

Philoctetes and the schizoid personality

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In thinking about the myths of ancient Greece, Freud made us very conscious of their emblematic function as internal emotional struggles. In the ancient tales, struggles ensued between men, nations, and gods as all pursued such things as power and honor and found themselves committing such acts as patricide, fratricide, incest, etc. The mysteries of human behavior were explained through belief in gods who were feared because they possessed all human frailties as well as the power of immortality. The gods indulged their passions seemingly without consequences while human beings lived in perpetual fear of consequences for their own actions or inactions. The only hope of humans was to become favored by the gods through acts of homage to them. The gods could not be counted on for anything better than the deeds of man except through the arbitrary use of their power exercised towards favorites. The morality of these people, then, was based on fear of the gods and their own passions. Freud turned to the myths of the Greeks to tap into knowledge of our most “primitive” selves, our unconscious desires and fears, as opposed to our higher, moral selves, and thus he came up with an unconscious in which aggressive and libidinal drives could destroy us if left to their own devices.

It has not been difficult for the western mind to assume that the Greek myths were projections of the imagination of the ancients. Such an idea suited medieval Christianity which saw these myths as pre-figurations, and it suits modern psychoanalytic thinking which sees them as representing universal emotional states. Their power becomes even greater in their capacity to help modern thinkers understand human emotions and also the way in which emotion establishes values and purpose. If ancient man worshipped gods who demonstrated the baser emotions of human beings out of fear of retribution, these same gods also offered him values to which to aspire. Think only of the positive value of the sun-god Apollo or of Athena, but then remember also that these gods could be ruthless as well to those who did not do as they wished or who made them jealous. The gods, then, these projections of the human imagination, possessed the full range of feelings – love, hate, generosity, selfishness, greed, vengeance, anger, rage, jealousy – but they did not tolerate difficulty with these feelings for long, they did not have to.

So how can these myths serve us a century after Freud? If we think about the myths as projections of internal objects, we may find some answers. In the first six months, the internal life of infants is already peopled with good and bad figures/objects with which it is in a constant state of shifting alliance. Play, dreams, fantasy, masturbation and other types of auto-erotism affect the internal figures/objects

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and alter the child's view of the external world. Infants establish connections to objects from birth and develop through the paranoid-schizoid and depressive positions with a host of objects, good and bad, in their interior world. To survive, splitting occurs into "good" and "persecuting" segments with the feeding breast representative of the good that will become love, trust, gratitude, and hope while possible threat comes from all sides both internally and externally. Every pain, disappointment, or shock attacks the trust in the goodness and strength of the object. Such is the paranoid-schizoid position in which all strength and safety from persecution derives from the idealized object, the mother's breast, or later, the father. When all splitting and idealization between infant self and objects has taken place, a child moves to the depressive position, and tender concern for the object comes to supersede selfish concern. At the same time, when the infant becomes anxious and fearful both of the overwhelming need for the mother's breast and that it may be taken away, the child gets rid of the anxious feelings through projective identification, ridding the self of sources of anxiety by projecting them into an object. The infant will bite the breast by which it is overwhelmed or of which it feels envy. Internal objects developed in this oral stage of life are well represented as projections and through projective identification in the myths of the ancients.

Let us demonstrate through one myth. The myth of Philoctetes begins with Herakles. At the end of his life, after a period of unendurable pain and suffering, Herakles orchestrates his own death by asking Philoctetes to light the funeral pyre that will relieve and kill him. As a reward for doing this, Herakles gives Philoctetes his infallible bow, and through this inheritance, Philoctetes is reborn as the adopted son of this man/god, as the recipient of object love. But to get this special status, Philoctetes had to agree to kill the father, Herakles; he had to accept the terms of his new-found paternity through patricide and abandonment. He inherits power by destroying its source, but his internal object is split by this.

The story continues with the Greek leaders asking Philoctetes to join them as they set out for their war in Troy. When they stop off at a tiny island to sacrifice to the local deity, Philoctetes approaches the shrine first and is bitten in the foot by a snake. The infection becomes peculiarly virulent, and the groans of Philoctetes make it impossible to perform the sacrifice, which would be spoiled by ill-omened sounds; the bite begins to suppurate with so horrible a smell that his companions cannot bear to have him near them. They remove him to a neighboring island and sail away to Troy without him. Philoctetes remains there for ten years during which time the mysterious and painful wound never heals. In the meantime, the Greeks at Troy suffer the deaths of Achilles and Ajax and learn from a soothsayer that they can never win the war without the help of Neoptolemus, the son of Achilles, who inherited his father's armor, and Philoctetes of the infallible bow. Eventually, both men return to Troy; Philoctetes is healed there by the son of the physician Aesclepius, and he kills Paris in single combat. Neoptolemus and Philoctetes become the heroes of the taking of Troy.

So how does the myth represent internal objects? Melanie Klein stresses the ways in which "ambivalence arises over the weaning crisis when the infant learns to bite and can react sadistically." In her view, love and hate block each other. The infant attacks and also feels identified with the object of his aggression, and so he feels guilt and involves himself in the fate, factual or fantasied, of the object. Hate of the object involves hate of oneself: one suffers with the object attacked because the object cannot be given up. The holder of the infallible bow feels powerful enough to approach the shrine first (a weaning process), but the snake bites him. Assuming the power of his forebear by approaching the shrine first, he rids himself of the all-powerful Herakles, but when he is bitten by the snake, the act of projective identification backfires. Instead of discharging anxious feelings on to the object, Philoctetes identifies with the object of his aggression and hates himself instead of Herakles. This breast remains all powerful, and he must deal with the split off persecuting objects. Abandoned and without care, he lives with no one near the smell from the suppurating sore.

Sophocles' play, "Philoctetes" takes place during one day after the wounded man has suffered his abandonment and suppurating sore for ten years. It is a day on which Odysseus and Neoptolemus arrive on his island to get Philoctetes to return to Troy with them. Edmund Wilson frames his reading of the play around the emotional effect of his abandonment on Philoctetes, and the emotion shown is

hate, hate caused by suffering and suffering that increases hate. To Wilson human sympathy in the play helps the wounded man give up his hate and assume his role as hero. But this reading does not account for the snake bite, the duration and suffering from the wound, nor the unwillingness of Philoctetes to leave when his empathic friend asks.

The action of the play involves the attempts of Neoptolemus to bring Philoctetes back to Troy and the changes that occur in him as he observes the sufferings of the bitter, wounded man. Early in the play, Odysseus urges Neoptolemus to use cunning to get Philoctetes to come with them by falsifying a shared rage at Odysseus whom Philoctetes hates and holds responsible for his abandonment. The suffering man agrees to go home and away from the war with Neoptolemus, but as they are about to depart, Philoctetes suffers another burst of infection and pain and cannot move. He gives his weapons into the care of Neoptolemus while enduring his ordeal and falls asleep at the end of the painful episode. Neoptolemus becomes reluctant to carry through on this plan of trickery. Odysseus appears, wants to take the bow and run, but Neoptolemus knows that the bow and arrows require Philoctetes in order to fulfill the prophecy. During the discussion between Odysseus and Neoptolemus, Philoctetes awakens, and the ploy to get him to Troy is exposed.

Neoptolemus comes to feel empathy for Philoctetes and shrinks from cheating him. Philoctetes still refuses to go to Troy, but he is not unresponsive to the kindness of Neoptolemus who treats him as another man whose courage and pride he admires. While confessing his own part in the treachery, Neoptolemus still tries to urge Philoctetes to go to Troy by pointing out that the snake that bit him was an agent of the gods, and that the son of Asclepius at Troy will cure the injured man. Philoctetes remains adamant and insists that Neoptolemus take him home as promised before the trickery was exposed. In the end Herakles appears from Mount Olympus and tells Philoctetes that despite his having been tricked, he should go to Troy with Neoptolemus. He and the son of Achilles shall stand like lions and gloriously carry the day. Wilson says that the *deus ex machina* that becomes the deciding factor in making Philoctetes agree to go off to war is a figure for the kindness and friendship from Neoptolemus. The injured man has found someone who recognizes the wrong that has been done to him and champions his cause in defiance of all the Greek forces. Philoctetes then becomes the true heir of Herakles who himself had performed so many generous deeds, and a long hatred is dissolved.

But this plan does not work until Herakles appears at the end and tells his adopted son to go. The wound would not have been healed without the return of the father, the now introjected good object. Philoctetes had an attack of physical suffering as he was about to leave with Neoptolemus, but this did not happen after Herakles appeared. Now he was ready to rejoin mankind. Under the care of Neoptolemus' growing empathy, Philoctetes did not yield but continued to be sullen, but with the return of the father to reinforce the suggestions of Neoptolemus, the younger man assumed an effective role as transitional object. Philoctetes now internalized Herakles sufficiently as a good object to assume his role as a man in community.

The bitter anger over his abandonment and the pain and stink from the wound have left Philoctetes weakened but alive. The wound follows a pattern whereby the infection gathers into an abscess which swells unendurably until it bursts. After it bursts, Philoctetes feels better for a while until the pattern renews and all of the infection in his bloodstream moves to one site of unbearable pain again. Psychic pain has a more elegant surface than this abscess, but this wound, this abscess, this ulcer, this cancer is a projection of an internal, a psychic wound in which an abandoned, angry, bitter man approaches a religious shrine before others, perhaps out of arrogance and envy, and now feels only helplessness, need, dependency, and longing. This longing for Herakles, the father, is relentless because it is accompanied by anxiety, the anxiety that comes from object hunger that cannot be satisfied. Clinically, one of the most basic responses to object hunger that cannot be satisfied is withdrawal into anger, bitterness, and isolation. Philoctetes does not withdraw initially voluntarily, but neither does he die from the wound or by his own hand. He lives with his suppurating sore, his anger, his bitterness, and his hatred until goodness and his father appear.

So Philoctetes suffers from object hunger, a schizoid condition that arises out of infantile fear and keeps one in a "dangerous state of anxiety." (Guntrip) Such infantile fear, or ego weakness, makes

for a flight from life expressed through being cut off or not one with people. This schizoid condition defends against the anxiety resulting from the experience of bad objects and the fear that the libidinal goal of finding gratification from objects will be frustrated. Yet we are constitutionally incapable of living in isolated units because we are object seeking creatures, and our experience with good objects does not have to be retained; these make us feel secure. We retain our experience of objects only when that experience is bad. Our inner psychic world is set up “duplicating an original frustrating situation. It is an unhappy world in which one is tied to bad objects and always feels frustrated, hungry, angry, guilty, profoundly anxious with the constant temptation to seek transient inner relief by projecting our anxiety back into the external world.” (Fairbairn) When you want love from a person who will not give it, the person becomes a bad object to you, and you react by becoming enraged at the frustration and want to make an aggressive attack on the object and thereby force it to become good and stop frustrating you. Here is the problem of hate or love made angry. Sometimes, instead of getting angry, the person may simply go on getting more and more hungry, and full of a sense of painful craving that includes a longing to get total and complete possession of the love object in order not to be left to starve. “Love made hungry is the schizoid problem,” and with that, the terrible fear is roused that one’s love has become so devouring and incorporative that love itself has become destructive. The depressive is always goaded to anger and the schizoid always tantalized, made hungry, and driven to withdrawal. Fairbairn thought that the schizoid condition is more fundamental than the depressive. For Philoctetes, the snake bite did not satisfy his hunger; it prolonged it and isolated him. Only Herakles’ attention could change that.