

# WHY OEDIPUS REALLY LOVED HIS FATHER

**E. James Lieberman**

Since Sigmund Freud's time, the extent to which little boys hate their fathers has been greatly exaggerated. The founder of psychoanalysis introduced the Oedipus complex in 1910, based on an ingenious though strained interpretation of the Sophocles drama. Freud believed that a strong--largely unconscious--hostility toward the same-sex parent coupled with sexual longing for the other parent sets up the key conflict of human development. Supposedly the boy's sexual and aggressive impulses are kept in check by his fear of paternal retaliation (castration anxiety). Eventually he renounces the forbidden wish and, ideally, identifies with the father in a positive way.

Despite the importance of Freud's theory about incest and patricide in 20th-century intellectual history, it lacks a sound biological basis, it does not describe the principal dynamics of most families, and it stretches the Oedipus myth considerably to fit the psychoanalytic mold. Freud challenged and enlightened his contemporaries with a dynamic and useful psychology. But his Oedipal theory presumes a powerful, innate sexual and aggressive drive in the child and completely ignores paternal behavior. Sophocles was more concerned than Freud with how fathers behave, and what makes them feared or loved.

In the original story, the son born to Laius and Jocasta was said by an oracle to be destined to kill his father and marry his mother. Before the child was three days old his father had him placed on a mountainside to die. Found by a shepherd, he was given to Polybus and Merope, the unsung heroes of the story, who reared their Oedipus into a splendid young man. Then Oedipus heard the same grim prophecy which had undone Laius. Horrified, the devoted son fled from home in order to spare his father and mother. Like Laius he sought to elude fate, but, unlike his sire, Oedipus acted altruistically, protecting those he loved as best he could, at great sacrifice to himself.

Sophocles leaves no doubt that Oedipus loved Polybus, the man who adopted, named and nurtured him. Oedipus speaks of "Polybus, to whom I owe my life" and acknowledges the grief he caused his father by fleeing. Oedipus did not even hate Laius: by dramatic coincidence the two men met at a crossroads and argued over the right of way. Laius struck first, and Oedipus killed him--a complete stranger who happened to be his biological father.

Applying conventional terminology, Laius would be called the real father and Polybus the adoptive father. As a child psychiatrist I prefer to call them "birth" and "real" fathers, respectively. Controversy still rages in this matter among partisans for and against opening adoptees' birth records, and surrogate parenting now raises the problem in another form. A real father, like Polybus, loves and nurtures, and even makes willing sacrifices for the child. He acknowledges his mortality and the cycle of generations in which sons replace their fathers. Freud ignored this part of the Oedipal tragedy, focussed as he was on the boy's sexual rivalry for the mother and his fear of father's wrath. Laius, admitting paternity, tried to dodge fatherhood. His insecurity and selfishness made him sacrifice his innocent child to save himself. This is just a step beyond primitive human sacrifice to propitiate the gods. Trying to thwart the oracle, Laius unwittingly helped fulfill the prophecy by destroying psychological family ties: he not only dispatched the baby, but put an intolerable burden upon Jocasta as well. Laius, acting with abstract knowledge but against present feeling, created psychological conditions in which patricide and incest could occur unwittingly.

A shadowy figure in the drama compared with Oedipus and Jocasta, King Laius symbolizes patriarchs, priests, and presidents who, frantically striving for immortality through masculine power, sacrifice their sons on ancient altars or modern battlefields for the everlasting glory of the clan or the Fatherland. The driving ideology holds out hope that, if you can propitiate the gods or kill the enemy who seeks your death, you can evade death itself. To some extent Freud was like Laius, authoritarian and pessimistic: he felt that behavior was driven by instinct and controlled by fear. Biology outweighs psychology in the Freudian drama, civilized behavior is a thin veneer atop the seething unconscious, religion and altruism fraudulent attempts to disguise our animal nature. Freud's interpretation of the Oedipus myth protects the father at the expense of the son. It ignores the human dimension of fatherhood which has come to be more important for most of us than mere paternity. Freud was preoccupied with sex, conflict, anger, deterrence, and resignation. So, evidently, was the Western world in the first half of this century.

Reinterpreted, the Oedipal message says that in human affairs relationship outweighs biology--that good fatherhood is possible without paternity, and paternity alone is empty. Tragically, Oedipus must find out "who I am" by opening his adoption record, making paternity--which really means fate, or predestination--decisive. He rejects Jocasta's plea to let go of

the fixation on genesis, to get on with living. Instead, putting cognitive truth above emotional connectedness, knowledge over experience, Oedipus brought about the suicide of the one who loved him most, Jocasta.

By cutting off relationship to avoid fate, we invite a worse fate. Human beings know we must die, but we do not have to die alone, in anguish, or doing something we don't believe in. Knowledge without love can be terribly destructive: knowledge can be suspended, but not relationship, or we die. Jocasta knew that; Oedipus learned it late; Laius never did. Knowing the prophecy led to estrangement, infanticide and patricide; knowing the biological facts led to suicide and exile.

The stimulus for this reinterpretation of Oedipus comes from Otto Rank, Freud's closest protege and subsequent critic. He made the commonsense observation of an "anti-Oedipal" tendency in children, namely the wish to keep their parents together when divorce threatens. Seventy years ago Rank faulted psychoanalytic theory for ignoring nurture in human development, and for pursuing "truth" disconnected from present--real--relationship. Probably most therapists and researchers today view affection and altruism as more important than hostility and competition in human development. Humanistic and existential therapies like Rank's represent a post-Freudian philosophy: the uncreative life is not worth living, the un-lived life is not worth examining.

The remorseful Oedipus blinds himself, but goes on living. His act symbolizes the damage done by amazing foresight, insight, hindsight--all disconnected from love, therefore lacking in wisdom. Sophocles seems to give the nod to human feeling over perfect knowledge when the two are in conflict.

Now it is time to acknowledge and celebrate Polybus, the neglected real father of Oedipus, the beloved adoptive one. Too bad he could not admit, when asked, that his son was adopted, but that seems a small flaw in the total picture, a forgivable concession to human feeling. Oedipus loved him dearly, and for good reason.

----

Similar version published in *The Harvard Mental Health Letter* 7:12, (June) 1991.

---

**Return to Otto Rank Website [Table of Contents](#)**