

Freud: The Structure of the Mind

"A man should not strive to eliminate his complexes but to get into accord with them: they are legitimately what directs his conduct in the world."

—Sigmund Freud

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Issues on Constitutional Law(LAW217-00)
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March 20, 2001

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Sigmund Freud (1856-1939)?

Freud was the founding father of psychoanalysis, which is a major school of psychology. His theory about sexuality being the center of psychopathology as well as the major drive of all individual developments has made him one of the most controversial yet most influential scientists of this century.

I. BIOGRAPHY

Birth: Freud was born in Moravia (now Czech Republic) on May 6, 1856.

He died in London on September 23, 1939.

Childhood: Sigismund Schlomo Freud (later shortened to Sigmund Freud by himself) was born to middle-class Jewish parents. When Freud was four, his family moved to Vienna, Austria, where Freud spent most of his life until 1938, when he was forced to flee to England because of the Nazi invasion.

Freud's father, Jacob Freud, was a wool merchant. Freud's mother, Amalia, was Jacob's second wife and 20 years younger than her husband. Freud had two much older half-brothers from his father's first marriage and seven younger siblings. One of the older half-brothers had a son who was about Freud's age. And Freud had a nanny who was Catholic and thought of as Freud's second mother. The unusual family situation, especially the complex relationships Freud had with his father and his nanny, was believed to have helped shape some of Freud's psychoanalytic notions, such as the Oedipus Complex.



Career: At age 17 Freud entered the University of Vienna to study medicine. Freud was a diligent student and a believer of the theory of evolution and the methods of natural science. Later, Freud, as a neuropathologist, became a respected physician. He became interested in the treatment of an emotional disorder known as hysteria when he studied under the famous French neurologist, Jean-Martin Charcot. Back in Vienna, Freud collaborated with Josef Breuer, another physician and physiologist. Breuer had a patient, known as Anna O, suffering from hysteria, which apparently paralyzed her. During her treatment, Freud and Breuer discovered that recalling traumatic experiences with the help of hypnosis would help relieving her symptoms. In 1895, Freud and Breuer published *Studies in Hysteria*, which documented "the cathartic method", also known as the "talking cure".

Freud continued to develop and publish his theories. *The Interpretation of Dreams*, published in 1900, and *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, published in 1905, made Freud famous. But his theories, especially the part about infantile sexuality, were severely criticized by the intellectuals in 20th century Vienna. Freud and his work, however, persevered and gradually gained a loyal following that included Alfred Adler and Carl Jung (who later parted their ways with Freud). The "International Psychoanalytical Association (IPA)" was founded in 1910. The psychoanalytical magazine "Imago" was founded in 1912. Eventually, the society at large began to recognize the extraordinary effort Freud had made in understanding the human mind. In 1935, just before his eightieth birthday, Freud was appointed Honorary Member of the prestigious British Royal Society of Medicine.

Today, the controversy over Freud's theories remains. Those theories, however, have forever changed the Western views of psychopathology, day-to-day life, and the world

II. Neuroses and The Structure of the Mind

Freud's account of the unconscious, and the psychoanalytic therapy associated with it, is best illustrated by his famous tripartite model of the structure of the mind or personality (although, as we have seen, he did not formulate this until 1923), which has many points of similarity with the account of the mind offered by Plato over 2,000 years earlier. The theory is termed 'tripartite' simply because, again like Plato, Freud distinguished three structural elements within the mind, which he called id, ego, and super-ego.

The id is that part of the mind in which are situated the instinctual sexual drives which require satisfaction; the super-ego is that part which contains the 'conscience', viz. socially-acquired control mechanisms (usually imparted in the first instance by the parents) which have been internalised; while the ego is the conscious self created by the dynamic tensions and interactions between the id and the super-ego, which has the task of reconciling their conflicting demands with the requirements of external reality. It is in this sense that the mind is to be understood as a dynamic energy-system. All objects of consciousness reside in the ego, the contents of the id belong permanently to the unconscious mind, while the super-ego is an unconscious screening-mechanism which seeks to limit the blind pleasure-seeking drives of the id by the imposition of restrictive rules. There is some debate as to how literally Freud intended this model to be taken (he appears to have taken it extremely literally himself), but it is important to note that what is being offered here is indeed a theoretical model, rather than a description of an observable object, which functions as a frame of reference to explain the link between early childhood experience and the mature adult (normal or dysfunctional) personality.



Freud also followed Plato in his account of the nature of mental health or psychological well-being, which he saw as the establishment of a harmonious relationship between the three elements which constitute the mind. If the external world offers no scope for the satisfaction of the id's pleasure drives, or, more commonly, if the satisfaction of some or all of these drives would indeed transgress the moral sanctions laid down by the super-ego, then an inner conflict occurs in the mind between its constituent parts or elements - failure to resolve this can lead to later neurosis. A key concept introduced here by Freud is that the mind possesses a number of 'defence mechanisms' to attempt to prevent conflicts from becoming too acute, such as repression (pushing conflicts back into the unconscious), sublimation (channelling the sexual drives into the achievement socially acceptable goals, in art, science, poetry, etc.), fixation (the failure to progress beyond one of the developmental stages), and regression (a return to the behaviour characteristic of one of the stages).

Of these, repression is the most important, and Freud's account of this is as follows: when a person experiences an instinctual impulse to behave in a manner which the super-ego deems to be reprehensible (e.g. a strong erotic impulse on the part of the child towards the parent of the opposite sex), then it is possible for the mind push it away, to repress it into the unconscious. Repression is thus one of the central defence mechanisms by which the ego seeks to avoid internal conflict and pain, and to reconcile reality with the demands of both id and super-ego. As such it is completely normal and an integral part of the developmental process through which every child must pass on the way to adulthood. However, the repressed instinctual drive, as an energy-form, is not and cannot be destroyed when it is repressed - it continues to exist intact in the unconscious, from where it exerts a determining force upon the conscious mind, and can give rise to the dysfunctional behaviour characteristic of neuroses. This is one reason why dreams and slips of the tongue possess such a strong symbolic significance for Freud, and why their analysis became such a key part of his treatment - they represent instances in which the vigilance of the super-ego is relaxed, and when the repressed drives are accordingly able to present themselves to the conscious mind in a transmuted form. The difference between 'normal' repression and the kind of repression which results in neurotic illness is one of degree, not of kind - the compulsive behaviour of the neurotic is itself a behavioural manifestation of an instinctual drive repressed in childhood. Such behavioural symptoms are highly irrational (and may even be perceived as such by the neurotic), but are completely beyond the control of the subject, because they are driven by the now unconscious repressed impulse. Freud positioned the key repressions, for both the normal individual and the neurotic, in the first five years of childhood, and, of course, held them to be essentially sexual in nature - as we have seen, repressions which disrupt the process of infantile sexual development in particular, he held, lead to a strong tendency to later neurosis in adult life. The task of psychoanalysis as a therapy is to find the

repressions which are causing the neurotic symptoms by delving into the unconscious mind of the subject, and by bringing them to the forefront of consciousness, to allow the ego to confront them directly and thus to discharge them.

III. Critical Evaluation of Freud

It should be evident from the foregoing why psychoanalysis in general, and Freud in particular, have exerted such a strong influence upon the popular imagination in the Western World over the past 90 years or so, and why both the theory and practice of psychoanalysis should remain the object of a great deal of controversy. In fact, the controversy which exists in relation to Freud is more heated and multi-faceted than that relating to virtually any other recent thinker (a possible exception being Darwin), with criticisms ranging from the contention that Freud's theory was generated by logical confusions arising out of his alleged long-standing addiction to cocaine (Cf. Thornton, E.M. *Freud and Cocaine: The Freudian Fallacy*) to the view that he made an important, but grim, empirical discovery, which he knowingly suppressed in favour of the theory of the unconscious, knowing that the latter would be more acceptable socially (Cf. Masson, J. *The Assault on Truth*).

It should be emphasized here that Freud's genius is not (generally) in doubt, but the precise nature of his achievement is still the source of much debate. The supporters and followers of Freud (and Jung and Adler) are noted for the zeal and enthusiasm with which they espouse the doctrines of the master, to the point where many of the detractors of the movement see it as a kind of secular religion, requiring as it does an initiation process in which the aspiring psychoanalyst must himself first be analysed. In this way, it is often alleged, the unquestioning acceptance of a set of ideological principles becomes a necessary precondition for acceptance into the movement - as with most religious groupings. In reply, the exponents and supporters of psychoanalysis frequently analyse the motivations of their critics in terms of the very theory which those critics reject. And so the debate goes on.

Here we will confine ourselves to: (a) the evaluation of Freud's claim that his theory is a scientific one, (b) the question of the theory's coherence, (c) the dispute concerning what, if anything, Freud really discovered, and (d) the question of the efficacy of psychoanalysis as a treatment for neurotic illnesses.

(a) The Claim to Scientific Status

This is a crucially important issue, since Freud not alone saw himself first and foremost as a pioneering scientist, but repeatedly asserted that the significance of psychoanalysis is that it is a new science, incorporating a new scientific method of dealing with the mind and with mental illness. And there can be no doubt but that this has been the chief attraction of the theory for most of its advocates since then - on the face of it, it has the appearance of being, not just a scientific theory, but an enormously strong scientific theory, with the capacity to accommodate, and explain, every possible form of human behaviour. However, it is precisely this latter which, for many commentators, undermines its claim to scientific status. On the question of what makes a theory a genuinely scientific one, Karl Popper's criterion of demarcation, as it is called, has now gained very general acceptance: viz. that every genuine scientific theory must be testable, and therefore falsifiable, at least in principle - in other words, if a theory is incompatible with possible observations it is scientific; conversely, a theory which is compatible with all possible observations is unscientific (Cf. Popper, K. *The Logic of Scientific Discovery*). Thus the principle of the conservation of energy, which influenced Freud so greatly, is a scientific one, because it is falsifiable - the discovery of a physical system in which the total amount of energy was not constant would conclusively show it to be false. And it is argued that nothing of the kind is possible with respect to Freud's theory - if, in relation to it, the question is asked: 'What does this theory imply which, if false, would show the whole theory to be false?', the answer is 'nothing', the theory is compatible with every possible state of affairs - it cannot be falsified by anything, since it purports to explain everything. Hence it is concluded that the theory is not scientific, and while this does not, as some critics claim, rob it of all value, it certainly diminishes its intellectual status, as that was and is projected by its strongest advocates, including Freud himself.

(b) The Coherence of the Theory

A related (but perhaps more serious) point is that the coherence of the theory is, at the very least, questionable. What is attractive about the theory, even to the layman, is that it seems to offer us long sought-after, and much needed, causal explanations for conditions which have been a source of a great

deal of human misery. The thesis that neuroses are caused by unconscious conflicts buried deep in the unconscious mind in the form of repressed libidinal energy would appear to offer us, at last, an insight in the causal mechanism underlying these abnormal psychological conditions as they are expressed in human behaviour, and further show us how they are related to the psychology of the 'normal' person. However, even this is questionable, and is a matter of much dispute. In general, when it is said that an event X causes another event Y to happen, both X and Y are, and must be, independently identifiable. It is true that this is not always a simple process, as in science causes are sometimes unobservable (sub-atomic particles, radio and electromagnetic waves, molecular structures, etc.), but in these latter cases there are clear 'correspondence rules' connecting the unobservable causes with observable phenomena. The difficulty with Freud's theory is that it offers us entities (repressed unconscious conflicts, for example) which are said to be the unobservable causes of certain forms of behaviour, but there are no correspondence rules for these alleged causes - they cannot be identified except by reference to the behaviour which they are said to cause (i.e. the analyst does not demonstratively assert: 'This is the unconscious cause, and that is its behavioural effect'; he asserts: 'This is the behaviour, therefore its unconscious cause must exist'). And this does raise serious doubts as to whether Freud's theory offers us genuine causal explanations at all.



(c) Freud's Discovery?

At a less theoretical, but no less critical level, it has been alleged that Freud did make a genuine discovery, which he was initially prepared to reveal to the world, but the response which he encountered was so ferociously hostile that he masked his findings, and offered his theory of the unconscious in its place (Cf. Masson, J. *The Assault on Truth*). What he discovered, it has been suggested, was the extreme prevalence of child sexual abuse, particularly of young girls (the vast majority of hysterics are women), even in respectable nineteenth century Vienna. He did in fact offer an early 'seduction theory' of neuroses, which met with fierce animosity, and which he quickly withdrew, and replaced with theory of the unconscious. As one contemporary Freudian commentator explains it, Freud's change of mind on this issue came about as follows:

Questions concerning the traumas suffered by his patients seemed to reveal [to Freud] that Viennese girls were extraordinarily often seduced in very early childhood by older male relatives; doubt about the actual occurrence of these seductions was soon replaced by certainty that it was descriptions about childhood fantasy that were being offered. (MacIntyre).

In this way, it is suggested, the theory of the Oedipus complex was generated.

This statement begs a number of questions, not least, what does the expression 'extraordinarily often' mean in this context? By what standard is this being judged? The answer can only be: by the standard of what we generally believe - or would like to believe - to be the case. But the contention of some of Freud's critics here is that his patients were not recalling childhood fantasies, but traumatic events in their childhood which were all too real, and that he had stumbled upon, and knowingly suppressed, the fact that the level of child sexual abuse in society is much higher than is generally believed or acknowledged. If this contention is true - and it must at least be contemplated seriously - then this is undoubtedly the most serious criticism that Freud and his followers have to face.

Further, this particular point has taken on an added, and even more controversial significance in recent years with the willingness of some contemporary Freudians to combine the theory of repression with an acceptance of the wide-spread social prevalence of child sexual abuse. The result has been that, in the United States and Britain in particular, many thousands of people have emerged from analysis with 'recovered memories' of alleged childhood sexual abuse by their parents, memories which, it is suggested,

were hitherto repressed. On this basis, parents have been accused and repudiated, and whole families divided or destroyed. Unsurprisingly, this in turn has given rise to a systematic backlash, in which organisations of accused parents, seeing themselves as the true victims of what they term 'False Memory Syndrome', have denounced all such memory-claims as falsidical, the direct product of a belief in what they see as the myth of repression. (Cf. Pendergast, M. Victims of Memory). In this way, the concept of repression, which Freud himself termed 'the foundation stone upon which the structure of psychoanalysis rests', has come in for more widespread critical scrutiny than ever before. Here, the fact that, unlike some of his contemporary followers, Freud did not himself ever countenance the extension of the concept of repression to cover actual child sexual abuse, and the fact that we are not necessarily forced to choose between the views that all 'recovered memories' are either veridical or falsidical, are, perhaps understandably, frequently lost sight of in the extreme heat generated by this debate.

(d) The Efficacy of Psychoanalytic Therapy

On this question, the situation is equally complex. For one thing, it does not follow that if Freud's theory is unscientific, or even false, that it cannot provide us with a basis for the beneficial treatment of neurotic illness, for the relationship between a theory's truth or falsity and its utility-value is far from being an isomorphic one. (The theory upon which the use of leeches to bleed patients in eighteenth century medicine was based was quite spurious, but patients did sometimes actually benefit from the treatment!). And of course even a true theory might be badly applied, leading to negative consequences. One of the problems here is that is difficulty to specify what counts as a cure for a neurotic illness, as distinct, say, from a mere alleviation of the symptoms. In general, however, the efficiency of a given method of treatment is usually clinically measured by means of a 'control group' - the proportion of patients suffering from a given disorder who are cured by treatment X is measured by comparison with those cured by other treatments, or by no treatment at all. Such clinical tests as have been conducted indicate that the proportion of patients who have benefited from psychoanalytic treatment does not diverge significantly from the proportion who recover spontaneously or as a result of other forms of intervention in the control groups used. So the question of the therapeutic effectiveness of psychoanalysis remains an open and controversial one.

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PERSONAL NOTES:

1. Inform the sources, and disclaim for the citations
2. Criticisms?

(Christian View)

1. The id, ego, and superego are actual parts of the human psyche.
2. A person's unconscious drives behavior more than his conscious mind chooses behavior.
3. Dreams are keys to understanding the unconscious and thus the person.
4. Present behavior is determined by unresolved conflicts from childhood.
5. Many people are in denial because they have repressed unpleasant memories into the unconscious.
6. Parents are to blame for most people's problems.
7. People need insight into their past to make significant changes in thoughts, attitudes and actions.
8. Children must successfully pass through their "psychosexual stages" of development or they will suffer from neurosis later on.
9. If I am to experience significant change, I must remember and re-experience painful incidents in my past.
10. The first five years of life determine what a person will be like when he grows up.
11. Everything that has ever happened to me is located in my unconscious mind.
12. People use unconscious defense mechanisms to cope with life.