

OTTO RANK

[1884 - 1939]

PERSONALITY THEORIES

Dr. C. George Boeree

*Psychology Department
Shippensburg University*

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A fascination with mythology, literature, art, and religion was hardly restricted to Carl Jung and Sigmund Freud. In fact, it comes up again and again among personality psychologists. It is especially prominent in Otto Rank.

The hero

One of his earliest works was *The Myth of the Birth of the Hero*, in which he examines such birth myths as those of the Babylonian kings Gilgamesh and Sargon, the Hindu hero Karna, The Persian king Cyrus, The Greek heroes Oedipus, Hercules, Paris, and Perseus, the Roman founders Romulus and Remus, the Celtic hero Tristan, the Germanic heroes Siegfried and Lohengrin, and even Moses, Buddha, and Jesus.

He finds the same pattern over and over again: There is a king and queen or god and goddess or other highly placed couple; something makes the hero's conception difficult or impossible; there is a dream or oracle prophesizing his birth, often including a warning of danger to the father; the infant hero is usually left to die in a box, basket, or small boat, floating on the water; he is rescued and nurtured by either animals or people of very low birth; he grows up, discovers his true parents, takes revenge on his father, and finally receives the honors due him.

Rank finds the myths relatively simple to understand: As children, we worship our parents. But as we get older, they begin to get in our way, and we discover they were not all they seemed. The myth reflects a wish in all of us for a return to the comforting days when we thought our parents were perfect and gave us the attention we felt we deserved. The box or basket symbolizes the womb, and the waters our birth. The "people of low birth" symbolize our weak and unappreciative parents. The king and queen symbolize what they should be like. And the revenge is our anger at how they have mistreated us.

But notice that Rank doesn't bring sexuality into the picture, and doesn't refer to a collective unconscious. The myths are simply the expressions different cultures have given to common childhood experiences. His interpretation may not be perfect, but its humility is refreshing!

The artist

Rank also tackles the difficult issue of artistic creativity. On the one hand, Rank says, the artist has a particularly strong tendency towards glorification of his own will. Unlike the rest of us, he feels compelled to remake reality in his own image. And yet a true artist also needs immortality, which he can only achieve by identifying himself with the collective will of his culture and religion. Good art could be understood as a joining of the material and the spiritual, the specific and the universal, or the individual and humanity.

This joining doesn't come easily, though. It begins with the **will**, Rank's word for the ego, but an ego imbued with power. We are all born with a will to be ourselves, to be free of domination. In early childhood, we exercise our will in our efforts to do things independently of our parents. Later, we fight the domination of other authorities, including the inner authority of our sexual drives. How our struggle for independence goes determines the type of person we become. Rank describes three basic types:

First, there is the **adapted type**. These people learn to "will" what they have been forced to do. They obey authority, their society's moral code, and, as best as they can, their sexual impulses. This is a passive, duty-bound creature that Rank suggests is, in fact, the average person.

Second, there is the **neurotic type**. These people have a much stronger will than the average person, but it is totally engaged in the fight against external and internal domination. They even fight the expression of their own will, so there is no will left over to actually do anything with the freedom won. Instead, they worry and feel guilty about being so "willful." They are, however, at a higher level of moral development than the adapted type.

Third, there is the **productive type**, which Rank also refers to as the artist, the genius, the creative type, the self-conscious type, and, simply, the human being. Instead of fighting themselves, these people accept and affirm themselves, and create an ideal, which functions as a positive focus for will. The artist creates himself or herself, and then goes on to create a new world as well.

Life and death

Another interesting idea Rank introduced was the contest between life and death. He felt we have a "**life instinct**" that pushes us to become individuals, competent and independent, and a "**death instinct**" that pushes us to be part of a family, community, or humanity. We also feel a certain fear of these two. The "**fear of life**" is the fear of separation, loneliness, and alienation; the "**fear of death**" is the fear of getting lost in the whole, stagnating, being no-one.

Our lives are filled with separations, beginning with birth. Rank's earliest work, in fact, concerned **birth trauma**, the idea that the anxiety experienced during birth was the model for all anxiety experienced afterwards. After birth, there's weaning and discipline and school and work and heartbreaks.... But avoiding these separations is, literally, avoiding life and choosing death – never finding out what you can do, never leaving your family or small town, never leaving the womb!

So we must face our fears, recognizing that, to be fully developed, we must embrace both life and death, become individuals and nurture our relationships with others.

Otto Rank never founded a "school" of psychology like Freud and Jung did, but his influences can be found everywhere. He has had a significant impact on Carl Rogers, a more subtle one on the older Adler, as well as Fromm and Horney, and an influence on the existentialists, especially Rollo May. Other people have "reinvented" his ideas, and we can find bits and pieces of Otto Rank in competence motivation, reactance theory, and terror management theory.

If you would like to learn more about Otto Rank's theory, his most important works are *Art and Artist*, *Truth and Reality*, and *Will Therapy*.