random, as one can, is the best way. As for your mother's bed, have no fear on that score; many a man has dreamt he found himself in bed with his mother. But the man to whom these things count for nothing, bears his life most easily'. This philosophy is an essential ingredient of the attitude of turning a blind eye. All the evidence points to one conclusion, but it does not *prove* it—there is just a chance that it is otherwise, so it is wisest to ignore it. 'The man to whom these things count for nothing, bears his life most easily.'

When Oedipus was offered her hand as part of his reward for freeing the city of the Sphinx, he was a popular figure, similar in appearance but nearly twenty years younger than her husband, and the marriage offered her the chance to continue to be Queen of Thebes, and to bear children. I think we are intended to suppose that these advantages led her to turn a blind eye to the truth and to collude in the cover up.

CREON'S ATTITUDE

In a similar way, we can examine the dilemma Creon was placed in when he held responsibility for the city after the death of Laius. He claims to have no love of responsibility and since he is in any way consulted on important issues, has no wish to be king. Thebes needs a leader, and if he can get a young man on the throne who will be advised by the more experienced Jocasta and himself, he can retain his influence. Throughout the play he is reticent and curt. 'I prefer to say nothing' is his reaction, as we have seen. Moreover, he shows no surprise when told of Teiresias' accusations. Because of their terrible import, he should

surely be horrified that tragedy was about to strike his family, but all he says is, 'If Teiresias says that, you know best'. Moreover, he knew both Laius and Oedipus and must have noticed the resemblance which Jocasta speaks of. The quarrel between Oedipus and Creon is made to appear foolish and trivial, both of them speaking in anger. However, if a cover-up had taken place, it makes sense if Creon tries to deny his complicity. Oedipus certainly cannot be saved, but Creon could and, in fact, does come out of it unscathed. Oedipus is angry at this, but Creon seems to be saying, 'It was your affair. You married my sister and took the crown when it was offered. I was content to have the power without kingly trappings. All I did was to keep quiet, and this is what I will continue to do'.

THE ATTITUDE OF THE ELDERS

Finally, we need to consider the role of the chorus of elders who are on stage throughout the unfolding of the drama. Although usually spoken as dialogue between the characters, many of the arguments seem to be directed to the chorus, and in the traditional reading of the play they appear to act as a kind of jury of respected citizens. They are, however, very clearly concerned with their own interests, and with great subtlety, Sophocles shows us how difficult it is for the ordinary citizens to speak out as they begin to suspect that all is not well with Oedipus.

At first, they elaborate on their distress at the suffering caused by the plague, and display an unquestioning religious fervour, which contrasts with the angry disrespect shown by Oedipus to Teiresias, and the scepticism of oracles voiced by Jocasta. They are loyal, but do not want the past investigated too closely. When Oedipus proclaims that he will find the guilty man, they assert, 'I did not kill Laius, nor can I point a finger to his killer. As for an inquiry, it is Phoebus (i.e. the Oracle) who can tell us'. They thus prefer divine knowledge to that arrived at by investigating reality.

Although they are present throughout the interaction between Teiresias and Oedipus, they at first avoid all reference to the accusations made. Indeed, they speak of an unknown robber with bloodstained hands who has committed the

most unspeakable of unspeakable crimes, and refer to him as trying to keep at bay the prophecy spoken at the earth's centre. It is evident that they have something terrible in mind but they prefer not to be specific, and speak as if the wrongdoer is at large roaming the countryside.

Eventually, they admit, 'Certainly what the learned augurer told us is disturbing, deeply disturbing', but they prefer to suspend judgment. 'We cannot accept it, we cannot refute it; we do not know what to say.' Their real reliance is neither on Teiresias nor on rational possibility, but on public opinion, the nationwide reputation of Oedipus. They decide to ignore everything—the challenge is too much for mortals and must be left to the Gods. They thus assert their piety but they also give space for a cautious concern with their own interests. Although piety would lead them to side with Teiresias, he, like the Sphynx, represents the unseen world, and Oedipus, they remind themselves, was clever enough to overcome that challenge and may even win again. They thus affirm their loyalty and say, 'Oedipus won his throne by his services to Thebes. I will never think evil of him without proof'. We might add, not when there is a chance that he might survive the crisis.

Their next major intervention occurs after they have heard Jocasta and Oedipus give all the details which they have intelligence enough to interpret. They are aware that something terrible is happening and are in mortal fear. They have been the close associates of Oedipus in government, and they know that when the gods destroy a sinner those nearest to him are engulfed in the cataclysm. They, therefore, begin with a hymn in praise of the Olympian laws and a prayer for innocence and purity for themselves. They plead with Zeus to punish the wrongdoer, and thus to uphold religion and reverse the decline of respect for the oracles and for the gods. Finally, when the tragedy is revealed in its full horror, they can only wish that they had never known Oedipus and seem overwhelmed by the catastrophe.

THE DEPRESSIVE POSITION AND THE OEDIPUS COMPLEX

What then is the psychic reality of the *Oedipus complex*? Freud showed us that oedipal impulses

are part of everyone's reality so that in phantasy we have all killed our fathers and slept with our mothers. If we do not evade the reality of these impulses, we will confront their consequences, and experience the fear and the guilt which necessarily follow from them. If persecutory anxieties predominate, facing reality involves facing the threat of retaliation sometimes expressed as a castration threat. If depressive anxieties are active, facing reality involves facing the catastrophic loss of the parental couple on which the patient depends. If this reality can be faced it can lead to an experience of loss which enables mourning to take place, and which ushers in the experiences which Melanie Klein described under the heading of the depressive position (Klein, 1935, 1940). These involve internalization, symbol formation and the drive to make reparation which enables the parental couple to be more realistically installed as symbolic figures in the internal world. In this way, growth and learning from experience is made possible.

If the oedipal crime is not acknowledged to have taken place, but is misrepresented, distorted or covered up, then there is nothing to mourn, and the reparative processes associated with the depressive position cannot operate. There is also nothing to fear because no crime is acknowledged except, of course, the fear that the cover-up will be exposed. The result is that the external couple is not attacked as it would be if psychic reality was acknowledged but instead the attack is mounted against an internal representation of a good intercourse, namely one in which truth is respected. The external *status quo* is apparently preserved but there is an inner corruption which is represented by the plague in the play and specifically confirmed by the oracle. The personality is then felt to be based on an insecure foundation and the need to cover up leads to further evasions and distortions. It is this kind of evasion of reality which Vellacott's interpretation of the play allows us to examine.

THE IMPORTANCE OF CHANCE IN THE MECHANISM OF TURNING A BLIND EYE

Further work is needed to understand what mechanisms are involved in turning a blind eye. It is, however, occasionally possible to observe a sequence which may account for some instances.

We sometimes notice a patient who seems to be in full contact with reality and makes an observation or reaches a conclusion which demonstrates this. Then it not infrequently happens that we listen while he begins to mount an argument which gradually convinces him that his original observation is false or at least not necessarily true. These arguments often involve considerable ingenuity and are sometimes greatly admired by the patient who may become increasingly excited by them as they proceed. They may function like propaganda and eventually convince the patient that his original observation need no longer be taken seriously. Chance seems to play an important role in this process as if it forms the vital flaw through which the truth can be attacked. Everything may point to the initial truthful observation but it has not been proved beyond doubt; there is still a chance that it may be wrong. The decision to evade reality therefore involves a gamble and this may be connected with the addictive hold which some of these mechanisms have on the personality; it is not uncommon to meet patients who appear to continue to turn a blind eye when it no longer seems to lead to any advantage.

This philosophy of chance is most clearly propounded by Jocasta, but espoused by Laius and Oedipus as well. Laius ignored the warning and allowed the fateful intercourse with Jocasta—there was a chance that it did not matter. There was a chance that the prophecy could be avoided and this justified killing his son and turning a blind eye on the consequences to his wife and to himself. Even the exposure of Oedipus has to do with chance, since to kill one's own son is certainly a pollution, but to expose him leaves the possibility, unlikely as it is, that he will survive. Guilt is thus evaded. For Oedipus too, there was a chance that Polybus was his true father, and to preserve this belief he had to turn a blind eye to the evidence of the scars on his feet, to the accusation at the banquet in Corinth, to the lack of reassurance from the Oracle, and later when the accusations actually began to be made, to the words of Teiresias and the gradual accumulation of the evidence throughout the play. Knowing that he was destined to kill his father, he could still take a chance and conclude that the man he killed may not be his father and the widow he married may not be his father's widow.

At some point, perhaps when the plague made him aware of the internal corruption, he begins to realize that the cover-up cannot last, and he shows an impressive determination to face reality. His resolve was, however, difficult to sustain, and throughout the play we see the struggle between the wish to continue the cover-up and the wish to make a clean breast of it and face the full truth. Finally when he can evade the truth no longer he takes full responsibility for his actions and in a truly heroic moment he faces his guilt. Sophocles, however, goes on to show us how impossible it is to sustain this degree of self-knowledge. Even the self-blinding seems to be a partial retreat from truth. The elders and, no doubt, the audience expect suicide and Oedipus justifies himself by explaining, 'When I come to the land of death—if I could see, I do not know with what eyes I should face my father or my unhappy mother, since against them both I am guilty of sins too black for strangling to atone'.

This point is even more striking when we meet Oedipus in Sophocles' final play, *Oedipus at Colonus*. Here Oedipus goes back on his admission of guilt completely. In what seems to be an absurdly illogical series of denials he asserts that he feels no guilt because, first he did not know that the man he killed was his father, second that the man struck the first blow so that he killed in self defence, and finally that since his father had tried to kill him as a baby he was perfectly right to avenge himself. I cannot unfortunately discuss this play further here but it presents a fascinating study of the retreat from truth into omnipotence (Vellacott, 1978).

COLLUSION

There is, however, a second factor in the creation of such illusory worlds where we believe something against the evidence of our senses because it suits us to do so, and that is the factor of *collusion*. A cover-up requires conspirators who agree either covertly or tacitly to collaborate. If Creon had called for a proper enquiry, the witness would have been interrogated and the truth would have come out. If Jocasta had not ignored the oracle which she so hated and despised, she might not have turned a blind eye to the scars on the feet of her young husband, to the

way he resembled Laius or to the fact that his age was precisely that which her son would be, had he lived. If the elders too had been more vigilant and not so concerned to back the winning party, they might have demanded an enquiry, or at least sent to Corinth for references about the origins and character of the new king. The cover-up could only take place because it suited several parties at the same time, and thus enabled the participants to be of mutual service to each other.

It is clear that Vellacott's Oedipus is a reluctant hero who does not face reality until circumstances make it difficult to evade it any longer. I believe this is how many of us come to analysis, delaying it until our symptoms can no longer be ignored. Moreover the struggle to evade reality continues throughout the analysis and the retreat into omnipotence is a characteristic feature of negative therapeutic reactions. Nevertheless the fact that we do sometimes face the truth however imperfectly, is a considerable achievement, and this is also the case with Oedipus.

DISCUSSION

(a) Social and political implications.

The social and political implications of turning a blind eye are too complex and too important to be discussed here. I will however, simply mention that I believe we turn a blind eye to a number of dangers which threaten our society and our future. Unemployment at home, and poverty and starvation in the third world are examples, but it seems to be above all the build-up of nuclear weapons which poses such a threat that neither we nor our leaders can properly comprehend it. Yet all the information pointing to the seriousness of the situation is available and we seem to have to avoid drawing the unhappy conclusions which a realistic appraisal would demand. We can only carry on our lives as normal by turning a blind eye.

(b) Clinical implications.

I introduced the fragment of clinical material at the beginning of this paper to illustrate how a patient who is evidently not psychotic, and fully capable of observing reality, can nevertheless misrepresent it to himself and to others and consequently live in an unreal world of phantasy

and illusion. Although we all do this to a worrying extent, the problem becomes tragically disabling in those patients who seem unable or unwilling to emerge from this state. Elsewhere I have characterized it as a borderline attitude to reality in which truth is neither fully evaded as it may be in psychosis, nor for the most part accepted as it may be in neurosis, but is rather twisted and misrepresented (Steiner, 1979, 1984).

These patients feel they need to use such misrepresentations to maintain their equilibrium and they often come to treatment when for one reason or another their defences are unable to sustain the *status quo*. In treatment they seem to seek only to regain their balance and are, therefore, against understanding which they feel would only undermine their defences further (Joseph, 1983). It is not simply that they use this or that defence mechanism which could be worked on and understood to their advantage. They use a whole organization of defences and fear that if any part of it is examined, the whole edifice will collapse.

In the case of my patient, I think we can see how the unreal world he lived in and the mechanism he used to maintain it are illuminated by the discussion of Sophocles' play. In his phantasy world he imagines how he can defeat his rival and share his girl-friend's bed, and couples are of such importance to him because he has projected on to them internal objects which represent his parents. These deeper oedipal conflicts have not been resolved by allowing the establishment of an internal parental couple upon whom he could depend. Instead he has in phantasy repeatedly triumphed over his father and felt himself to be his mother's favourite.

But he has never faced the consequences of his actions and he never, or at least only very rarely, acknowledges the reality which the phantasy world denies. This reality involves an awareness of his childish incompetence and his consequent dependence on his parents. It involves facing the fact that it was their intercourse which brought him into existence and their parental care which allowed him to survive and develop. It is this reality to which he turns a blind eye, and he is consequently sentenced to relive his oedipal strivings in a perverted form. Thus he is seduced into situations where gratification is derived either from objects which collude with his phantasy and

gratify him in his illusion or if as more often happens, reality thwarts his ambitions, from objects who provide him with masochistic pleasure.

The two views of himself which he seemed to hold, appeared to coexist rather in the way Freud suggested when he wrote; 'We may probably take it as being generally true that what occurs in all these cases is a psychical *split*. Two psychical attitudes have been formed instead of a single one—one, the normal one, which takes account of reality, and another which under the influence of the instincts detaches the ego from reality. The two exist alongside of each other' (Freud, 1940, p. 202). It is important to note that this kind of split is rather different from the splitting described by Melanie Klein (O'Shaughnessy, 1975). It was first elaborated by Freud in his discussion of fetishism (Freud, 1927) and is I think characteristic of the type of situation which I connect with turning a blind eye. I think it is intimately connected with various forms of dishonesty and perversion.

My patient seemed to get drawn into a cover-up of the truth which involved a conspiracy in which that side of himself which was capable of facing reality and which wanted to live in the real world was afraid to speak out. He seemed to deal with it by using his own weakness and need, to persuade it that a cover up was necessary. In the transference, I was often drawn into various manoeuvres to prevent the cover-up from being exposed and was often in danger of finding reasons of my own for turning a blind eye to uncomfortable facts. I believe we have first to struggle to deal with some of our own inclinations to collude, like many of the figures in Sophocles' play, so that we may then be able to help our patients to begin to face their internal, as well as their external reality.

SUMMARY

Philip Vellacott's study of Sophocles and Oedipus is used to suggest that both the play and the Oedipus complex need to be understood at two levels simultaneously. In the classical view Oedipus is a victim of fate and bravely pursues the truth. Freud likened this to the course of an analysis where the unconscious is gradually revealed to the patient. At the same time

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Sophocles seems to intend us to understand that the chief characters in the play must have been aware of the identity of Oedipus and realized that he had committed parricide and incest. There is some ambiguity about the degree of awareness of this knowledge and in the paper I put forward the view that each of the participants, for their own reasons turned a blind eye to it so that a cover-up was staged.

In the same way, a modern view of the Oedipus complex would not replace the classical view but complement it. Oedipal conflicts are universal and do not in themselves account for pathology. The view is put forward that a pathological resolution of the Oedipus complex arises when the psychic reality of these impulses is denied and a cover-up of a perverse kind results.

It is suggested that *turning a blind eye* is an important mechanism which leads to a misrepresentation and distortion of psychic reality.

TRANSLATIONS OF SUMMARY

L'étude de Phillip Vellacott sur Sophocles et Oedipe est employé pour suggérer que le théâtre aussi bien que le Complxe d'Oedipe ont besoin d'une compréhension à deux niveaux simultanés. Selon le point de vue classique, Oedipe est une victime du destin et poursuit la vérité courageusement. Freud a associé ceci avec le cours de l'analyse où l'inconscient est graduellement découvert au patient. En même temps, Sophocles semble avoir l'intention de nous faire comprendre que les caractères principaux dans le théâtre ont dû être conscients de l'identité d'Oedipe et ont pris conscience qu'il a commis de parricide et de l'inceste. Il ya une certaine ambiguïté à propos du degré de conscience sur ce savoir et dans ce rapport je mets en évidence le point de vue que chacun des participants, à cause de raisons personnelles, refusent à voir ce fait de façon qu'une couverture est mise en scène.

De la même façon, un aperçu moderne du Complxe d'Oedipe ne pourrait pas remplacer le point de vue classique mais c'est un complément. Les conflits oedipiens sont universels et par leur seule présence, ne rendent pas raison de la pathologie. Ce point de vue est mis en évidence par rapport à une résolution pathologique du Complxe d'Oedipe laquelle se produit lorsque la réalité psychique de ces instincts est refoulée et est une couverture de résultats de type perverse.

On suggère que *refuser de voir quelque chose* est un mécanisme important qui conduit à une fausse interprétation et une déformation de la réalité psychique.

Philip Vellacotts Arbeit über Sophokles und Ödipus wird verwendet um darauf hinzuweisen, dass beide, das Stück und der Ödipuskomplex, auf zwei verschiedenen Ebenen gleichzeitig verstanden werden müssen. In der klassischen Sicht ist Ödipus ein Opfer des Schicksals der tapfer nach der Wahrheit sucht. Freud hat dies mit dem Verlauf einer Analyse verglichen, in der das Unbewusste dem Patienten langsam offenbart wird. Gleichzeitig scheint Sophokles uns zu verstehen zu geben, dass die Hauptpersonen des Stücks, von der Identität Ödipus wussten und ihnen außerdem bewusst war, dass er Inzest und Vatermord begangen hatte. Wie tief dieses Wissen in ihr Bewusstsein eindringt, wird offen gelassen, und in dieser Arbeit vertrete ich die Ansicht, dass jeder der Teilnehmer, aus bestimmtem ihm eigenen Grunde, ein Auge zudrückte, so dass die Tatsache verdeckt wurde.

Ähnlicherweise würde eine moderne Sicht des Ödipuskomplexes, die klassische Sicht nicht ersetzen, sondern ergänzen. Ödipale Konflikte sind allgemein vorhanden und können nicht in sich als die Ursache von Pathologien betrachtet werden. Es wird hier angenommen, dass eine pathologische Lösung immer dann auftritt, wenn die psychische Realität dieser Impulse verneint und auf perverse Weise verdeckt wird.

Es wird vorgeschlagen, dass *ein Auge zuzudrücken* ein wichtiger Mechanismus ist, der zur falschen Darstellung und zur Entstellung der psychischen Realität führt.

Basándose en al estudio que Phillip Vellacott hizo de Sófocles y del Edipo, se llega a la conclusión de que tanto la obra como el complejo de Edipo se han de entender simultáneamente a dos niveles. Según el punto de vista clásico Edipo es víctima del destino y persigue la verdad. Freud asemejó esto al curso del análisis, en donde el inconsciente se va revelando gradualmente al paciente. Pero también es cierto que Sófocles parece dar a entender que los personajes principales de la obra conocían la identidad de Edipo y sabían que había cometido parricidio e incesto. Hasta qué punto eran conscientes de que lo sabían no está del todo claro. Según el autor de este artículo, cada uno de ellos tenía sus razones para hacer como si no lo supiera y echar tierra al asunto.

El punto de vista más actual sobre el complejo de Edipo no desplaza al clásico sino que lo complementa. Los conflictos edípios son universales, y por si solos no resultan en algo patológico. Según el autor el Edipo desemboca patológicamente cuando se niega la realidad psíquica de estos impulsos y se encubre de forma perversa.

En opinión del autor, hacer como si uno no vieras es un importante mecanismo que lleva a la falsa representación y distorsión de la realidad psíquica.

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