



### ERICH FROMM'S ATTACKS UPON THE OEDIPUS COMPLEX—A BRIEF CRITIQUE

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C. G. SCHOENFELD, LL.B.

Freud's theories are by no means sacrosanct, and Fromm's attacks upon some of them may well be sound. Yet, as this paper will try to suggest, Fromm's criticisms of one of the cornerstones of Freudian theory—the Oedipus complex—are seriously questionable. And these criticisms (which continue to be advanced by Fromm to this very day (15)) certainly ought to be examined, especially since Fromm's view are influential and his books reach what appears to be an ever-increasing audience (20).

Although Fromm's attacks upon the Oedipus complex are many, varied and scattered throughout his works (and in some instances really beside the point, as in *The Heart of Man: Its Genius for Good and Evil* (15), in which Fromm contends that if the Oedipus complex actually exists, it is less important than what he describes as the childhood "fixation" to the mother), nevertheless, Fromm's main criticisms of the Oedipus complex may be summarized as follows:

*The Oedipus complex is a fiction.*

- a) *Its origin lies in defects in Freud's personality.*
- b) *It misinterprets the tendency of youngsters to rebel against patriarchal authority and to desire closeness with their mother.*

It is these attacks upon the Oedipus complex that this paper will briefly examine.

In *Sigmund Freud's Mission: An Analysis of His Personality and Influence* (13), Fromm offers an extended—and extremely critical—sketch of Freud's personality. He asserts that Freud failed to show his father proper respect and was tied too closely to his mother—and then concludes

that Freud's description of the Oedipus complex reflects these objectionable traits, and to this extent lacks validity.

Although Fromm's sketch of Freud's personality in *Sigmund Freud's Mission* clearly defies evaluation in a paragraph or two, certain characteristics of Fromm's methodology require mention here, especially since the book has been attacked as a work of "haste and carelessness," in which "incredible omissions are apparent," and in which "contradictions and inaccuracies dog one at every turn" (3).

Consider, for example that in attempting to demonstrate that Freud had little respect for his father, Fromm cites Freud's reply at the age of two when his father scolded him for bed-wetting: "Don't worry, Papa, I will buy you a beautiful new bed in Neutitschein." Fromm interprets this reply as revealing that "Freud, at the age of two, had already a sense of importance and of superiority toward his father," that here already are "traits which would characterize Freud in his later life: a difficulty in accepting criticism, a supreme self-confidence, and rebelliousness against his father and, as we may also say, fatherly authority" (13). Quite a bit to read into the words of a two-year-old!

This straining of the evidence is compounded by Fromm's failure to raise apposite questions such as whether a Freud allegedly bound too closely to his mother could have withstood—as he did—the furious opposition of his contemporaries.

... there was no logical blunder, no offence against decency and good taste which the scientific opponents of psycho-analysis did not permit themselves in those days. It was a situation such as



actually occurred in the middle ages, in which a wrong-doer, or even a mere political opponent, was put in the pillory and exposed to the ill-treatment of the mob. And perhaps you do not fully realize how high up in our society the mob spirit extends, and to what lengths people will go when they feel that they are a part of a crowd and superior to personal responsibility (4)

And Fromm also fails to inquire whether a Freud allegedly bound tightly to his mother would have stressed—as, indeed, does Fromm himself—the psychoanalytic goal of independence. “From the time of puberty onward,” states Freud, “the human individual must devote himself to the great task of *freeing himself from the parents*; and only after this detachment is accomplished can he cease to be a child and so become a member of the social community” (7).

Relevant here is Fromm's tendency to overlook data that appear to contradict his theories. For example, when developing the thesis that Freud lacked proper respect for his father, Fromm neglects to mention Freud's well known statement regarding his father's death.

By one on the dark ways behind the official consciousness my father's death has affected me profoundly. I had treasured him highly and had understood him exactly. With his peculiar mixture of deep wisdom and fantastic lightness he had meant very much in my life. (17)

And when contending that Freud had an intense attachment to his mother, Fromm ignores the effect of Freud's self-analysis upon this relationship. In fact, incredible as it may seem, no reference to this prolonged and fruitful self-analysis appears in *Sigmund Freud's Mission*, which, after all,

is a biography of one psychoanalyst by another (2, 7).

Suppose, however, that Fromm's conclusions about Freud's feelings towards his parents *were* indisputable. Would it follow, as Fromm assumes, that Freud's description of the Oedipus complex reflects these objectionable feelings?

History has presumably known many men who have had little respect for their fathers and desired undue closeness with their mothers. Yet Freud announced the discovery of the Oedipus complex only about sixty-five years ago.<sup>1</sup> Hence, no necessary relationship would seem to exist between having these undesirable filial attitudes and describing or discovering the Oedipus complex.

Freud's alleged feelings about his father and mother *might* have generated his belief in the Oedipus complex. But Fromm adduces no proof to support this possibility, simply assuming it to be true. Yet the available evidence concerning Freud's discovery of the Oedipus complex actually contradicts the view that Freud presupposed the existence of innate Oedipal wishes (2, 6, 8). Rather, this evidence shows that Freud tried to explain away his patients' accounts of sexual cravings during early childhood either as products of seduction at a young age or as sexual fantasies projected from a later period onto early childhood. Only gradually, and with the greatest reluctance, did he abandon these explanations and ultimately conceive of the existence of the Oedipus complex.

Despite this, suppose that Freud's belief in the Oedipus complex *were* a product of too little respect for his father and too close a tie with his mother. Does it follow—as Fromm charges—that Freud's description of the Oedipus complex lacks validity?

<sup>1</sup>Indisputably, some intuitive men before Freud—Denis Diderot, for example—suspected that children harbored patricidal and incestuous feelings towards their parents (5).

Asked this question, a logician might try to rephrase it and inquire, "Can one refute a scientific doctrine—or, indeed, any concept at all—by relating it to flaws in its originator's personality?" "No" has been the only reply generally accepted by scientists and philosophers, certainly since William James delivered the Gifford lectures at Edinburgh in 1901–1902.<sup>2</sup>

In these talks, James sought to evaluate religious feelings, acts and experiences—matters presumably far more complex than those the Oedipus complex describes. Yet, despite the difficulties of this task, he accepted the added burden of respecting a then seemingly novel logical distinction between questions of origin and questions of value.

In recent books on logic, distinction is made between two orders of inquiry concerning anything. First, what is the nature of it? how did it come about? what is its constitution, origin, and history? And second, What is its importance, meaning or significance, now that it is once here? The answer to the one question is given in an *existential judgement* or proposition. The answer to the other is a *proposition of value*, what the Germans call a *werturtheil*, or what we may, if we like, denominate a *spiritual judgment*. Neither judgement can be deduced immediately from the other. They proceed from diverse intellectual preoccupations, and the mind combines them only by making them first separately, and then adding them together (16).

Applying this logical distinction, James concluded that when one seeks to evaluate a religious doctrine, the mental state of its

<sup>2</sup>These lectures, a landmark in philosophical and psychological thought, appear in book form under the celebrated title, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (16).

advocate or author is irrelevant. To test a religious concept one must examine its fruits—not its roots (16).

Fromm's attempt to judge the Oedipus complex by relating it to alleged flaws in Freud's personality violates the logic of these conclusions. His dismissal of Freud's description of the Oedipus complex, labeling it a product of objectionable filial attitudes, blurs the distinction scientists and philosophers draw between a concept's origin and its validity. Fromm fails to perceive that the validity of the Oedipus complex is no more determinable by examining Freud's character than are the theories concerning child behavior of a John Bowlby or an Arnold Gesell testable by studying their personalities—or, indeed, is relatively provable by investigating Albert Einstein's inner feelings. To hold to the contrary, to assert that the Oedipus complex—or any concept, scientific or not—is an offshoot of the personality of its originator and so evaluable, leads to absurd contentions, like arguing that physics, astronomy, biology, physiology, anatomy, natural history, politics, ethics, logic, rhetoric, art, theology and metaphysics, all explored and mapped by Aristotle, prove understandable in terms of his character traits and attitudes.

In *Man For Himself: An Inquiry Into The Psychology Of Ethics* (9), Fromm dismisses the Oedipus complex as a fiction which misinterprets the emotions and behavior of youngsters. He grants that children may direct hostile, even erotic, impulses towards their parents, but denies that sexual rivalry motivates the hostility. The pressure of parental authority in a patriarchal society, according to Fromm, generates the rebellious conduct Freud labeled "Oedipal" (9, 10).

The child's natural reaction to the pressure of parental authority is rebellion, which is the essence of Freud's "Oedipus complex." Freud thought that, say, the little boy,



because of his sexual desire for his mother, becomes the rival of his father, and that the neurotic development consists in the failure to cope in a satisfactory way with the anxiety rooted in this rivalry. In pointing to the conflict between the child and parental authority and the child's failure to solve this conflict satisfactorily, Freud did touch upon the roots of neurosis, in my opinion, however, this conflict is not brought about primarily by the sexual rivalry but results from the child's reaction to the pressure of parental authority, which in itself is an intrinsic part of patriarchal society (9).

Fromm's argument has the merit of simplicity, but it ignores much relevant data. It fails to account for the blatant sexual jealousy that so often accompanies the angry feelings of youngsters.<sup>3</sup> It overlooks the many cases in which a small boy has resented and hated his father, even though the father "was a very mild person who never interfered with what his son did" (18, 19). It does not explain why children raised in cultures that tend to minimize patriarchal authority exhibit this selfsame hostility (18).

The logic of Fromm's argument also proves unsound. If, as Fromm contends, parental restrictions cause the hostility little boys and girls display, would not these feelings be experienced more or less equally regarding both parents? Or if, for example, the father were the family disciplinarian, would not the hatred be felt mainly for him? The fact is, however, that sons regularly direct their Oedipal aggression towards their fathers, daughters towards their mothers. Consequently, the anger and hostility youngsters exhibit cannot be ex-

plained away as a "natural reaction to the pressure of parental authority."

Disputable also is Fromm's view that "rebellion... is the essence of Freud's 'Oedipus complex.'" Admittedly, Fromm helps erase this objection by stressing the sexual core of the Oedipus complex in *Psychoanalysis and Religion* (11), *The Sane Society* (12), and again in *The Heart of Man* (15). In these works he acknowledges that children may direct erotic impulses towards their parents. He contends, however, that this sexuality is to be understood as something else, that it reflects, camouflages and helps to repress a more fundamental wish—the desire to remain fixated to, in the orbit, and under the protective wing of the mother.<sup>4</sup>

The most elementary of the natural ties is the tie of the child to the mother. The child begins life in the mother's womb, and exists there for a much longer time than is the case with most animals; even after birth, the child remains physically helpless, and completely dependent on the mother. ... The child, in these decisive first years of his life, has the experience of his mother as the fountain of life, as an all enveloping, protective, nourishing power. Mother is food; she is love; she is warmth; she is earth. To be loved by her means to be alive, to be rooted, to be at home. (12)

It is axiomatic that a youngster wants his mother's affectionate interest, comforting presence and loving care. But do these wishes need to be—or even tend to be—outlawed from consciousness? Certainly no cultural taboo discourages, much less prohibits, a four-year-old from basking in the warmth and security of his mother's closeness. On the other hand, parents do

<sup>3</sup>Curiously, Fromm seems aware of this jealousy when he seeks merely to describe, rather than to discredit, the Oedipus complex (14)

<sup>4</sup>In *Sigmund Freud's Mission* (13), Fromm contends that Freud himself repressed a wish to remain bound to his mother.





react vigorously to and attempt to squelch overt sexual behavior by their young. Masturbation commonly evokes grave parental concern and often leads to stern corrective measures. Yet according to Fromm's argument, that which is socially acceptable—the desire to remain near the mother—becomes abhorrent to children and is repressed.<sup>5</sup> But that which collides with strong parental opposition—infantile sexuality and its manifestations—remains conscious, ego-compatible, and even aids the repression of the wish for closeness. Indeed!

This unusual reasoning aside, Fromm's contention that infantile sexuality masks a desire for nearness to the mother retains some plausibility provided one thinks of the Oedipal wishes of small boys. After all, the object of their sexual urges is the same person for whose presence Fromm asserts youngsters crave, their *mothers*. But even this tenuous plausibility disappears when one recalls that the main object of the Oedipal sexuality of little girls is their *fathers*. In short, Fromm's argument that the sexual wishes of youngsters camouflage a deeper longing for closeness with their mothers overlooks the female Oedipus complex. And an argument that neglects half the evidence is surely unacceptable.<sup>6</sup>

In this paper, an attempt has been made to examine Erich Fromm's criticisms of the Oedipus complex. And as the discussions in the preceding pages have tried to suggest, the Oedipus complex, contrary to Fromm's views, cannot be explained away as a mask for a child's desire for closeness with his mother, nor as a "natural reaction

to the pressure of parental authority," and certainly not as a fiction originating in alleged defects in Freud's personality.

That this paper may have failed to do justice to Fromm's views regarding the Oedipus complex (that, for example, some of the arguments advanced may have been unfair, unconvincing or unsound) is surely possible. But if the conclusions reached in the preceding pages are at all valid, it would certainly seem incumbent upon Fromm (especially because of the increasingly large audience his books seem to have) to reconsider—and where necessary, to revise—his views regarding the Oedipus complex. And if Fromm were to do so, he would be continuing in the tradition of the first psychoanalyst, Freud, who openly changed his views—in fact, disowned to do otherwise—when argument or data revealed that a position he had taken was no longer tenable.

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<sup>5</sup> Fromm tries to bolster this argument in his latest book, *The Heart of Man* (15), by emphasizing what he refers to as the child's fear of the mother's destructiveness.

<sup>6</sup> In *The Heart Of Man* (15), Fromm seems at first sight to reveal an awareness of this objection, for he asks, "But what about fixation to father?" Unfortunately, however, Fromm fails to go on to meet the objection—and in addition ignores much relevant data regarding the early sexual development of girls (1).



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