

# Review of: "The Eden Complex: Transgression and Transformation in the Bible, Freud and Jung"

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I very much enjoyed this article, and in the spirit of the Qeios publishing model I would like to offer several points for the author and others to think about. However, it is important for me to preface my comments by saying that I am not a Jungian and my familiarity with analytic psychology is limited. Therefore, I cannot contribute to a discussion about Jung's relationship to the 'Eden Complex.' Additionally, I have no intention of defending the Oedipus complex as Freud developed it. As Dr. Drob has noted, many contemporary therapists trained in psychoanalysis, including myself, have concluded that there are more productive ways to understand how family dramas influence individual psychological development. That said, what I intend to do is to speak to the complex itself, first by re-historicizing it, and second, by saying a few things about its clinical relevance.

In terms of historicization, the central argument of the article – that the 'Eden Complex' is more basic and therapeutically relevant than the Oedipus complex, is not original. Eric Fromm,[1] for one, fully developed this idea as early as 1941 in his seminal book *Escape from Freedom*, and this notion served as the bedrock of his anthropologically informed, humanistic philosophy throughout his career.

In line with Dr. Drob's thesis, Fromm viewed eating from the tree of knowledge as a transgressive act. More specifically, it was an act of transgression that dislodged humankind from an otherwise permanent state of merger with an uncompromising authority figure. In Fromm's words,

Man is forbidden to eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. He acts against God's command, he breaks through the state of harmony of which he is a part without transcending it. From the standpoint of the Church which represented authority, this is essentially sin. From the standpoint of man, however, this is the beginning of human freedom (Fromm 1941: 33).

Fromm then goes on to argue that although the expulsion from paradise liberated humankind from primordial bondage, it simultaneously exposed humankind to the terrors of earthly life. In the wake of the expulsion "He [Man] is alone and free, yet powerless and afraid (Fromm 1941: 34). Fromm goes on to say,

Primary bonds once severed cannot be mended; once paradise is lost, man cannot return to it. There is only one possible solution for the relationship of individualized man with the world: his active solidarity with all men and his spontaneous activity, love and work, which unite him again with the world, not by primary ties but as a free an independent individual (Fromm 1941: 35).

Here, Fromm's thinking seems to conform very closely to the Lurianist theology Dr. Drob describes; humankind can, under appropriate circumstances, re-actualize the *sefirot* and reconstitute the world in a way only made possible by the experience of suffering and strife, but it will take time.

With this utopian image in place, Fromm devoted the remainder of the book to outlining the historical movement toward greater individual freedom, focusing heavily on the modern 'mechanisms of escape' (authoritarianism, destructiveness, automaton conformity) that he felt were undermining efforts to realize true human emancipation.

It is important to note that although in *Escape from Freedom* Fromm was primarily concerned with political psychology, his development of what Dr. Drob calls the 'Eden Complex' was a recurrent theme in his psychological writings. For example, in Fromm's most popular book, *The Art of Loving*, he again draws on the myth of the expulsion from Eden to argue that the human fear of separation and individuation creates a regressive pull to reestablish a state of symbiotic union with some other (the return to Eden). However, succumbing to this pull can prevent the individual from learning to love in mature ways, which involve artfully uniting with the other without sacrificing one's integrity or individuality. In this context Fromm argues that love too often parades as a merger experience where the boundaries of the self are dissolved, or as a form of conformity to dominant societal ideals, or as a sado-masochistic dance enacted by the controller and controlled, all of which represent flights from freedom that diminish rather than enhance our capacity to love.

Beyond Fromm, I want to point out that other psychoanalysts have also mobilized the Eden myth to describe the very kinds of pre-Oedipal dilemmas Dr. Drob references. For example, writing about primordial experiences of disillusionment and shame, Peter Shabad has argued, ala Winnicott, that healthy early development is characterized by an "unawareness or innocence of evil that insulates an illusory sphere of going-on-being in which the child can play and explore in a carefree way" (Shabad 2001: 62). Shabad then asks, "What occurs, then, when this sense of innocence is disrupted before its time? What happens when any number of impingements, frustrations, traumas, or prolonged separations prematurely evict a child from his private Garden of Eden?" (ibid).

As Dr. Drob has noted, the expulsion from Eden is a necessity. Additionally, one could argue that Jung's observation that God must have orchestrated the expulsion from the Garden of Eden is consistent with contemporary notions of good enough parenting, which suggest that progressively granting children the autonomy they need to learn and grow as individuals is crucial to healthy development. Fromm's writings make clear that separation and individuation, especially from parental authorities (who often serve as prototypes for object-representations commonly called 'gods'), is the condition of possibility for healthy human development, the aim of which is to empower the child to come into possession of an authentic sense of oneself as a self-directed and self-conscious individual. But as Shabad (2001) has suggested, premature expulsion from proverbial paradise can have a traumatic effect on development, which is to say the child must *choose* to eat the forbidden fruit; when it is forced upon them it becomes poisonous. Thus, exiting Eden can be complicated.

Dr. Drob acknowledges this in the article, but I think more could be said about it. The complexity of the human

psyche makes clinical work exceedingly difficult, and sorting out what, exactly, is being transgressed, why, and to what end, is no easy task – especially since the analyst is typically in the middle of it. Many patients report to therapy because their transgressive behaviors are repetitive and self-destructive; they violate boundaries, disregard rules, and hurt people, including themselves. For these patients the proverbial forbidden fruit is consumed too often, and the hunger for it and the riddle of its meaning must be deciphered before they can acquire the freedom to make different and more authentic choices. Adam Phillips (2016) has observed that these patients - and most of the rest of us for that matter, would do well to pay more attention to the unforbidden pleasures that are near to hand, but that are overshadowed by our fascination with that which been tabooed. Other patients need help liberating themselves from from stifling strictures they have internalized in the course of development, strictures that keep them at arms-reach from life, or worse, that trap them in self-destructive spirals fueled by shame and guilt. Clearly these kinds of patients could benefit from a bit of transgression; their fears and inhibitions literally prevent them from tasting the fruit that might set them free. And many if not most people experience an admixture of these and other dispositions. Moreover, developmental psychology has taught us that children only feel free to explore and cross new boundaries when they have a safe base to retreat to; the leap into the unknown is made possible by keeping one foot in the known, which is part of why maintaining the frame is so important when doing psychoanalytic work. The point is that transgression is not inherently valuable or growth promoting. I think this is what Dr. Drob means to convey when he tells us Jung believed positive acts of transgression operate in the service of creating new objective values – that is, arriving at a place where one's desires and choices can be authentically claimed as one's own.

With this in mind, part of what I enjoyed most about Dr. Drob's article was his account of Jung's own apparent compulsion to transgress boundaries in the service of self-discovery. Dr. Drob paints Jung as an explorer keen to surmount the obstacles he believes are standing between himself and the attainment of some higher truth. Dr. Drob then goes on to talk about how this might serve as an object lesson that can be applied both in psychotherapy and society at large. Dr. Drob uses the language of the 'paradigm shift' and invokes Lacan to suggest that both scientific discovery and personal growth are contingent upon our ability to innovate or perhaps outright reject the models and personal myths we have come to cherish. In the Lacanian tradition this has the quality of 'hitting upon' some deeper truth that unsettles the status quo and facilitates a reorganization of the psyche.[2] This portion of Dr. Drob's article brought to mind the *Wizard of Oz*; it is only when the veil is suddenly and unexpectedly torn away and the great wizard is revealed to be a mere mortal that Dorothy and her companions are able to recognize that they already have that which they seek. Having been disabused of their illusions, they finally become free to chart their own courses of action. I think this idea is also implicit in Freud's emphasis on the importance of attuning ourselves to primary process thinking – that is, to the kind of mental activity that is complicit in shaping our dreams and that offers us access to areas of mental life we typically defend against to preserve agreeable but incomplete (or distorted) understandings of ourselves. The progressive integration of these disavowed parts of ourselves renders us whole and relatively speaking, freer.

In conclusion, Dr. Drob's ability to fluidly shift between therapeutic and religico-mythological registers made this article a joy to read, and I think he effectively demonstrated, or enacted, the main point he sought to convey; by inviting readers to reimagine things with reference to the Eden Complex, he seemingly aspired to move us out of our taken-for-granted frames of reference and move us into a new realm of meaning. I suspect that clinicians like Dr. Drob work this way

with their patients, and it is impressive to see it made manifest through the medium of publishing. In terms of criticism, I think the Oedipus complex was used as a foil of sorts to frame Dr. Drob's argument, which is fine, but I'm not sure it was necessary. That said, I was happy to see Dr. Drob give a nod to Freud's own transgressive propensities at the end of the paper. As for work that might be done to expand or elaborate the article, I think integrating figures like Fromm and other analysts who were marginalized in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century mostly because they became free-thinking individuals who refused to conform to Freudian orthodoxy would make the article richer and more powerful – that is, if the point is to foreground the value of transgression, especially since figures like Fromm were so inspired by both Talmudic thought and the Myth of the Fall. However, the article is very instructive in its current version.

Fromm, Eric. (1941). *Escape From Freedom*. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston Inc.

Phillips, Adam. (2016). *Unforbidden Pleasures*. New York: Penguin.

Shabad, Peter. (2001) *Despair and the Return of Hope: Echoes of Mourning in Psychotherapy*. New Jersey: Jason Aronson Inc.

[1] It should be noted that Fromm was himself a Talmudic scholar descended from rabbis, and although his professional training was in sociology and psychoanalysis, his thinking in these areas was heavily informed by strains of thought derived from Judaism.

[2] My own experience suggests that this is the exception rather than the norm. Insight is important, but psychological change typically occurs slowly and is motivated by complex relational dynamics.