Chapter II
Riddle of the Sphinx: Paradox Revealed and Reveiled

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ABSTRACT

This chapter interprets the myth of Oedipus in light of interpersonal neurobiology and second-order cybernetics, where observers are self-referentially implicated within the observed. The riddle of the Sphinx, “What walks on four legs in the morning, two legs at noon, and three legs in the evening?” is understood as a paradox of self-reference in apparent contradiction with all known laws of science. From a developmental perspective, traumatic residues from King Laius’ attempted infanticide uniquely prepare Oedipus to solve the Sphinx’s riddle. Oedipus’ capacity for full self-reference is equated with the operation of the most powerful universal Turing machine with both implicit and explicit memory of its past. That Oedipus could move beyond literal thought to interpret morning, noon, and evening as stages of human life proves pivotal. Oedipus’ use of metaphor and abstraction to solve a paradox of self-reference signals humankind’s transition to greater levels of internal complexity, including more fully self-reflective consciousness.

INTRODUCTION

Mythology the world over helps to organize cultural categories and mores by providing roles, rules, models, and narratives about life in the past in preparation for life in the future. Ancient and traditional peoples often treat myths literally as stories about real people and concrete events (e.g., Jaynes, 1976). Especially heralded by the work of Carl Jung (e.g., 1961), contemporary psychology brings a more symbolic, self-referential focus to the ways that myths can illuminate the inner world and culture of the mythmakers themselves.

If one myth rises above all others to signal entry into modern consciousness, it is that of Oedipus. This tale has been analyzed through-
out the millennia by well-known thinkers such as Aristotle, Socrates, Nietzsche, Lévi-Strauss, Lacan, and Ricoeur. Some (e.g., Lévi-Strauss, 1977; Ricoeur, 1970) have understood the Oedipus myth as the individual quest for personal origins or identity; others (e.g., Aristotle, 1982, Nietzsche, 1871/1999) have used sociopolitical and cultural lenses to focus on the tale’s prohibitions against the very taboos it illustrates. Prohibitions against infanticide, patricide, and incest help to establish the modern day state by erecting boundaries to protect society’s youngest and most vulnerable members while serving as social glue to bind individuals into larger collective units. From an evolutionary vantage point, these prohibitions prevent inbreeding and maximize chances for survival and healthy propagation within the collective gene pool.

Perhaps the most noted analyst of the Oedipus myth is Sigmund Freud. At the inception of psychoanalysis, Freud’s discovery of this myth fused his theory of psychosexual developmental with his topographical metaphor of the psyche. That this tragic hero killed his father and then married and seduced his mother staked out the psychological lay of the land, so to speak, which became immortalized as the Oedipus complex. Whereas Freud (1900/1966) viewed this myth quite literally in terms of unconscious impulses and fantasies toward real people, his successor Jung (1956) interpreted the Oedipus story symbolically as an intrapsychic reflection of healthy individuation.

This chapter revisits early origins of psychoanalysis that pivot around the Oedipus myth in order to introduce a second-order cybernetic point of view. Whereas cybernetics establishes the study of information, second-order cybernetics views information science self-referentially by implicating the observer within the observed (see Heims, 1991). From the vantage point of self-reference, the Oedipus story yields important clues about how the modern psyche became more complex through recursive loops in consciousness whereby implicit memory processes become explicit and lead to an increased capacity for self-reflection.

In the section to follow, I refresh the reader’s memory by briefly recounting the Oedipus myth. Then I apply the approach of Lévi-Strauss to treat the myth structurally by introducing a new level of abstraction. I regard the Sphinx’s riddle as a paradox of self-reference, arguing that both the riddle of the Sphinx and the life course of Oedipus bear structural similarities that signify the self-reflective search for origins. This interpretation establishes a foundation to regard the shift within the early history of psychoanalysis from a literal, Freudian interpretation to a more symbolic Jungian one. I demonstrate how this shift itself emerges in part self-referentially through the concrete enactment of the Oedipus myth within the real relationship between Freud as father and king, and Jung as prince and heir apparent.

Next, I follow Feder (1974/1988) to examine the clinical profile of Oedipus, whose restless, relentless search for his own origins plus infantile, primitive attempts to blot out what he ultimately sees are driven by psychobiological symptoms of separation and adoption trauma combined with the physical abuse of attempted murder by his biological father. Then I link Feder with contemporary research on the psychoneurobiology of implicit vs. explicit memory plus a cybernetic perspective that implicates the power of universal Turing machines to fully harness implicit and explicit memory. I conclude with claims that affective, imagistic, and cognitive skills necessary to advance from concrete to metaphorical thinking relate to implicit processes within Lakoff and Johnson’s (1999) embodied philosophy and mature, abstract cognition within Jean Piaget’s (e.g., Flavell, 1963) developmental psychology. Recursive loops in consciousness by which the observer can be detected within the observed signal enhanced internal complexity and the power of self-reflection to break intergenerational chains of abusers unwittingly begetting abusers.