

The Waning of the Oedipus Complex

Hans Loewald M.D.

MANY OF THE VIEWS EXPRESSED in this paper have been stated previously by others in some form. To account for my omission (barring a very few *exceptions*) of specific references, I can do no better than quote from Breuer's introduction to his theoretical chapter in the "Studies on Hysteria" (Breuer and Freud, 1893-1895pp. 185-186):

When a science is making rapid advances, thoughts which were first expressed by single individuals quickly become common property. Thus no one who attempts to put forward to-day his views on hysteria and its psychical basis can avoid repeating a great quantity of other people's thoughts which are in the act of passing from personal into general possession. It is scarcely possible always to be certain who first gave them utterance, and there is always a danger of regarding as a product of one's own what has already been said by someone else. I hope, therefore, that I may be excused if few quotations are found in this discussion and if no strict distinction is made between what is my own and what originates elsewhere. Originality is claimed for very little of what will be found in the following pages.

The Oedipus complex—psychic representation of a central,

Address given in Plenary Session at the Annual Meeting of the American Psychoanalytic Association in Atlanta, Georgia, on May 6, 1978. The first paragraph of the Introduction has been added for publication of the paper.

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instinctually motivated, triangular conflictual constellation of child-parent relations—is said to be superseded or to lose manifest importance, temporarily, during latency. The disappearance or retreat of the complex was the subject of Freud's 1924 paper, "*Der Untergang des Oedipuskomplexes*." In the *Collected Papers* the title is translated as "The Passing of the Oedipus Complex," in the *Standard Edition* as "The Dissolution of the Oedipus Complex." Freud, in the body of this paper and elsewhere (1923), (1925) uses even stronger, more active words: destruction (*Zerstörung*), demolition (*Zertrümmerung*). The German word *Untergang* literally means a going under, going down. It is used for the sun's going down in the evening (*Sonnenuntergang*) as well as for the "destruction" of the world (*Weltuntergang*) (cf. *Schreber*). Spengler's famous book, *The Decline of the West*, which was published just a few years earlier in 1922, bears the German title *Der Untergang des Abendlandes*, *Abendland* being the land of the evening, the occident, that region of the earth where the sun sets.

It is known that Ferenczi thought the word *Untergang* was too strong and that he assumed that Freud was alarmed by "Rank's tendency to replace the Oedipus complex by the birth trauma as the essential etiological factor in the neuroses and elsewhere" (Jones, 1957). We also learn from Jones that the paper "contained at first a slight criticism of Rank's theory about birth trauma (later omitted)," and that Freud (in a letter to Ferenczi) "admitted that the word in the title might have been emotionally influenced by his feelings about Rank's new ideas" (p. 108). It seems clear that Freud was concerned about this challenge to the genetic centrality of the Oedipus complex.

Freud states in his paper that the phallic phase, being that of the Oedipus complex, does not directly proceed on to the definitive genital organization, but submerges (*versinkt*) and is replaced by the latency period. In the conflict between "narcissistic" interest in the penis and libidinal cathexis of parental objects, the first is victorious: the child's ego turns

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away from the Oedipus complex (this account refers to the boy). Freud stresses the importance of castration and of the ego's defenses against castration anxiety. He speaks of the relinquishment of oedipal object cathexes and their substitution by identification with parental authority, which forms the nucleus of the superego; of desexualization and sublimation of the libidinal strivings of the complex, and of aim inhibition and transformation of these strivings into tender impulses. He emphasizes that this process of the ego's turning away (*Abwendung*) from the complex is "more than a repression," that it amounts, when ideally carried out, to a destruction and abolition of it. He implies that the ideal norm, never attained, would be such destruction as contrasted with repression. Insofar as it is repressed, the complex persists unconsciously in the id and will later show its pathogenic effects.

The title of my paper is meant to call to mind two different problem areas. First: no matter how resolutely the ego turns away from it and what the relative proportions of repression, sublimation, "destruction" might be, in adolescence the Oedipus complex rears its head again, and so it does during later periods in life, in normal people as well as in neurotics. It repeatedly requires repression, internalization, transformation, sublimation, in short, some forms of mastery in the course of life—granting that the foundations for such repeated mastery are established during latency and that the forms and levels of mastery are likely to vary with changing levels of experience and maturity. Seen in this light, there is no definitive destruction of the Oedipus complex, even when it is more than repressed; but we can speak of its waning and the various forms in which this occurs.

Secondly, "waning of the Oedipus complex" suggests the contemporary decline of psychoanalytic interest in the oedipal phase and oedipal conflicts and the predominance of interest and research in preoedipal development, in the infant-mother dyad and issues of separation-individuation and of the self and narcissism (in the recently elaborated sense of these terms). What

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Ernest Jones tells us about Freud's paper and the exchange between Freud and Ferenczi in regard to it constitutes a significant precedent. Even in contemporary so-called object-relations theory there is great emphasis on early stages of self/object differentiation, on separation-individuation, on the primitive origins of object relations. Instead of referring to the "passing" of the Oedipus complex in the course of further development, to the paramount influence its resolution or lack of it has on later development, waning in this second sense, then, points to the diminished interest in the complex itself and its resolution. To a significant extent, psychoanalytic interest has shifted away from this nuclear conflict of the transference neuroses and onto the narcissistic neuroses (I am using Freud's nosological classification here) in which oedipal conflicts are held not to be central, and to narcissistic aspects of classical and character neuroses.

In what follows I shall consider certain facets of the content of the Oedipus complex and of its resolution, and then some aspects of the decrease of interest in the complex. I hope to show that increased understanding of preoedipal issues, far from devaluating oedipal ones, may in the end help to gain deeper insight into them.

Parricide, Guilt, Responsibility, Atonement

The active words destruction, demolition, which Freud has used in referring to the dissolution of the Oedipus complex, may be heard as reverberations of that dominant feature of the oedipal **conflict**, parricide, the destruction of the parent by the child.¹

¹*I am aware that Freud's main thesis is that the "demolition" of the Oedipus complex is the result of the castration threat. The destruction wrought by parricide, however, is but the complement to the threat of destruction of the child by castration. Moreover, as will be seen later, the distinction between repression and "destruction" of the complex involves far more than the distinction between two different forms of **defense** against the castration threat. The problem here is the inadequate psychoanalytic theory of internalization and sublimation and of the maturing of object relations.*

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A parricide—that is, one who commits an act of parricide—is defined as follows: "One who murders a person to whom he stands in a specially sacred relation, as a father, mother, or other near relative, or (in a wider sense) a ruler. Sometimes, one guilty of treason" (Webster, 2nd ed.). The meaning of the word, as distinguished from patricide, thus is not limited to the murder of the father (Freud's essay, translated as "Dostoevski and Parricide," published in 1928, just 50 years ago, uses the word patricide [*Vatertötung*] in the title). Parricide, strictly, is the murder of a parent or near relative; it includes the murder of one who represents or symbolizes a parent, mother or father, and even the serious betrayal of an entity or group standing for parental authority. It is a parental authority that is murdered; by that, whatever is sacred about the bond between child and parent is violated. If we take etymology as a guide, it is the bringing forth, nourishing, providing for, and protecting of the child by the parents that constitute their parenthood and "authority" (authorship) and render sacred the child's ties with the parents.² Parricide is a crime against the sanctity of such a bond. The bond is most clearly exemplified for us by the relationship to biological parents. In a patriarchal society the murder of the father, patricide, is the prototype of the crime of parricide. For Freud, the father was the foremost provider and protector, as well as the castrator if his authority and predominance were challenged.

A brief clinical illustration will help to set the **stage** for the discussion to follow. A student, working for a degree in the same field as his father's, had trouble in completing his thesis. He was brilliant; the thesis so far had progressed well. His father had died about a year earlier. The patient began to procrastinate; he felt strongly that he needed support and advice from his thesis advisor. But he knew quite well that he

²*The word "parent" derives from the Latin verb *parere*, to bring forth, and is related to Latin *parare*, to prepare, procure, as well as to the English "parturition."*

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was perfectly capable of finishing the work on his thesis without help. He chided himself for his delaying techniques. In part, these took the form of paralyzing doubts about the originality of his work, regarding which, at other times and for good reasons, he had no doubts. He also wanted encouragement and support from me, but he kept telling me that it was wholly his responsibility, not the advisor's or mine. Becoming independent, taking responsibility for the conduct of his own life, was one of the themes that had come up repeatedly during the analysis. As he continued, over several hours, to insist that completing the thesis was his and no one else's responsibility, but that he could not bring himself to work on it, it dawned on me that he might be speaking of responsibility also in a sense not consciously intended by him. In addition to or underneath the meaning of

responsibility as accountability to himself, as self-autonomy, perhaps he was talking about being responsible for a crime. It would be a crime he wished to delay, avoid, or undo. An [interpretation](#) along these lines led to further work on his relationship with his father, his murderous impulses and fantasies regarding him, his ambitions and fears of outdistancing him, and on his guilt about these ambitions (in part already fulfilled) and about his father's death. In this case, as in so many others, preoedipal currents and those belonging to the positive and [negative Oedipus complex](#) were inextricably blended.

The clinical example puts in bold relief the ambiguity of adult responsibility and autonomy as considered in the light of the Oedipus complex and its vicissitudes in the course of life. In the process of becoming and being an adult, significant emotional ties with parents are severed. They are not simply renounced by force of circumstances, castration threats, etc.—although these play an important instrumental role—but they are also actively [rejected](#), fought against, and destroyed to varying degrees. Perhaps this active rejection represents a "change of function," a form of taking over actively what had to be endured passively in the beginning. Be that as

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it may, in the course of what we consider healthy [development](#), this active urge for emancipation comes to the fore (already in early phases of the [separation-individuation](#) process).

In the oedipal struggle between the generations, the descendant's assuming or asserting responsibility and authority that belonged to the ascendants arouses guilt in the descendant (although not only guilt). It looks as if opponents are required with whom the drama of gaining power, authority, [autonomy](#), and the distribution of guilt can be played out. In analytic work, and particularly as revived in the [transference](#), we see this in magnified form.

I focus here on that aspect of the mastering of the [Oedipus complex](#) that leads to the constitution of the superego and is more than repression or, as I would say, different from repression. In considering this from the particular angle I wish to emphasize, it is no exaggeration to say that the assumption of responsibility for one's own life and its conduct is in [psychic reality](#) tantamount to the murder of the parents, to the crime of parricide, and involves dealing with the guilt incurred thereby. Not only parental authority is destroyed by wresting authority from the parents and taking it over, but the parents, if the process were thoroughly carried out, are being destroyed as libidinal objects as well (all this, as I have already mentioned, *pro tempore*).

I spoke of dealing with the guilt for the crime of parricide. The organization of the superego, as internalization or narcissistic transformation of oedipal object relations, documents parricide and at the same time is its atonement and metamorphosis: atonement insofar as the superego makes up for and is a [restitution](#) of oedipal relationships; metamorphosis insofar as, in this [restitution](#), oedipal object relations are transmuted into internal, intrapsychic structural relations. To the extent to which patients and others insist on cruel, inflexible standards and demands and persist in unconsciously dealing with love objects as incestuous objects, they fight against

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bearing and mastering the guilt of parricide by internalizing atonement. [Need for punishment](#) tends to become inexhaustible if atonement, reconciliation, is not eventually brought about by mourning which leads to a mature superego and to the possibility of nonincestuous [object relations](#) (the word *atone* literally and in many contexts means: to become or cause to become *at one*—to reconcile, to bring to concord or harmony).

In an important sense, by evolving our own autonomy, our own superego, and by engaging in nonincestuous [object relations](#), we are killing our parents. We are usurping their power, their competence, their responsibility for us, and we are abnegating, rejecting them as libidinal objects. In short, we destroy them in regard to some of their qualities hitherto most vital to us. Parents resist as well as promote such destruction no less ambivalently than children carry it out. What will be left if things go well is tenderness, mutual trust, and respect—the signs of equality. This depends on, more than on anything else, the predominant form of mastery of the [Oedipus complex](#).

The [Oedipus complex](#) wanes as a crucial pathogenic focus to the extent to which its resolution—never achieved once and for all—is "more than a repression," something other than a retreat from and exclusion by what Freud called the coherent ego. Seen from the perspective of parricide, guilt, and responsibility, repression of the complex is an [unconscious](#) evasion of the emancipatory murder of the parents, and a way of preserving infantile libidinal-dependent ties with them. Parricide is carried out, instead of being sidestepped, in that dual activity in which aspects of oedipal relations are transformed into ego-superego relations (internalization), and other aspects are, qua relations with external objects, restructured in such a way that the incestuous character of object relations gives way to novel forms of object choice. These novel object choices are under the influence of those internalizations. Insofar as human beings strive for emancipation and

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[individuation](#) as well as for object love, parricide—on the plane of psychic action—is a developmental necessity.

We take for granted that this murder renders us guilty and calls for atonement. But when Freud equates the sense of guilt with need for *punishment*, he takes too superficial a view on the matter and appears to ignore his own deeper insight that more than repression is involved in superego development. Punishment is sought to evade or undo guilt. It is hoped that punishment will extinguish guilt, but it does not work for any length of time and more punishment is needed. Punishment, whether inflicted by others or by oneself, is too much in the service of repression of the sense of guilt (although it may serve other purposes too). Guilt, in other words, may and often does lead to a need for punishment. Similarly, anxiety often leads to defense against it in various forms, but anxiety is not therefore to be equated with a need for assuaging or eliminating it. Nor is anxiety, in its primary function, a signal to induce flight or repression, but a sign of internal [conflict](#) and danger which may be dealt with in a number of ways. Guilt, whether conscious or not, is a sign of internal discord (more specific than anxiety), which may lead to a variety of internal and external actions, only one of which, a short circuit, is punishment (with its strong masochistic components). For action that is not compulsive to take place, the affect is to be borne for a time (it is here that the "holding environment" is of help). Thought and feeling (affect) are "delayed action," that is, activity which lingers, is "long," instead of being a short circuit (it should be kept in mind that seeing any action or process that does not short-circuit as a delay, takes reflex-action and direct "energy-discharge" as the standard).

Bearing the burden of guilt makes it possible to master guilt, not in the hasty form of [repression](#) and [punishment](#), but by achieving a reconciliation of conflicting strivings. Completing his thesis was, for my patient, to a significant degree the outcome of reconciling parricide with love for his father,

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and of reconciling his quest for emancipation and self-responsibility with his desire for identification and becoming one with his father. I understand his eventual ability to complete the thesis in time (as well as other positive developments) as a confluence and [integration](#) of conflicting needs rather than mainly as evidence of defense against one or the other of these currents. By the same token, I disagree with the characterization and

classification of sublimation as a form of successful defense (Fenichel, 1945p. 141). It is not easy to be certain that such confluence occurred. In this case I relied on the patient's more even mood, a certain unpressured resolve, and his balanced awareness—manifest only at significant moments—of the different elements. Their convergence is an inference I drew, no less and no more than [repression](#) is an inference we draw from given signs.

By acting responsibly, by completing his thesis on his own, the patient is guilty of parricide. At the same time, he submits to his father whose strong interest in the patient's career choice had acted as a command. A submissive, "castrated" attitude toward the father is an element in the oedipal conflict; but so is that direct, preoedipal father-identification which, according to Freud, helps to prepare the oedipal constellation and is reinforced and modified in the direction of submission by the castration threat. While submission bespeaks a passive-homosexual position vis-à-vis the father, it also shows the retreat from and rejection of an active libidinal position vis-à-vis the mother, and often a simultaneous identification with mother's passive-receptive attitude toward father. If we add to this the less-well-explored intricacies of the feminine oedipal conflict, the complexities of the [Oedipus complex](#) tend to become overwhelming. To master all of these currents permanently and without the aid of degrees and waves of repression appears to be beyond human capacity. In neurotic illness, however, repression and other defenses have become the mainstay of the attempt at mastery.

Responsibility to oneself within the context of authoritative

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norms consciously and unconsciously accepted or assimilated from parental and societal sources is the essence of superego as internal agency. I stress here only certain relevant aspects of self-responsibility. It involves appropriating or owning up to one's needs and impulses as one's own, impulses and desires we appear to have been born with or that seem to have taken shape in interaction with parents during infancy. Such appropriation—notice that I use the same word as when I spoke of appropriating parental [authority](#)—such appropriation, in the course of which we begin to develop a sense of self-identity, means to experience ourselves as agents, notwithstanding the fact that we were born without our informed consent and did not pick our parents. To begin with we were more or less fortunate victims, and it may be claimed that in some sense this remains true as long as we live, victims of our [instincts](#) and of those of others, not to mention other forces of nature and social life.

When I speak of appropriating our desires and impulses—which of course are active forces themselves—I do not mean repressing or overpowering them. I mean allowing, granting them actively that [existence](#) which they have in any event, with or without our permission. Following the lead of the word responsibility, one may say that appropriation consists in being responsive to their urgings, acknowledging that they are ours. A harsh, unyielding superego is unresponsive and in that sense irresponsible. Unless modified, it leads to self-destruction or to its having to be bribed and corrupted. Self-inflicted or "arranged" [punishment](#) is one form of such corruption; it merely assuages guilt for a while.

Responsibility to oneself in the sense of being responsive to one's urgings in the manner I described involves facing and bearing the guilt for those acts we consider criminal. Prototypical, in oedipal context, are parricide and incest. From the standpoint of [psychic reality](#) it matters little if these acts are in objective reality merely fantasies or [symbolic](#) acts. (Parricide and incest, themselves strongly interwoven, stand for the

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basic instincts [aggression](#) and sexuality in their transgressive, "evil" aspects.) If parricide and incest are not carried out in factual reality, they nevertheless partake of psychic reality. I spoke earlier of the implications of internal, intrapsychic atonement. Atonement for these crimes—which I defined as reconciliation, being again at one—consists in a reconstitution of child-parent relations on the internal scene of action (internalization). As mentioned before, this transposition or transmutation, at once destruction and [restitution](#), in metapsychological language is a transformation of object cathexis into narcissistic cathexis.

We are faced with a double paradox. Self-responsibility, involving parricide in [psychic reality](#) and in symbolic form (we shall see later how it is more than symbolic), is, from the viewpoint of received morality, a crime. But it is not only a crime of which humans inevitably become guilty in the process of emancipating [individuation](#) (cf. the expulsion from the Garden of Eden and original sin); self-responsibility at the same time is the restitutive atonement for that crime. Without the guilty deed of parricide there is no autonomous self. And further, also from the viewpoint of received morality, individuality and its maturity—I am not speaking of unbridled individualism—is a virtue, a *summum bonum*, at any rate in modern Western civilizations. To live among these paradoxes appears to be our fate for the time being.

If without the guilty deed of parricide there is no individual self worthy of that name, no advanced internal organization of psychic life, then guilt and atonement are crucial motivational elements of the self. Guilt then is not a troublesome affect that we might hope to eliminate in some fashion, but one of the driving forces in the organization of the self. The self, in its [autonomy](#), is an atonement-structure, a structure of reconciliation, and, as such, a supreme achievement. In the abstract, as the organization of this structure proceeds, the [Oedipus complex](#) would be destroyed as a constellation of

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[object relations](#) or their fantasy representations. But, in the words of Ariel in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, nothing fades, "but doth suffer a sea-change into something rich and strange."

In mature [object relations](#)—I am speaking of an ideal construct—the self engages, in a return movement as it were, with objects that are differently organized and experienced by the self, thanks to its own richer organization. It is that richer self-organization which then can lead to novel ways of relating to objects while being enriched by their novelty. In some sense that novel way of relating with objects—most obvious in mature [love relations](#)—creatively destroys and reconstitutes, in a sea-change on the plane of object love, the old oedipal relations: it also constitutes an atonement.

Summarizing, I may list the various forms of the [Oedipus complex](#)'s waning which I discussed: (1) repression; (2) "destruction" (transmutation) by internalization, involving parricide, guilt, and atonement. If I were to go deeper into these matters, issues such as mourning, remorse, repentance, would have to be considered. (3) "Destruction" on the plane of object love, by relinquishing incestuous ties and recreating the murdered and mourned oedipal ties through novel love relations. I am condensing here psychic events that repeat themselves on different levels of development throughout life. In that sense, there is no such thing as definitive destruction of the [Oedipus complex](#).

I now return briefly to parricide from a somewhat different angle. Parricide is symbolically carried out and atoned for by the severance of oedipal object ties, or aspects of them, and the establishment of new [love relations](#), as in adolescence. However, if we look at the adolescent dependence-emancipation struggles from the standpoint of how they are experienced by adolescents (as well as by patients in the [transference neurosis](#)) and by parents, something more than symbolic action is apparent. In magnified and extended form our

present age experiences or witnesses in various parts of the world something approaching or amounting to a life-and-death struggle between generations. The structure of society at large and of the family are in jeopardy—certainly not for the first time. Perhaps the [crisis](#) is less ominous than we often tend to think. Nevertheless, what we almost daily hear and see in this larger arena is alarming. As I said, it may be viewed as portraying in magnified and more complex forms the generational [conflict](#) and love-hate struggle represented by the Oedipus complex in individual and family life. (I hope I shall not be misunderstood to be suggesting that the social problems alluded to are simply to be explained as or reduced to oedipal problems.)

The generational struggles, most manifest in adolescence but often prolonged far beyond, and later resumed, if only in reversed form, when children become parents, these struggles are palpable factual experiences that may, and in the end do, diminish one or the other side. Parents or children tend to be rendered relatively impotent, at least as far as the generational engagement itself is concerned. Parricide, if the child convincingly develops as an individual, is more than symbolic or on the plane of intrapsychic reorganization. Not to shrink from blunt language, in our role as children of our parents, by genuine emancipation we do kill something vital in them—not all in one blow and not in all respects, but contributing to their dying. As parents of our children we undergo the same fate, unless we diminish them. If eventually some sort of balance, equality, some transcending conciliation is achieved, we—children and parents—are fortunate. It is a balance or harmony that in the external no less than in the internal arena remains vulnerable. The good outcome of an analysis, in terms of the resolution of the [transference neurosis](#), shows itself in the increasing but fragile establishment of such equality. It is not established once and for all, but requires continued internal activity; and it is not necessarily obvious at the point of actual [termination](#).

Incest

Incest may be seen as the other side of parricide, the side where love appears [dominant](#). In parricide, however, underneath or mingled with destructive [aggression](#), there also is a more or less violent, passionate appropriation of what is experienced as lovable and admirable in parents. Similarly, incest does not merely spell love or the urge of Eros to bind together and unite. Incest also contains the exclusion and destruction of the third in the triangle, and often a hateful vengeance perpetrated on the incestuous object that wanted, or allowed and responded to, the rival. Would the rival be a rival if he or she were not an incestuous love object in disguise? I include in incest, here, homosexual trends or acts between children and parents or siblings.

Incestuous object relations are evil, according to received morality, in that they interfere with or destroy that sacred family bond of which I spoke earlier, and not simply in the sense of rivalrous exclusion of or triumph over the third party. What is felt to be sacred about this bond? I assume that it is the original oneness, most obvious in the mother-infant dual unity, which shines through or is sensed as remaining the innermost core in later family relations. The identities and identifications that precede object cathexis and prepare the ground for the first object relations in the oedipal stage reveal an original intimate unity that is anterior to what is commonly called sexuality. Perhaps this accounts for the blindness to [infantile sexuality](#), including, at least in Freud's time, blindness to "phallic," oedipal sexuality. The "sacred" innocence of [primary](#) narcissistic unity and its derivatives, anterior to individuation and its inherent guilt and atonement, while resulting from sexual union of the parents, precedes and is the undifferentiated source of the child's emerging sexuality. Our vision tends to be blurred by a nostalgic longing

for such a state; there is an investment in preserving or prolonging that state of innocence in one's children, and in recapturing

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some of it for ourselves in our identifying and protecting relations with children. Implicit in the modern objective-scientific world view, on the other hand, is an investment in the opposite direction that tends to negate the validity, however compromised and complicated by subsequent [development](#), of the primacy of that unitary source.

My thesis is that the preoedipal identificatory bonds within the family, as direct derivatives of narcissistic unity, are felt to be sacred, to belong to a state of innocence, and that incestuous fantasies and acts are felt to violate that sacred innocence. The reason is that object-libidinal fantasies or acts are entertained with a person with whom strong preobjectal, identificatory bonds not only exist—but that in incest the other, qua libidinal object, is emerging or has emerged directly and without substitutive change of person from an identificatory bond or unity. The very same person with whom there has been a preobjectal bond prior to and continuing into the oedipal phase, this very same person now becomes an object of sexual desire. Insofar as the oedipal *objectum* is consubstantial, as it were, with the preoedipal *identificatum*—is the same body as that with whom the identificatory bond existed and still persists—the preoedipal bond is violated. (I use the Latin expressions *objectum* and *identificatum* for what I hope will be greater clarity of meaning.) The incest barrier which, seen in this light, is a barrier between [identification](#) and object cathexis, is overturned.

Applied to the oedipal boy and his sexual desire for his mother: the maternal libidinal object is gradually and directly evolving from a stage where she was not an object (*objectum*) for the boy, but where there was (and still also is) a symbiotic bond uniting them. The [preoedipal](#) stage of [primary](#) lack of subject/object differentiation is evolving into the object stage—along the enabling person of the mother as vehicle—an object stage that can be characterized as incestuous. The incestuous object, thus, is an intermediate, ambiguous entity,

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neither a full-fledged libidinal *objectum* nor an unequivocal *identificatum*. The fact that the incestuous object, insofar as it is libidinal object, is the very same person that originally has been and continues to be also an *identificatum*, renders incest evil in our eyes. The identificatory intimacy of child and parent (or close relative) is both exploited and defied in incest.

Adult relations with a partner who in actuality is not an incestuous object are, as we know, influenced by oedipal currents. The less prominent the novel aspects of the relationship are, or the more they become overshadowed by old oedipal problems (for example, through the arrival of a baby), the more do we consider the relationship to be neurotic. In actual incest the sexual act, which seems designed to overcome temporarily and consciously the established individuality of the partners, appears perverted in that the partners enact, live out oedipal relations. The [Oedipus complex](#), then, is neither repressed nor "waning" by [transformations](#) that destroy its original form; but it is carried out, reproduced in action. Incest is in this sense a regressive, back-sliding repetition of an intermediate stage in the process of individuation and not a creative repetition achieving novel resolutions.

The oedipal stage itself is still so enmeshed in and pervaded by identificatory [processes](#)—as manifested by the actual sameness of *identificatum* and *objectum*—that incestuous oedipal fantasies dominating sexual life in adulthood represent nonresolution of the [Oedipus complex](#).

Identification [processes](#) develop, on a new plane of organization established in the oedipal phase, into [secondary](#) identifications of superego development. If, in the interactions between parents and children, parents foster the predominance of incestuous trends, that development is interfered with. The older, primary identifications, inherent in the incestuous trends, are then not allowed to become partially transformed into superego identifications, as the oedipal relationship is not relinquished but perpetuated. When one says that the relinquishment of oedipal-incestuous object ties and

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emancipatory-restitutive identification with aspects of oedipal objects leads to superego formation, it is implied that to a significant degree primary identifications give way to [secondary](#) or superego identifications. Therefore, lack of resolution of the [Oedipus complex](#) does not only mean that antiquated object relations are not given up and replaced by more mature object relations. It also means that primary identifications, those direct derivatives of primary narcissism, have not been sufficiently transformed into and replaced by superego identifications, because the latter come into being by way of relinquishing oedipal object choices, and narcissistic transformation (internalization).

The Waning Interest in the Oedipus Complex

Perhaps I have succeeded in showing that the [Oedipus complex](#) is no less crucial and interesting today than it was. Its interest and significance may be enhanced if one focuses on the ambiguous and intermediate nature of incestuous [object relations](#).

For years many of us have been concerned with the less explored reaches of earliest, [preoedipal](#) development; with problems of the so-called symbiotic phase (Mahler) and the "selfobject" stage (Kohut) and their derivatives, as well as with their direct—I am tempted to say nonoedipal—continuations and permutations in the adult life of patients with psychotic, borderline, and narcissistic [personality](#) disorders. Problems of primal transference in analysis, complexities of transference-countertransference phenomena, of direct communication between the unconscious of different persons are related to such issues. We find parallels and similarities in the mental life of primitive peoples. Some of these problems, in my opinion, raise the important but largely unexplored and for the present unanswerable question whether we are justified in simply equating, as we do, psychic life with the intrapsychic.

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To be fully alive to the fact that the oedipal stage itself contains—more than was realized by Freud, although he acknowledged the fact long ago—in its very core features of [primary identification](#) and symbiosis may give new luster to the [Oedipus complex](#) in the present psychoanalytic climate.

In this concluding section I shall consider this problem area from a somewhat different angle. It is not unusual, I believe, for those who attempt to do analytic work with certain gifted and articulate patients showing psychotic or psychotic-like traits, to experience something like the following (the experience is not easy to describe): they often give one the feeling that they are struggling with basic, [primary](#) dilemmas of human life in forms and contents that seem less diluted and tempered, less qualified and overshadowed, by the ordinary familiar vicissitudes of life than is generally true of [neurotic](#) patients. Oedipal and postoedipal conflicts are not absent, but they seem to pale in

comparison with issues that appear to lay the groundwork for and to go deeper than the conflicts of everyday life interpersonal problems and their intrapsychic counterparts. To put it quite pointedly: life itself, and especially individual life and separateness, are not taken for granted. The objectivity of the object and the subjectivity of self don't seem to be common ground shared by such patients and ourselves, although they may use language that presupposes these distinctions. But bizarre features, overconcreteness and the like, may indicate that their language itself is affected by the problematic status of these distinctions.

It is as though, in comparison, the **neurotic** conflicts commonly encountered are, as viewed from this uncommon ground, blurred reflections, garbled echos of a basic quest those patients desperately pursue in pure **culture**. They seem unable or unwilling to let go of it, to be less single-minded and turn to matters less intractable; or to come to terms with it step by step, by allowing the unfolding of more complex developments and temporary solutions, with detours, failures, accommodations, and renunciations along the way. Such

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people seem too serious or unyielding, from our point of view, about the ultimate antinomies and dilemmas of human life, and too cynical or judgmental about our faltering and faulty steps, attempts at conciliation, and compromises. They have an unwavering eye for the pitfalls of getting embroiled in what many of us experience as the troubling but rewarding richness of life.

For the present, in the light of our growing understanding of the **separation-individuation** process, of the development of subject/object differentiation from **primary** narcissism during the early, preoedipal stages, it is reasonable to assume that the fundamental issues by which such patients are transfixed have to do with problems of this genetic depth and antiquity. Unquestionably there is something archaic about their mentality; it is archaic in the sense of antiquated, but also in the sense of belonging to the origins of human life and thereby to its essence or core. Just as the Oedipus complex, the neurotic core, wanes but is never actually and definitively destroyed, and rises again at different periods in life and in different shapes, so, too, that more archaic, psychotic core tends to wane but remains with us. Indeed, the Oedipus complex and its sequelae, viewed prospectively rather than retrospectively from adult life, are later versions of archaic yet enduring, indestructible life issues. In normality the psychotic core is harder to find than the Oedipus complex; in the classical neuroses it may not need specific analytic work.

Normality, however, is a standard far less clear-cut and immutable than even our psychoanalytic forefathers, who saw its relativity, were wont to think. Norms of conduct, behavior, convention, thought, of what is rational, realistic, and "ego-syntonic," are interdependent with the stability of a civilization. This stability does not only include the general acceptance of ethical or religious precepts or of the valuation of scientific rationality, but also the comparative lack of change of living conditions within a given cultural area and of

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life on this planet. To mention only the last, is it possible to doubt that the revolutionary changes, manifested and promoted by the discovery of atomic fission and fusion and the invention of space travel, would be paralleled and reflected by profound changes in the norms of human thought and life? But we need not go outside our own field. Psychoanalysis itself is a sign of and, at the same time, promoting far-reaching changes in the sensibility of our age. As much as we value the dominance of **secondary**-process rational thought and action, the released influence of **primary**-process thinking on many spheres of life, for good and ill, is undeniable, unsettling our notions of normality and changing our concept, experience, and organization of reality itself. As a new psychology,

psychoanalysis does not only change our knowledge of the human mind, it changes the human mind by that new knowledge.

Psychoanalysis certainly has contributed, wittingly and unwittingly, to a change in sexual mores and in family life, to the loosening of the family [structure](#) and of the [structure](#) of society, as well as to giving less exalted value and prominence to rationality and its norms. For this it should not be condemned any more than modern physics and biology can be condemned for the unsettling changes they bring about. But like physicists and biologists we must be aware of our responsibility to stem the tides of precipitous action and to guide novel potentials into channels that make for a viable mental and societal life.

With reference to the problem of [individuation](#) and the status and valuation of the individual, psychoanalysis appears to be in an awkward position. On the one hand, it seems to stand and fall with the proposition that the emergence of a relatively autonomous individual is the culmination of human development. How this may come about and what interferes with such an outcome, resulting in psychopathology, is a most important aspect of psychoanalytic research, [reconstruction](#), and treatment. Also, psychoanalysis is individual

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treatment, takes place between two individuals. The idea of the resolution of the [transference neurosis](#), for one, makes little sense if individual autonomy is not envisioned.

On the other hand, owing in part to analytic research, there is a growing awareness of the force and validity of another striving, that for unity, symbiosis, fusion, merging, identification—whatever name we wish to give to this sense of and longing for nonseparateness and undifferentiation. I pointed out that oedipal, incestuous [object relations](#) are characterized by hovering between the poles of identification and object cathexis, between merging and individuality. The more we understand about primitive mentality—which constitutes a deep layer of advanced mentality—the harder it becomes to escape the idea that its implicit sense of and quest for irrational nondifferentiation of subject and object contains a truth of its own, granted that this other truth fits badly with our rational world view and quest for objectivity. Even a schizophrenic's sense of a continuum or an uncanny—cherished or dreaded—affinity and sameness of himself and another person, as if both merely pose as two distinct individuals, begins to make sense if viewed in the light of deep [unconscious](#) levels.

But [psychoanalysis](#) has always been in an awkward position, even when only the Oedipus complex was the center of its attention. While its intent has been to penetrate unconscious mentality with the light of rational understanding, it also has been and is its intent to uncover the irrational unconscious sources and forces motivating and organizing conscious and rational mental processes. In the course of these explorations, unconscious processes became accessible to rational understanding, and at the same time rational thought itself and our rational experience of the world as an "object world" became problematic. In the conceptualization and investigation of the Oedipus complex and of transference it became apparent that not only the neurotic's libidinal object is "unrealistic" in that its objectivity is contaminated and distorted by transferences. In [normality](#) as well, object

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relations as established in the oedipal period contribute to the constitution of the contemporary libidinal object. In other words, the contemporary libidinal object, even if freed of the gross transference distortions seen in [neurosis](#) (which helped us to see the ubiquitous phenomenon of transference), is "unrealistic" or contains "irrational" elements. If this is so, objectivity, rationality, and reality themselves are not what we thought them to be, not

absolute states of mind and/or the world that would be independent of and unaffected by the generative process-structures of mind and world.

Research into psychic life antecedent to the oedipal phase has only led us more deeply into the thicket of such problems. Awareness of forms of reality in which there is no definite distinction between a subject, or self, and objects, while not new, has been newly recovered by psychoanalysis (and certain branches of developmental psychology and of anthropology). Once seen, we can detect the relevance of nonobjective forms of reality-organization for the understanding of narcissistic disorders, but also of normal mental life. If we exclude the whole realm of [identification](#) and empathy from normality, for example, we arrive at a normality that has little resemblance to actual life. [Identification](#) and empathy, where subject-object boundaries are temporarily suspended or inoperative, play a significant part in everyday interpersonal relations, not to mention the psychoanalyst's and psychotherapist's daily working life.

In the psychosexual and social life of the present day, "archaic" currents are more in evidence, less repressed, I believe. They consequently make for different troubles, often closer to "perversion" than to "neurosis." Our own views on what is to be considered as perversion are changing, for example, in regard to [homosexuality](#). Modern life, both moved by and moving psychoanalysis, is redrawing the outlines and shifting the standards of normality, of what is archaic in mental life and what is advanced, mature mentality.

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SUMMARY

I am attempting to sum up. Not only the Oedipus complex is a constituent of normal psychic life of the adult and, as such, again and again active. A psychotic core, related to the earliest vicissitudes of the [ambivalent](#) search for primary narcissistic unity and individuation, also is an active constituent of normal psychic life. Its activity, through a variety of investigations into archaic mental life, has become more apparent and—partly in their wake—more prominent in the pathology of patients and in modern life in general. These deeper unconscious currents, having been uncovered and reentering modern sensibility, influence the organization of mind, experience, and action.

Our hitherto normal form of organizing reality, aiming at a strict distinction and separation between an internal, subjective, and an external, objective world, is in question. Our psychotic core, as it comes increasingly into view, prevents us from being as much at home and at ease with this solution as our scientific forefathers were. I believe that our quest for individuation and individuality, and for an objective world view, is being modulated by insights we are gaining from the "psychic reality" of [preoedipal](#) life stages. We even need to re-examine Freud's distinction between psychic reality and factual, objective reality. Not that this distinction might be invalid. But its validity appears to be more circumscribed and limited than we assumed, analogous to Newtonian physics: the new theories and discoveries of modern physics do not invalidate Newtonian physics, but they limit its applicability.

Interest in the Oedipus complex has been on the wane because of these developments. But it is also true that perspectives on the Oedipus complex are changing, that the different modes of its waning and waxing during life stages give it renewed significance and weight, and that the intermediate nature of incestuous relations, intermediate between

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identification and object cathexis, throws additional light on its centrality. I have pointed out that the superego as the heir of the Oedipus complex is the structure resulting from parricide, representing both guilt and atonement for the usurpation of authority. We are reminded that the oedipal attachments, struggles, and conflicts must also be understood as new versions of the basic union-individuation dilemma. The superego, as the culmination of individual [psychic structure](#) formation, represents something ultimate in the basic separation-individuation process.

I am aware that—perhaps confusingly—I have shifted perspectives several times in my presentation. I hope that the composite picture I have tried to sketch in this fashion has not become altogether too blurred by my approach.

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