

## Who would have believed it? Freud, transference and the Oedipus Complex

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I would like to start with a quotation, not from Freud but from Goethe, from his poem "Prometheus". Prometheus was the Greek god of fire and of craft. He failed to show respect to the other gods, particularly Zeus, and received a cruel punishment for this. He is also given credit for creating man in the image of the gods, and giving mankind the arts, the sciences and the means for survival.

In Goethe's poem Prometheus addresses himself to Zeus thus: "Who helped me against the Titans' excesses? Who saved me from death, from slavery? Did you not accomplish all this yourself, oh my holy glowing heart? And did you not glow young and well but were deceived into giving thanks to the one who sleeps, up there?" And also: "Here I sit making men in my own image, a race that shall resemble me, a race that shall suffer and weep, enjoy and take delight in things and pay no heed to you, like me".(Goethe, c1983-c1989).

For me the image of Prometheus in Goethe's poem represents the image of man held by those who espouse science in today's world. It represents the view that anything is possible; that man determines his own destiny, that through science he holds the key to finding the solutions to his problems, and that all that is required is an act of will to do so. It is the view of man held by those who advocate therapies such as CBT and DBT: therapies that are based on the idea that man can change his thoughts and hence his feelings and actions; that man can learn skills such as mindfulness and hence refrain from acting impulsively or precipitously to his own detriment.

I started out studying science. I saw myself as a Prometheus. It's a point of view that still appeals, that I find hard to give up. Later, when I started studying psychology and came across Freud I didn't like his ideas in the least. Fancy thinking that childhood sexual fantasies could remain in the unconscious and could affect you in your adult life. I thought I knew my fantasy, and knew it was a fantasy; couldn't I indulge in it a little, on the side, in daydreaming. Can't I still be master of my fate, and like Prometheus flout the rules, deny castration.

There are several moments in a child's development where enjoyment is curtailed. First the exclusive rights that the child feels it has to the mother's body, and vice versa, are called into question. This can be accomplished either by the father or by something which acts in the place of the father, something which the mother desires beyond the child. Then, as the child begins to experience sexual stirring in its own body, it faces the task of relinquishing the *jouissance* which is forbidden in its culture while still getting access to a bit of surplus *jouissance*. Freud introduced the notion of the Oedipus complex to account for what happens here. His idea was that little boys desired their mothers but would eventually give up trying to get this forbidden *jouissance* because of their fear of castration. Little girls gave up their wish for phallic enjoyment in exchange for being loved and being given a penis equivalent, such as a child, by a man. I have always

found these ideas problematic and I was glad when Sol Aparicio gave a reformulation of what happens in this stage: namely that there is an exclusion of jouissance and an introduction of desire as the child is introduced into discourse. Nevertheless Freud was onto something here. He said in Lecture 33 of the New Introductory Lectures:

I wish (to explain) to you at length how important all the factual details of early masturbation become for the individual's subsequent neurosis or character: whether or not it was discovered, how the parents struggled against it or permitted it, or whether (the child) succeeded in suppressing it himself. All this leaves permanent traces on his development." (Freud, S., 1955).

There is a similar passage in Freud's "A child is being beaten":

"...in our opinion the Oedipus complex is the actual nucleus of the neuroses, and the infantile sexuality which culminates in this complex is the true determinant of neuroses". (Freud, 1919) This something that remains of infantile sexuality in the unconscious, this wish for the forbidden jouissance, which is not given up, can cause symptoms and can become manifest in the transference as an over-the-top, out-of-all-proportion reaction to the analyst or sometimes towards others, a reaction that can take you completely by surprise, knock you for six and leave you gasping. So much for my wish to enjoy my fantasy "on the side". I find to my sorrow that it is all pervasive. It seems that the only options are to give it up or to continue to suffer the consequences.

This is where the Promethean view of man becomes unstuck. The issue is not just castration, being subject to prohibitions, suffering the consequences of breaking the rules. That also applied to Prometheus. It is to do with the division of the subject which is the inevitable consequence of allowing for something which is repressed and unconscious. That this unconscious something can cause you to act in ways you could not have predicted; this is what makes the Promethean ideal untenable. And to have progressed thus far in my understanding I thank Freud.

## References

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