

## Chapter 3

# Riddle of the Sphinx Revisited: Self-Referential Twists to an Ancient Myth

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### ABSTRACT

*Myth is a universal conveyor of culture whose stories capture the human heart and whose embodied set of guidelines serve to conduct everyday life. When Freud added the Oedipus myth to his theory of psychosexual development, his method of psychoanalysis subsequently launched worldwide. Whereas Freud viewed the myth of Oedipus quite literally as a prohibition against infanticide, patricide, and incest, this chapter views the myth more metaphorically to examine how the riddle of the Sphinx informs self-referential thinking as a collective stage of human consciousness. Two contemporary theoretical lenses are adopted: 1) interpersonal neurobiology, which proposes that mind, brain, and body develop from relational origins, and 2) second-order cybernetics, which examines how observers become entangled in their very processes under observation. From within these perspectives, the Sphinx's riddle appears as a paradox of self-reference whose solution requires humankind to leap from concrete to metaphorical thinking. Only upon retaining recursive loops in consciousness can humans attain full self-reflection as a beacon towards full actualization.*

### INTRODUCTION

*It is all imaginary and only the imaginary is real! (Louis Kauffman)*

During ancient times, myths were passed along as teaching tales told from generation to generation. Yet, for most of contemporary Western society, it is not ancient tales but rather modern science and math that predominantly guide the way. Although ancient tales—of Greek heroes and Gods, of Buddha, Arjuna, and the Ramayana—are still around and sometimes make their mark as animation features, these figures have largely fallen into collective shadows. Especially in written form, the classics easily lose their luster compared with the bright icons and shiny features of computers, iPads, tablets, and other digital devices.

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Our collective excitement has been drawn more toward science, perhaps because of its concrete power to transform information, communication, and the general quality of life. Science and especially physics comprise our culture's contemporary creation mythology (Marks-Tarlow, 2003). Whereas the 19th century Newtonian model of physics separated observers cleanly from the realm of the observed, 20th and 21st century models offer inner and outer worlds more fully and reflexively blended (see Orsucci & Sala, 2008; 2012). In gaming technologies, virtual avatars take the place of real bodies, while in medical research, thoughts drive prosthetic limbs (Peck, 2012).

Of all forms of contemporary science, inner and outer worlds appear blend in fantastic, even surreal ways, within quantum physics. Quantum entanglement, nonlocality, and the uncertainty paradox are just a few ideas that shake our sense of ordinary reality to the core. This is the stuff of modern fairytales, a good example of which is the book, *Alice and the Quantum Cat* (Shanley, 2011). Written in the tradition of Martin Gardner (1999), author of *The Annotated Alice*, Shanley introduces his book as "A Twenty-First Century Myth." Its chapters are written by physicists, e.g., Amit Goswami (e.g., 1995) and Fred Alan Wolf (e.g., 1995), and chaos and complexity theorists, e.g., John Briggs and David Peat (e.g., 2000), who regularly popularize physics in service of new ways to think, see, and be in the world. The book's main character, the Quantum Cat, is a blend of the Cheshire Cat, whose smile appears out of nowhere, and Schrödinger's Cat, who embodies the quantum paradox of existing and not existing simultaneously. With Alice as his sidekick, the Quantum Cat battles a sterile, Newtonian, mechanistic world, where observers and observed are so antiseptically separated as to threaten their very aliveness:

In Newton's world, ambiguity was the enemy—mechanism stresses the absolute, the unchanging and the certain—things are 'either/or,' 'good/bad.' In the quantum world reality is 'both/and'—a coexistence of mutually contradictory possibilities, all equally true, each one a potentially possible constituent of reality. Acausal, non-local synchronicities can give rise to events that seem to 'pop-up' out of thin air. There are no isolated, separate, closed systems in Nature. In this universe of wholeness, everything affects everything else, from the most fundamental particles to faraway galaxies at the edge of the universe.

The central theme of Shanley's quantum tales is the Observer Effect, through which the awareness of observers forms deep, invisible foundations for material existence. With observers and observed intertwined to the point of full interpenetration, this world view implies a radically relational perspective. Here it becomes absurd to try to parse out isolated elements, people, or traditional concepts of cause and effect. Much akin to the worldviews revealed by Maya's veil within Hinduism or the Indra's net within Buddhism, the appearance of observers as separated from observed is mere illusion, born of evolutionary needs for survival. And so mythology of contemporary science dovetails with ancient mystical and spiritual traditions the world over (Marks-Tarlow, 2003; 2008a).

Just as *The Quantum Cat* uses science to illustrate microscopic truths, so too does this paper use science to reveal deep truths implicit within the neurobiological weave of our social and relational worlds. After a section on myth broadly, I review the myth of Oedipus by exploring the Riddle of the Sphinx as a paradox of self-reference. I claim Oedipus is uniquely positioned to answer the riddle because of his own traumatic origins. Within Oedipus's relentless search for truth, we can see how recursive, self-referential loops in consciousness increase cognitive capacity, enabling the leap from concrete to metaphorical thought. By using second-order, cybernetics to explore the dynamic, embodied unconscious of Oedipus, observer and observed remain hopelessly entangled, here at macroscopic levels of body, brain, and relationship.

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