

## **Myth and Personality**

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Myths seem to function to inspire and guide persons. Presumably, myths have this effect because they deal with major life tasks that all persons have and that are difficult to perform well. Pinpointing these major life tasks is an important function of personality theorizing. Hence, personality formulations are a sensible starting point in this attempt to understand the effectiveness of myths.

What follows should not be construed as any systematic testing of personality hypothesis on myths. It is more like construct validation, in which joint consideration of personality theory and myths may lead to illumination of both. What is illuminated may eventually turn out to be useful to the personologist in more systematic research, and to persons in general as they conduct their lives.

Needless to say, this vast task must be cut down to size. Accordingly, I will rely on existential personality theory and restrict myself to Greek myths. The choice of existentialism represents a conviction on my part that there is more in this approach to human behavior than has been explicated by psychologists. In addition, it may be stimulating to have available a third alternative to the all too familiar Freudian and Jungian interpretations of myths. The restriction to Greek myths is simply an expedient, and may indeed limit the generality of what is learned.

### **A Main Thrust of Existential Psychology**

A central idea in existential psychology is the definition of personality as a blend of facticity and possibility (Sartre, 1956). Let us explore this idea a bit, as it will turn out to be important in understanding the appeal of myths.

Facticity involves accepting as givens those aspects of yourself and your life-situation that you cannot alter. These givens may be biological, e.g., you are a male or a female, tall or short, keen of vision or myopic. They may also be social, e.g., you are rich or poor, marginal or central, educated or uneducated. Facticity includes not only biological and social facts over which you have had little control, but also present states

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resulting from choices you yourself have made in the past. For example, you may be a psychologist — not a lawyer, philosopher or classicist — and a husband and father — not a bachelor with few obligations except to self.

In contrast to facticity, possibility involves recognizing and pursuing desired future states to which you can realistically aspire. This thread of existential thought recognizes that the uniqueness of humans is the interrelated processes of symbolization, imagination and judgment (Maddi, 1970). Through these processes, humans make the decisions which mold their life-courses. Certainly the givens constituting present states issuing from past decisions are at least somewhat subject to revision and change through additional decision-making. Does one have to be a psychologist, husband and father in just the way one has been? Does one have to remain in these activities at all? In the same way, biological and social givens can be evaluated as to their necessity. Must a biological female act according to norms of feminine behavior? May a short person become a basketball player through development of ball-handling skills? Is a socially-marginal person doomed to a life of impotency?

In a life well-led, there is considerable tension between facticity and possibility. In order to appreciate this, let us scrutinize the existential assumption that persons are decision-makers, and their lives a series of decisions. Regardless of differences in content, decisions share an invariant form: one choice leads the person to the future by entailing change, and the other choice ties one to the past by reaffirming the status quo. Choosing the future is regarded as superior because it is the way of growth, development, vitality, and renewal (Kobasa & Maddi, 1977).

According to existential psychology, it is incumbent upon persons to continually assess whether "givens" really *are* unalterable. If some state is not really inevitable, then to continue it is to choose the past and jeopardize growth and development. For example, if one is bored with one's job because it does not utilize enough of one's energies and skills, but decides to remain in it for fear that no better position may be available, then one has chosen the past and therefore jeopardized growth. The choice of the past brings ontological guilt, the psychological aspect of which is a sense of missed opportunity. If one chooses the past regularly, ontological guilt accumulates into the despair and meaningless attendant upon perceiving one's life as wasted (Kobasa & Maddi, 1977).

To complicate matters further, ontological guilt is not the only hazard for the decision-maker. To choose the future is indeed to pursue what appears to be possibilities but are by no means actualities. Hence, there is considerable risk involved. One may change, burn one's bridges, and still fail to achieve hoped-for goals. In a very real sense, one has only partial control over what will happen. One may decide to become an architect only to find that due to an economic depression there are no relevant jobs to be had. One may make the commitment of falling in love with someone only to find that the love is not reciprocated. Thus, pursuing possibility brings ontological anxiety, or fear of the unknown (Kobasa & Maddi,

1977).

Persons may make matters even worse by failing to perceive sensitively what are givens and therefore outside the realm of possibility. Through an act of egotism, one may insist that everything one wishes is possible, thereby greatly increasing the likelihood that one's choices of a supposed future will end in fruitless frustration.

Even if one is perceptive enough to pursue only what is truly possible, each decision for the future brings a new facticity with it. If you decide to change fields and become a lawyer, the new facticity is that you are no longer a psychologist, that you enter a new career in mid-life, that you must spend your time developing adversary skills rather than doing other things. The longer you persist in trying to become a lawyer, the more entrenched and difficult to change becomes the new facticity.

What emerges from all these considerations is that facticity and possibility are inextricably (even paradoxically) intertwined opposites. When persons are living vigorously and developing well, they oscillate between facticity and possibility, trying to blend them somehow, trying to manage anxiety and guilt, trying to grow without denying real limitations. What I have described is the existential ideal, the authentic life-style (Sartre, 1956). It is indeed a strenuous way of living. So difficult is it that persons all too often fall short of it. One way to fall is the denial of possibility inherent in *conformism*, where the person regards social conventions as unassailable givens, and subjugates him or herself to them (Maddi, 1970). The other way to fail is to deny true facticity, which constitutes *extravagance* (Binswanger, 1963) or egotism in that preoccupations with a desired outcome clouds recognition of a totally unacceptable outcome that is the more likely.

### The Appeal of Myths

It is precisely when we consider how persons can find the courage and spirit to engage in the rather constant and difficult reevaluation of their lives (here called authenticity) that we encounter the appeal of myths. *Myths provide, among other things, culturally-relevant inspiration and guidance in the paradoxical task of governing oneself as a shifting blend of facticity and possibility, without lapsing into conformism or egotism and thereby jeopardizing growth.* Myths are not prescriptive in any easy, concrete, literal sense. It would not be sensible to recreate the actual stuff of any particular myth in one's own life. Rather, myths are universal enough for the culture group from which they arise to serve as a general inspiration and guide. In this regard, it is important to recognize that although myths are populated by divinities and heroic figures, they can be identified-with in that the events they experience are surprisingly close to everyday life, as are their emotions, strengths and weaknesses. Thus, by permitting identification and yet dealing with universal concerns, myths stimulate in the audience a mental outlook facilitating courageous consideration of the paradox of facticity and possibility in their own particular

life circumstances.

### *Inspiring a Sense of Possibility*

When the experience of a myth is pleasant or exciting, one reason for this is that it has inspired a sense of possibility in the consumer. This inspiration begins with an obvious feature of most myths, namely, that they chronicle extraordinary exploits and happenings. Sisyphus is able, by his ingenuity, to return from the dead. Odysseus' will and excellence permit him even in old age to thread his heavy bow and shoot an arrow through nine axe heads, thereby winning the competition for possession of his wife. The general message is that if one is intent and capable enough even unlikely goals may be achieved.

There is further cultivation of the sense of possibility in the theme that biological characteristics are not necessarily what they seem. Although many mythological personages might resemble ordinary mortals, they actually have a divinity for a parent. Thus, Theseus is the child of Poseidon, and Achilles of Thetis. Such extraordinary parentage gave the personages unusual confidence and power. Other mythological figures did almost as well, i.e., having a remarkable mortal parent, with this fact often concealed from them and others until the point where extraordinary achievement was called for. And, of course, many myths are about divinities themselves, who frequently change their physical forms, cavorting as animals, mortals, the opposite sex. What is being communicated in all these mythological possibilities is that although biology is real and important, one can never be sure it has been correctly perceived. And even when correctly perceived, biology is hardly destiny in any simple, mindless way.

Further, myths teach that social norms also need not be regarded as unequivocal givens. Innumerable examples of signs and oracles provoke mythological figures to believe in their own extraordinariness enough to break with convention. For example, when Theseus is able to remove his mortal father's sword from under the rock, he decides to spurn the conventional and safe sea route to Athens in favor of the more dangerous but challenging overland route. The many years of the Trojan war are filled with uncommon exploits of bravery resulting directly from some warrior being visited by a divinity or encouraged by valor in someone else. In other myths, divine inspiration leads similarly to all sorts of transcendence of social conditions — sexual, political and familial. Clearly, an important message in myths is that transcendence of social norms is not only possible but often valuable.

### *Stimulating a Sense of Facticity*

But myths also include a theme concerning the dangers involved in failing to heed immutable givens. As an example of biological givens, Icarus is not satisfied with the already remarkable feat of flying, and in soaring too high, he denies his mortal status; thus, Apollo punishes him. For breaking his pact with the underworld and remaining by trickery among the living

though already dead, Sisyphus must be punished by rolling a stone uphill throughout eternity. There is a reminder of social givens in the death of Achilles, which must take place, because in his grief and rage over his lost friend, he defiles the body of Hector by cutting it up, feeding it to dogs and not permitting a decent burial. And, of course, the downfall of Oedipus and his line results from his having killed his father and married his mother.

When an audience reacts with horror to a myth, it is often because the characters failed to recognize necessity, and in their extravagant treatment of it as a possibility, came to a bad end. The audience feels cautioned not to do likewise.

### Guidance in Myths

Thus far, I have considered the sheer stimulus value of the inspirational quality of myths. But what is there to learn in myths about how to perceive possibility and facticity accurately? Beyond stimulating, how can myths guide? Some observations will perhaps be useful in suggesting the direction a comprehensive answer would take.

#### *Importance of Imagination and Judgment*

From the viewpoint of existential psychology, it is imagination and judgment that are most important in perceiving facticity and possibility accurately. This is because no one has a static, a priori list of givens and possibles. Rather, one discovers them during the decision-making process. Important in the discovery is imagining the consequences of the decision and judging their acceptability. If the decision seems likely to lead to a truly unacceptable consequence, then one is in the grips of facticity and should heed it by deciding otherwise. If there are no imminent unacceptable consequences, one is dealing with possibility and can justify going ahead with the decision whatever the outcome.

In Greek myths, there is considerable reliance of characters on their imagination and judgment in making decisions with discernment. Most of the extraordinary exploits in myths seem the result of ingenuity, whereby the character is able to transform what appeared initially unlikely into the hoped-for outcome. In this process, the character is guided by special knowledge (e.g., a message from the Gods), or extraordinary capabilities (e.g., great strength or cunning) pertinent to the task at hand. Through special knowledge (which is a kind of imagination) and extraordinary capability (it is good judgment to take this into account), the probabilities are altered such that the desired outcome shifts from extremely unlikely to within the realm of possibility. The enormously difficult labors of Heracles become sensible for him to attempt when his enormous capabilities are fully appreciated. The achievements of Theseus do not seem quite so risky when one takes into account the signs he has that he is no ordinary mortal. And the stratagems employed by Odysseus in various dangerous escapades seem realistic given his cunning and manipulative abilities. All these

mythic exploits show what vigorous imagination and judgment can accomplish in reinterpreting situations such that desired outcomes initially appearing impossible emerge as worth striving for.

### *How to Fail in Recognizing Facticity*

Myths are, by definition, about extraordinary circumstances, so it is not surprising that guidance concerning the identification of facticity is carried mainly in negative instances. When characters deviate from the ideal of acting on possibility accurately perceived, they do not fall into conformism so much as extravagance. In other words, they fail to identify immutable givens to their detriment.

Existential psychology has not thus far provided much basis for understanding this phenomenon of extravagance beyond identifying it. Therefore, it is here, in this tragic aspect of behavior, that scrutiny of myths has much to offer for guidance. Such scrutiny inclines me to the belief that *strong emotions and compensatory sentiments block otherwise remarkable characters from perceiving facticity*. It does not seem to matter whether the given in question is primarily social or biological.

Creon is a good case in point. As king of Thebes, he proclaims that Polyneices, killed attacking the city, shall not receive the burial rites by which souls pass successfully into the next life. Although Polyneices, a son of the former king, was to be king himself and was attempting to claim this right when killed, Creon decides that he had committed treason by the attack and was therefore not entitled to burial. Polyneices' sister, Antigone, defies the proclamation and buries her brother, whereupon Creon brings about her death. But Haemon, Creon's son, commits suicide because of his great love for Antigone, his fiancée. Creon is overwhelmed by his loss, and his downfall ensues.

Clearly, Creon did not exercise imagination and judgment in posing and evaluating consequences before his decision to condemn Antigone. Had he done so, he would have realized that Haemon desperately loved Antigone (indeed, he tells his father this), and Antigone had no choice but to bury her brother, on pain of losing her own soul along with his. Creon would also have realized that he could not withstand the loss of his son. Recognizing this facticity, he would have had to act differently. Actually, it would not have been difficult to conclude that familial obligations are as important as considerations of state in the matter of deaths. An ingenious solution would have been to permit a family member to bury Polyneices, while still denying him state sanction.

Creon's failing in imagination and judgment, his extravagance in insisting on his way, can be traced to the compensatory sentiment of pride. Actually, Creon only became king when Polyneices and his brother, the sons of the former king, were both killed in battle. Creon had been passed over for the kingship before, and having now gained it unexpectedly, was puffed up with his own power. Operating out of what must have been a sense of inferiority, he probably felt that for Polyneices to receive a hero's

burial would somehow diminish his own new status by reminding the populace of their loss. It is an excess of pride, compensating for inferiority feelings, that clouded the vision of facticity.

In the myth of Achilles, it is immense anger which serves the same clouding function. Feeling badly treated by Agamemnon (the leader of the Greek forces besieging Troy), Achilles withdraws from the battle and observes from his ships. The Trojans are encouraged by his withdrawal, and sweep the Greek forces to the sea, beginning to destroy their ships and hence to cut off their escape route. Patroclus dons Achilles' bright armor and joins the fight, hoping to delude the Trojans into believing that his great lover has reconsidered. The trick works for a while, but finally Patroclus is killed. Achilles is so beside himself with grief that when he kills Hector in retaliation, he defiles the body brutally. This sinful behavior seals Achilles' doom as the gods decide that he must die as atonement.

Achilles fails to scrutinize the consequences of deciding not to fight. The Greeks are, after all, his kinsmen and comrades. They beseech him to take the field, as he is the best warrior among them. Agamemnon even relents, an unusual act of contrition in a field commander. Not being cognitively incapacitated by wrath, Patroclus must rejoin the battle when it is clear that the Greeks are being wiped out. But armor or not, Patroclus is not Achilles, and clearly cannot stand up to the best Trojan warriors. He is in great peril, and it is not surprising that he is killed. Had he been exercising imagination and judgment, Achilles could have foreseen all this, and also weighed properly his intense love for Patroclus. Facticity would have prevented Achilles from acting in a manner that produced his downfall, had his faculties not been overwhelmed by insane anger.

In the same set of myths, another good example concerns Hector, a normally sensible and capable person. During the retirement of Achilles from battle, Hector leads the Trojan forces to the rout mentioned above. He knows that it has been prophesied that only when Achilles is fighting can the Trojans lose. He also knows that Achilles will only fight if his own ships are attacked. The question arises in the Trojan camp as to whether Achilles' camp should be attacked. An advisor, Polydamas counsels caution out of a clear perception of facticity, a strategy that might have led eventually to a complete Trojan victory. But, in his extravagance, Hector insists that the attack be pressed. Achilles reenters battle and kills Hector, an event not only unfortunate for him, but disastrous for the Trojan cause.

Why is Hector suddenly so blind and injudicious? He seems to be experiencing a compensatory kind of megalomania (Redfield, 1975). He knows that Achilles is a much better warrior than he is. He must also sense that the Trojan position is deteriorating slowly with the passing of each month. The gnawing frustration of all this, coupled with a creeping sense of inferiority, probably leads him to overvalue the victory achieved in Achilles' absence. He becomes drunk with victory in compensation for his sense of inferiority. This megalomania renders him fatally incapable of the imagination and judgment so clear in the counsel of Polydamas.

The blinding function of intense emotion and compensatory sentiment is apparent not only in matters of war and politics but also in interpersonal intimacy, not only with regard to mortals but gods as well. Hephaestus, for example, becomes extremely jealous because his wife, Aphrodite, is having an affair with Ares. He conspires to trap them in bed with an invisible net he has forged and then summons the divinities self-righteously to bear witness to his degradation. The goddesses do not come, finding the matter too distasteful. Zeus concludes that Hephaestus is a pitiable complainer and will not help him. And worst of all, the gods all lust after Aphrodite, seeing her sexuality, and conspire to seduce her. Consequently, Hephaestus has many more competitors to flame his jealousy. His suffering is complete when he realizes too late that he loves Aphrodite far too much to leave her, whatever her department.

How is it that Hephaestus fails to recognize and heed in time the facticity of his intense love for Aphrodite and her inexorable ability to arouse lust in other males? On the basis of these two givens, his inviting the neighbors in amounts to procuring lovers for his wife. This is lack of imagination and judgment indeed on the part of someone usually distinguished by his cleverness and craft. The problem is his extravagantly intense jealousy and the compensatory sentiment of moral indignation. Perhaps what is being compensated for is the sense of inferiority a deformed hunchback might have — be he god or mortal — married to a woman who is the definition of physical and sexual beauty.

### Final Comment

It is time to summarize what has been proposed in this consideration of existential psychology and Greek myths. Persons function best as decision-makers when they use their imagination and judgment vigorously to pose and evaluate the likely consequences of their decisions before they make them. This is an enormously difficult task, and one important function of myths is to inspire us to take it on. A major reason why posing and evaluating the likely consequences of decisions is so difficult is that we must be wary not to mistake givens for possibilities and possibilities for givens. The latter mistake is conformism, in that social and biological conventions are regarded as inevitabilities. The former mistake is extravagance, in that inevitabilities are vainly treated as if they do not matter or could be changed. So difficult is the discernment of facticity and possibility that persons need all the help they can get. Myths serve a prescriptive function by depicting extravagance and its disastrous consequences.

The theme of extravagance in myths involves characters of otherwise notable capabilities who experience downfall by an extraordinary inability to recognize a distinct inevitability, treating it instead as if it were somehow in the realm of possibility. As the reader and the other characters can predict, this decision-making mistake involves actions that are disastrous. In this mythic theme, what clouds the vision of the tragic



character is a single-minded preoccupation with one desired consequence of decision to the exclusion of consideration of others that are totally unacceptable. This lack of imagination and judgment occurs due to the interfering effect of intense emotions and related compensatory impulses.

Should persons strive, therefore, never to experience intense emotions and compensatory impulses? Even if this were possible, and it probably is not, it might constitute throwing the baby out with the bath water. How much emotion is too much? Can persons afford to lose the important source of motivation inherent in compensatory thought? The answer to all these questions is very likely, "no." It may be quite sufficient to keep clearly in mind that it is unwise to act too quickly on decisions contemplated while in the full flush of strong emotions and compensatory impulses. One should insist on reconsidering the decision once the emotions have cooled a little. In a cooler moment, all of the various consequences of the decision can be considered in a more balanced fashion. If there still appears no facticity, in the form of a totally unacceptable and likely consequence, then there is no further obstacle to action.

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