

## **Freud: More Hellenistic Than Hebraic** **Don Carveth**—York University

James Anderson emphasizes the influence of Jewishness on Freud's theory. But in many respects Freud's thinking is more Hellenistic than Hebraic. To a considerable extent, Freud is a follower of Plato: while id (horse) is Plato's "appetites," Freud's ego is Plato's "reason" and his superego resembles Plato's "spirit." The mind/body dualism in which a human ego-superego conflicts with an animalistic id is Platonic. Freud found the roots of human destructiveness in the id drives of sex and aggression that he claimed are rooted in *somatic* sources (by which he did not mean the brain but bodily erogenic zones, despite his admission that he could never specify the somatic source of the aggressive drive).

Here lies one of Freud's greatest errors: to think (with unfortunate common sense) that human destructiveness is "beastly"—that it derives from the animal in us. This is sheer projection onto animals of a uniquely human destructiveness of which animals are incapable. Similarly, human sexuality is so pervaded by uniquely human symbolic meanings and dramas (as Freud the clinician understood without allowing the fact to affect his more general theorizing) that to conceive it in animalistic terms is grossly reductionistic.

As Anderson understands, the Bible, especially the so-called "old" testament, is not hostile to the body and sexuality for it holds that God created the material world, including our bodies, and said it is good. It is the gradual corruption of this vision by the incursions of Greek thought, especially in St. Augustine, that infected Christianity with Greek, gnostic devaluation of the material world in general and of sexuality in particular. Whatever other attitudes of Freud's may have contradicted this strain in his thinking, his view of the sexual and aggressive drives of the id as in their raw forms essentially asocial if not antisocial and as deriving from somatic sources reflects a Greek rather than a

Jewish pattern of thought.

Although proud of his ethnic Jewishness, Freud hated Judaism (and its offshoot, Christianity) and was intensely ambivalent toward the father who practiced it. He preferred dualism to any monism that smacked of monotheism. When his first drive theory (sexual vs. self-preservative drives) broke down on the shoals of narcissism (the recognition that the self-preservative drive was not an independent drive at all but a mere manifestation of the sexual drive invested in the self) he was forced for six years (1914-1920) to put up with an instinctual monism. Though he could still speak of conflict between the socialized part of the self and the sexual drive, he wanted to conceptualize conflict between the drives themselves. So in 1920, with palpable relief, he ditched this "Jewish" monism for a new Greek dualism, even giving capitalized Greek names to his two new "deities": Eros and Thanatos, which he acknowledged were new editions of the dual metaphysical forces that his pre-Socratic predecessor Empedocles called *philia* (love) and *neikos* (strife).

Freud was an elitist. With Nietzsche he believed one earns the right to rule others by first learning to rule oneself; like Plato he believed philosophers (read successfully psychoanalyzed people) should rule. Just as an enlightened elite should dominate in society, so there should be a "dictatorship of the ego" and the intellect should prevail over the other components of the self. When Freud referred to America as "a great mistake," whatever else he may have meant, I believe he had its experiment with democracy in mind for, as Franz Alexander has pointed out, Freud had a dim view of the viability of democracies. In *The Future of An Illusion* he argues that because of the instinctual renunciations it demands, civilization requires the coercion of the masses by a minority: "For the masses are lazy and unintelligent; they have no love for instinctual renunciation, and they are not to be convinced by argument of its inevitability."

In *Civilization and Its Discontents* Freud writes of "the psychological poverty of groups" and says this is "most threatening when the bonds of society are chiefly constituted by the

identification of its members with one another, while individuals of the leader type do not acquire the importance that should fall to them in the formation of a group." Alexander points out that Freud has little to say about the role of abstract principles and ideals, such as freedom, individual responsibility, and self-government in holding groups and societies together, emphasizing instead the role of the leader whom he likens to a hypnotist, whereas for Alexander, "the guiding principles of free societies, the stress on the individual's critical faculty and self-responsibility, are contradictory to that blind obedience to authority which is the essence of hypnosis." Freud has little to say about independent self-governing individuals who display a very different attitude toward leaders, critically watching them, ready to throw them out. Bion too is critical of Freud's view of the group's dependence, pointing out that when the leader isn't taking the group where it wants to go it simply replaces him.

Freud mostly wrote about unstructured groups that, following LeBon, Tarde, McDougall and others, he sees as highly emotional, irrational, regressive, etc. Here we have the 19th and early 20th century bourgeois fear of unruly mobs, such as those which made a revolution at the Bastille and again in October 1917. When Freud does speak of structured rather than unstructured groups his models are the Church and the Army, highly authoritarian organizations. As a product of the Austro-Hungarian empire, we can perhaps understand where he came by all this, though perhaps not entirely forgive his early admiration of Mussolini (until he turned on the Jews).

In all these ways Freud's thinking displays an affinity with Platonic and anti-democratic thought. People who like to view Freud as a political liberal tend to ignore his typically conservative outlook in which civilization is viewed as a "thin veneer" perpetually threatened by barely contained barbarous forces, in constant need, like the ego, of defenses against the chaos and madness threatening from the id. This is a long way from the prophetic tradition of Judaism calling the established order to account for its immorality, and from the outlook of a morally outraged peasant rabbi tortured and crucified by the Romans at the behest of the establishment.

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