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CHAPTER

8

Freud: The Unconscious Basis of Mind

Freud's psychoanalytic approach revolutionized the understanding of human nature in the first half of the twentieth century. He spent the whole of his long career developing and modifying his theories, touching on a vast range of subjects, including neurology, psychiatry, child development, sexology, anthropology, sociology, art, and religion. He also led the development of the worldwide psychoanalytic movement, trying to keep it under his own control. I concentrate here on Freud himself, not the many later developments in psychoanalytic theory and practice. In this chapter, I have found it convenient to keep my critical points for two sections at the end.

FREUD'S LIFE AND WORK

Sigmund Freud was born in Moravia in 1856, but in 1860 his family moved to Vienna, where he lived and worked until the last year of his life. Even in his school days, Freud's precocious interests ranged over the whole of human life, and when he entered the University of Vienna as a medical student he attended lectures on other subjects, such as those of the philosopher of mind Franz Brentano. Freud became deeply interested in biology and spent six years doing research in the laboratory of the famous physiologist Brücke, writing papers on technical topics such as the nervous systems of fishes. (And he almost made a controversial reputation for himself in pioneering the medical use of cocaine.) In order to marry his fiancée, Martha Bernays, Freud needed more secure employment, so he reluctantly began work as a physician in the Vienna General Hospital. In 1886, he set up a private practice in "nervous diseases"; that is, psychological problems, which he continued for the rest of his life.

Freud's subsequent intellectual career can be divided into three main phases. In the first of these he arrived at his original hypotheses about the nature of neurotic problems and developed his distinctive theory and method of treatment, both of which have come to be known as "psychoanalysis." His interest in human psychology had been fired by a visit to Paris in 1885–86 to study under Charcot, a French neurologist who was using hypnotism to treat "nervous" problems. Many of Freud's early patients were middle-class Viennese women suffering from what was then called "hysteria." Typically, they had mysterious paralyses, loss of speech, or loss of sensation in bodily regions that bore no relation to neurology but only to the ordinary concepts of body parts such as hand or arm. Etymologically, the word "hysteria" comes from ancient explanations of such symptoms as due to disturbances of the womb, and nowadays the word tends to mean a state of extreme emotion, but in Freud's time it referred to a puzzling syndrome that orthodox medicine found almost impossible to treat. (One wonders, of course, if its prevalence in late nineteenth-century bourgeois women had something to do with their repressed social situation.) Freud was impressed by how Charcot's purely psychological method of hypnotism seemed to induce dramatic cures.

Faced with similar symptoms in his own patients, Freud used electrotherapy or hypnotic suggestion, but finding them unsatisfactory, he began to try another method derived from Breuer, a senior Viennese consultant. Breuer's approach was based on the assumption that hysteria was caused by some intense emotional experience (a "trauma") that the patient had apparently forgotten; his treatment was to induce the recall of the experience and a "discharge" of the corresponding emotion. This hypothesis that people could suffer from an "idea," an emotion-charged memory that they were not aware of, but from which they could be relieved by bringing it into consciousness, is the basis from which Freud's psychoanalysis developed.

Freud found that the traumatic ideas in his patients typically had some sexual content and (ever ready to make a generalization) he suggested that neuroses *always* have a sexual origin. In many cases, his patients came up with reports of "infantile seduction"—what we now call child sexual abuse. At first he believed them, but then—in a dramatic change

of theoretical tack that he regarded as a crucial discovery—he came to think that in many cases the reports were based on fantasy; that is, on unconscious desires rather than memories of anything that actually happened. (In view of recent controversies, we have to wonder whether Freud's first thoughts on this matter may not have been somewhat nearer the truth.) In 1895, he published *Studies on Hysteria* jointly with Breuer, but the latter was unable to agree about the universal importance of sexuality, the collaboration broke up, and Freud went on his own theoretical way. (For Freud, this was the first of many disputes with colleagues.)

In the closing years of the nineteenth century, Freud began to formulate his theories about infantile sexuality and the interpretation of dreams, both of which are central to psychoanalytic theory. He introduced his distinctive theoretical concepts of resistance, repression, and transference. He also attempted to psychoanalyze himself! At this time he wrote (in correspondence with Fliess, a medical friend given to unorthodox speculations, who influenced him strongly in this period) the *Project for a Scientific Psychology.* Freud was ambitiously trying to relate his developing psychological theory to a physical basis in the nerve cells in the brain, which he had studied in his physiological work. Although excited by this interdisciplinary project, he came to think it too much ahead of its time and did not publish these thoughts (the rediscovered manuscript was eventually published in 1950). But its ghost haunts all Freud's later works in the form of a background assumption that the mental processes postulated in psychoanalytic theory would eventually be identified with movements of electrical energy in the neurons in the brain.

The second phase of Freud's work, in which the works expounding his mature theory appeared, can conveniently be dated from the publication in 1900 of *The Interpretation of Dreams.* There followed in 1901 *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life,* in which he analyzed the unconscious causation of everyday errors such as slips of the tongue, and in 1905 his *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality.* These works applied psychoanalytic theory to normal mental life, not just neurotic patients. International recognition followed, and the spread of psychoanalysis began: in 1909 Freud was invited to America, where he gave the *Five Lectures on Psycho-Analysis,* a brief, popular exposition of his ideas. In 1915–17 he delivered the much longer *Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis* at the University of Vienna, in which he expounded the complete theory as it had developed up to then.

From after the end of the First World War until his death in 1939, the third phase of Freud's work saw some important changes in his theories, together with wide-ranging speculative attempts to apply his ideas to social questions. In 1920 came *Beyond the Pleasure Principle,* in which he

first introduced the concept of the "death instinct" (to try to explain aggression and self-destruction) as well as the "life instincts" (self-preservation and sexuality), which he had postulated up to then. Another late development was the tripartite structure of the mind—id, ego, and superego—which was presented in *The Ego and the Id* (1923). In a second popular exposition, *The Question of Lay Analysis* (1926), Freud expounded his theory in terms of this new three-part structure.

Most of Freud's last years were devoted to social theorizing. (Already, in 1913, he had speculatively tried to relate his theories to anthropology and human prehistory in *Totem and Taboo.*) In *The Future of an Illusion* (1927), he treated religion as a system of false beliefs whose deep root in our minds can be explained psychoanalytically. In *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930), he discussed the conflict between the demands of human instincts and of civilized society, and in *Moses and Monotheism* (1939), he offered a controversial psychoanalytic interpretation of Jewish history. In 1938 Hitler annexed Austria, and Jews were in danger. Freud was ethnically Jewish (and had already been the victim of Austrian anti-Semitism). Because of his huge international fame, the Nazis allowed him to flee to London, where he spent the last year of his life writing a brief final *Outline of Psycho-Analysis.*

METAPHYSICAL BACKGROUND: NEUROLOGY, DETERMINISM, AND MATERIALISM

What is distinctive in Freud's thought is, of course, his theory of the human mind, but we first should take note of his metaphysical and methodological assumptions. He started his research career as a physiologist and claimed to remain a scientist throughout: his constant hope was to explain all the phenomena of human life scientifically. (How far he lived up to this self-description, we shall see!) Freud rejected all theology or transcendent metaphysics. He was not a Marxist, but he did share the nineteenth-century belief in processes of historical development as explanatory of the present state of things.

Given Freud's wide knowledge of biological science as it had developed up to his day, and his thorough training in physiological research, he assumed that everything that happens is determined by the laws of physics, chemistry, and biology, and that human beings are subject to these too. He was steeped in the confidence of late nineteenth-century biology, after the advent of Darwin's theory of evolution, accepting that human beings are one species of animal (albeit of a special sort). Freud has been described as a "biologist of the mind," but we shall see how far he moved away from purely physiological methods of explanation and

treatment. He applied nineteenth-century historicism in biology, psychology, and anthropology, assuming that so-called primitive races have mental processes like those of childhood.

Freud was a philosophical materialist as well as a determinist. He acknowledged a distinction of some sort between mental states and physiological states, but this was for him only a dualism of concepts or aspects, not of two substances or two different sets of events. Materialist philosophers agree that in talking of states of consciousness such as sensations, thoughts, wishes, and emotions we are not committed to metaphysical dualism, and Freud says the same about the *unconscious* mental states that he postulates. After his bold early attempt to relate psychology and physiology in his *Project*, he was content to leave the material basis of psychology to be discovered in the future development of brain science. Enormous progress has been made in this area in recent years, but it has not vindicated Freud's specific neurological theories.

THEORY OF HUMAN NATURE: MENTAL DETERMINISM, THE UNCONSCIOUS, INSTINCTS, AND CHILD DEVELOPMENT

I shall expound Freud's approach in four main areas. The first is his strict application of determinism—the principle that every event has preceding causes—to the realm of the mental. Thoughts and behavior that had formerly been assumed to be of no significance for understanding a person, such as slips of the tongue, faulty actions, dreams, and neurotic symptoms, Freud assumed must be determined by hidden causes. He thought that such errors could be highly significant, revealing in disguised form what would otherwise remain unknown. Nothing a person thinks or does or says is really haphazard or accidental; everything can in principle be traced to some cause or other, presumably in the mind (hence the concept of the "Freudian slip").

This would seem to imply a denial of free will, for even when we think we are choosing perfectly freely, Freud would claim that there are unknown causes determining our choice. There is an interesting parallel with Marx here, in that he and Freud both say that the contents of our consciousness, far from being uniquely "free" and "rational," are determined by causes of which we are not normally aware. But whereas Marx says that the causes are social and economic, Freud claims they are individual and psychological, rooted in our biological drives.

The second and most distinctive feature of Freud's theorizing—the postulation of *unconscious* mental states—thus arises out of the first. But we must be careful to understand his concept of the unconscious correctly.

There are lots of mental states, for instance memories of particular experiences or facts, of which we are not continually conscious but that can be recalled to mind whenever they become relevant. These Freud calls "preconscious"; he reserves the term "unconscious" for states that *cannot* become conscious under normal circumstances. His crucial assertion is that our minds are not coextensive with what is available to conscious attention, but include items of which we can have no ordinary awareness. To extend a well-known analogy, the mind is like an iceberg, with some of it visible above the surface of the sea, some of it occasionally visible as the waves rise and fall, but with a vast hidden bulk exerting its influence on the rest. Freud would happily accept the findings of recent cognitive science that there is unconscious information processing involved in perceptual recognition of objects; the perceiver is unaware of these processes in his or her own mind, but psychologists can infer them as the best explanation of the facts of perception (and misperception).

So far, this gives us a *descriptive* account of the unconscious, but Freud's concept is also *dynamic*. To explain puzzling human phenomena such as hysterical paralyses, neurotic behavior, obsessional thoughts, and dreams, Freud postulated the existence of emotionally charged ideas in the unconscious part of the mind that actively yet mysteriously exert causal influences on what a person thinks, feels, and does. Unconscious desires or emotions can make people do things that they cannot explain rationally, even to themselves. Some unconscious states have previously been conscious (e.g., traumatic emotional experiences) but were repressed because they became just too painful to acknowledge. "Repression" is thus postulated as a mental process of pushing ideas into the unconscious and keeping them there. But the rest of the unconscious consists of the driving forces of our mental life (the "instincts"), which operate from infancy.

Freud introduced a new *structural* concept of the mind into his theory in the 1920s, which does not coincide with the distinction between conscious, preconscious, and unconscious. In this later phase, he distinguished three systems within the mental apparatus. The *id* contains the instinctual drives that seek immediate satisfaction like a small child (they operate according to "the pleasure principle"). The *ego* has the conscious mental states and its function is to perceive the real world and to decide how to act, mediating between the world and the id (the ego is governed by "the reality principle"). Whatever can become conscious is in the ego (though Freud says it also contains elements that remain unconscious), whereas everything in the id is unconscious. The *superego* is a special part of the mind containing the conscience (i.e., the moral norms learned in early childhood); it can confront the ego with rules and prohibitions

like a strict parent. The forces of repression are located in the ego and superego, and they typically operate unconsciously. The poor old ego has the difficult job of trying to reconcile the conflicting demands of id and superego, given the often unhelpful facts of the real world. This is Freud's dramatic picture of the human condition, beset by external problems and internal conflict.

There are interesting, if partial, parallels with Plato in this theory of tripartite mental structure. The id obviously corresponds closely to Appetite or desire, but it is not so clear how ego and superego correspond to Plato's Reason and Spirit. In its reality-knowing function, the ego would seem to be akin to Reason, but Reason for Plato has also a moral function that Freud assigns to the superego. And Plato's spirited element seems to be performing a moralistic function in the example of feeling disgusted at one's own desires by which he introduced it (see Chapter 4).

The instincts or drives are a third main feature of Freud's theory. In postulating the existence of motivating factors of which the person may not be aware, he was following up on the ideas of Schopenhauer and Nietszche, two nineteenth-century philosophers who theorized about the will as an unconscious instinctual force. Freud's word was *Trieb,* and though this is often translated as "instinct," the term "drive" is perhaps better because it is part of Freud's theory that the same underlying *Trieb* can be the motivating force or energy behind a variety of different behaviors. These drives are the only motive forces within the mental apparatus, they generate the energy that seeks discharge.

Freud used this mechanical or electrical language in an almost literal way, influenced by his scientific training and the psychophysical theory of his early *Project,* in which he presciently wrote about flows of electrical charge through the neurons in the brain. His conception of mental drives is of electrical charges or hydraulic pressures that have to be discharged in one way or another. His psychological classification of instincts is, however, one of the most speculative and variable parts of his theory. He admitted that we can distinguish an indeterminate number of "instincts," but he suggested that they can all be derived from a few basic drives that combine or even replace each other in multifarious ways.

Of course, Freud held that one main kind of drive is sexual, and he notoriously traced much human behavior back to sexual thoughts and desires (sometimes repressed into the unconscious). It is, however, a common misinterpretation to say that he tried to explain *all* human phenomena in terms of sex. What is true is that Freud gave sexuality a much wider scope in human life than had formerly been recognized, claiming that it is manifest in much more than "normal," adult heterosexual intercourse. He claimed that the beginnings of sexuality exist in children from birth, that

sexual factors play a crucial role in adult neuroses, and that sexual energy ("libido") can be "sublimated" in other activity, such as art.

But Freud always held that there was at least one *other* basic drive. In his early period he distinguished what he called the "self-preservative" instincts for eating and self-protection from the sexual drive. He first treated sadism as a perversely aggressive manifestation of sexuality. But in later works he radically changed his classification, putting libido and hunger together into one "life" drive or instinct (*Eros*), and referring sadism, aggression, self-destruction, and so on, to a biologically implausible "death" instinct (*Thanatos*). In popular language, the duality of love and hunger was replaced by love and hate.

The fourth main point in Freud's theory is his developmental account of individual human character. This is more than the obvious truism that personality depends on experience as well as on hereditary endowment. Freud started from Breuer's discovery that particular traumatic experiences could, although apparently forgotten, exercise a baneful influence on a person's mental health. The full-fledged theory of psychoanalysis generalizes from this and asserts the crucial importance for adult character of the experiences of infancy and early childhood. The first five years are the time in which the basis of each individual personality is laid down. So one cannot fully understand a person until one comes to know the psychologically crucial facts about his or her early childhood.

Freud produced detailed theories of the psychosexual stages of development through which every child is supposed to grow. He extended the concept of sexuality to include any kind of pleasure involving parts of the body. He claimed that infants first obtain a sexual kind of pleasure from the mouth (the oral stage), and then from the other end of the alimentary tract (the anal stage). Both boys and girls then become interested in the male sexual organ (the phallic stage). The little boy is alleged to feel sexual desire for his mother and to fear castration by his father (the "Oedipus complex"). Desire for mother and hostility to father are then normally repressed. From age five until puberty (the "latency" period), sexuality is much less apparent. It then reappears, and if all goes well it attains its full genital expression in adulthood.

Freud suggested that at the time of the Oedipus complex in boys, little girls develop "penis envy"; but he never treated female psychology and sexuality so thoroughly. In *The Question of Lay Analysis*, he made a statement that is astonishing (coming from someone whose professional practice consisted so largely in treating the psychological problems of women), that "the sexual life of adult women is a dark continent for psychology"! Dark continent or not, Freud was not inhibited from making some dogmatic, unsupported assertions about female psychology. In

Civilization and Its Discontents (Ch. IV), he said that women "represent the interests of the family and of sexual life." Don't men do the same, one wonders?! And in the next sentence he asserted, without any appeal to evidence, that women are little capable of the instinctual sublimations that men can manage in doing "the work of civilization." It seems that on this topic Freud was firmly imbued with the prejudices of his time.

DIAGNOSIS: MENTAL DISHARMONY, REPRESSION, AND NEUROSIS

Like Plato, Freud says that individual well-being or mental health depends on a harmonious relationship between the various parts of the mind and between the whole person and society. The ego has to reconcile id, superego, and external world, seeking opportunities for satisfying the instinctual demands of the id without transgressing the moral standards required by the superego, the internal representative of society. If the world does not supply enough opportunities for fulfillment, the result will be pain or frustration; but even when the environment is more favorable, there will be mental disturbance if there is too much inner conflict between the parts of the mind. In Freud's view, neurotic illnesses result from the frustration of the sexual instinct, either because of external obstacles or because of internal mental imbalance.

There is one particular mental process that Freud thought was crucial in the causation of neurotic illnesses; namely repression. In a situation of mental conflict, where someone experiences an instinctual impulse that is sharply incompatible with the standards they feel they must adhere to, it will be repressed out of consciousness, so that as far as subsequent awareness is concerned, it does not exist. Repression is the basic "defense mechanism" by which people attempt to avoid inner conflict. But it is essentially a pretense, a withdrawal from reality, and is doomed to failure. For what is repressed does not go out of existence, but remains in the unconscious portion of the mind. It retains all its emotional energy and exerts its influence by sending into consciousness a disguised substitute for itself in the form of a neurotic symptom. Thus, people can find themselves behaving in ways that they may admit are irrational, yet they feel compelled to continue. By repressing an idea, they have given up effective control over it; they can neither get rid of the symptoms it causes, nor lift the repression and recall it to consciousness.

Freud located the decisive repressions in early childhood and held that they are basically sexual. It is essential for future mental health that the child successfully pass through the normal stages of development of sexuality. But this does not always proceed smoothly, and any hitch leaves

a predisposition to future problems; the various forms of sexual perversion can be traced to such a cause. One typical kind of neurosis consists in what Freud called "regression," the return to one of the stages at which childish satisfaction was obtained. He even identified certain adult character types as "oral" and "anal," by reference to the childhood stages from which he thought they originated.

There is much more detail in Freud's theories of the neuroses into which we cannot enter here, but he attributes part of the blame for them on the external world, and we should note this social aspect of his diagnosis. The standards to which a person feels obliged to conform are one of the crucial factors in mental problems, but they are a product of the social environment—primarily the parents, plus anyone else who has exerted emotional influence over the growing child. The instilling of such standards is an essential part of education, making children into members of society; for as Freud sees it civilization requires self-control, some sacrifice of instinctual satisfaction, in order to make work and human society possible.

However, the standards imposed by any particular family or society may not be the most conducive to happiness. Maladjusted parents are notoriously likely to produce maladjusted children. Freud entertained wider speculations that the relationship between society and individual has gotten out of balance, so that our whole civilized life might be described as neurotic. This theme came to the fore in his late work *Civilization and Its Discontents*, but as early as the *Five Lectures* of 1909 he had suggested that our civilized standards tend to make life too difficult for most people and that we should not deny a certain amount of satisfaction to our instinctual impulses. So there is a basis for those neo-Freudians, such as Erich Fromm, who diagnose our troubles as lying as much in society as in individuals.

PRESCRIPTION: PSYCHOANALYTIC THERAPY

Freud proposed that our human problems can be diagnosed and ameliorated by the methods of science. His hope was to restore a harmonious balance between the parts of the mind, and (if possible) to suggest a better adjustment between the individual and the world. The latter would involve programs of social reform, but Freud did not try to specify any such thing; his own professional practice consisted in the treatment of neurotic patients. And he was realistic about the limits of his therapeutic influence, famously describing the aim of psychoanalytic therapy as only to replace neurotic unhappiness by ordinary unhappiness. It is this therapy that we must now examine.

Freud's method developed gradually out of Breuer's discovery that a hysterical patient could be helped by being encouraged to *talk* about the thoughts and fantasies that had been filling her mind, and seemed to be cured when she was able to remember the traumatic experiences that had induced her problems in the first place. Freud tried using this "talking cure," assuming that the pathogenic memories were still in his patients' unconscious minds; he asked them to talk to him quite uninhibitedly, hoping that he could interpret the unconscious forces behind what was said. He required them to say whatever came into their mind, however absurd or embarrassing it might be (the method of "free association"). But he often found that the flow would dry up, the patient would have nothing more to say and might even object to further inquiry. When such "resistance" happened, Freud took it as a sign that the conversation was getting near the repressed complex. He assumed that the patient's unconscious mind was trying to prevent the painful truth becoming conscious, just as someone with a painful part of their body may flinch from examination. If the repressed material could only be brought back into consciousness despite the resistance, the conscious, rational mind could be given back power over the noxious ideas, and the neurosis would be cured.

But to achieve this happy result could take a long process, involving weekly sessions over a period of years. The analyst must try to arrive at the correct interpretations of the patient's unconscious mental states and to present them at such a time and in such a way that the patient can accept them. Dreams can provide very fruitful material for interpretation, for according to Freud's theory the "manifest" content of a dream is the disguised fulfillment of unconscious wishes that are its real or "latent" content. Errors and faulty actions can also be interpreted to reveal their unconscious causation. There will typically be discussion of the patient's sexual life, childhood experiences, infantile sexuality, and relationship with parents.

Clearly, all this demands a relationship of peculiar confidence between patient and analyst, but Freud found that much more than this happened; in fact, his patients often manifested a degree of emotion toward him that could amount to love or hatred. He called this "transference," on the assumption that the emotion was projected onto the analyst from the life situations in which it was once present, or from the unconscious fantasies of the patient. The handling of such transference is of crucial importance for the success of the therapy, for it itself needs to be analyzed and traced back to its sources in the patient's unconscious.

The goal of psychoanalytic treatment can be summarized as self-knowledge (echoing Socrates!). What the cured neurotic does with the new self-understanding is up to him or her, and various different outcomes are

possible. The person may replace the unhealthy repression of instincts by a rational, conscious control of them (suppression rather than repression); or may be able to divert the instincts into acceptable channels ("sublimation"); or the person may decide to satisfy them after all. But, according to Freud, there is no need to fear that primitive instincts will "take over" the person, for their power is *reduced* by being brought into consciousness.

Freud never thought of psychoanalysis as the answer to *every* human problem. When thinking about the problems of "civilized" modern society, he was realistic enough to accept their extreme complexity and to abstain from offering any social program. But he did suggest that psychoanalysis had wider applications than just the treatment of neurotics. He said that "our civilization imposes an almost intolerable pressure on us": he had primarily in mind the conventional (but, of course, frequently flouted) restriction of sex to marriage, and he speculated that psychoanalysis might help prepare a corrective—presumably some loosening of the moral rules. Much of the restriction on sexual expression that was characteristic of Freud's era has been lifted (making some of his remarks about "civilization" sound old-fashioned), but it is not obvious that we are any happier, overall.

CRITICAL DISCUSSION: FREUD AS WOULD-BE SCIENTIST

The validity of psychoanalysis has been a matter of dispute ever since its inception. An enormous variety of psychoanalytic (and more generally, psychotherapeutic) theories and methods have developed, starting from the early "heretics" from the Freudian fold—Adler and Jung. However, most academic psychologists have tended to condemn Freud's theories as unscientific, either too vague to be testable or not supported by the evidence where the claims are testable. Psychoanalytic therapy has been criticized for working by the power of suggestion, like brainwashing or witchcraft. Some critics have fastened on the orthodoxy that has often been imposed by institutes of psychoanalysis and the "indoctrination" imposed on all aspiring analysts by the requirement to be analyzed themselves. Psychoanalysis has thus been likened to a religious cult.

Freudian theory obviously has a readily available method of disparagingly analyzing the motivations of its critics. Any questioning of its truth can be alleged by its defenders to be based on the unconscious resistance of the critic. So, if it also has a built-in method of explaining away any evidence that appears to falsify it, it will be a closed system in the sense defined in the introduction to this book. And because belief in the theory is a requirement of membership of psychoanalytic societies, it can even

be said to be the ideology of those groups. However, we should look more closely before we pass judgment.

We can distinguish two areas to question: the truth of Freud's theories and the effectiveness of treatment based on them. Any doubts about psychoanalytic theory will naturally extend to the therapy based on it. Because psychoanalysis has been widely applied, surely we can make some estimate of its success. This might in principle give an empirical test of the theory: if the theoretical claims were true, one might expect the therapy based on them to be effective.

But these matters are not straightforward. First, understanding the causes of an unwanted condition does not necessarily give us the power to change it (climate change may be one example, another might be the effects of a traumatic childhood, which might be impossible to undo, however well understood). Second, a true theory might be inadequately applied in clinical practice—all sorts of things can go wrong in medicine, in psychiatry, and in psychotherapy. Third, there is considerable vagueness about what constitutes cure from neurosis, for who is to make such a judgment—the patient, the therapist, or society generally? Should we require the complete disappearance of any symptoms labeled neurotic, or just a reduction of them? A recovery rate of two thirds has been claimed as the approximate success rate for patients who persist with psychoanalysis. This may sound favorable, but it must be compared with control groups of similarly neurotic people who have not been treated (or who have been treated by other methods). The rate of spontaneous recovery from neurosis has also been estimated as two thirds, so on those sorts of figures there is no clear evidence of any therapeutic effectiveness of psychoanalysis.

On the question of the truth of the theories, the fundamental issue is whether they are empirically testable at all. We have seen that Freud put forward his theories as scientific hypotheses to explain the observable evidence, and testability by observation is a necessary condition for scientific status. But, for some of the central propositions of Freudian theory, it is not clear whether or how they are testable. I will illustrate this from different levels of Freud's theorizing.

By applying his postulate of psychic determinism, Freud arrived at some very specific claims, such as that all dreams are wish-fulfillments, often in disguised form. But even if we accept that the content of every dream must have a cause of some sort, it does not follow that the cause must be *mental* rather than physical. Couldn't the cause be something one has eaten or a neurophysiological need for some sort of "cleaning-out" process of information in the brain? And even if the cause is mental, it does not follow that it is unconscious or deeply significant—why couldn't

it involve only quite banal experiences of the day or ordinary concerns about the morrow?

Can Freud's generalization that the cause of every dream is a wish (often unconscious and often disguised) be tested? Where an interpretation in terms of an independently established wish of the dreamer is made plausible, well and good. But what if no such interpretation is found? A convinced Freudian may say there *must* be a wish whose disguise has not yet been seen through. But how then could we ever show that a given dream is *not* a disguised wish-fulfillment? It is notoriously difficult to prove such a negative statement. This threatens to evacuate any empirical content from Freud's general claim, leaving only the practical suggestion that we should always look for a disguised wish. (Similar doubts arise about the postulation of unconscious causes for *every* slip of the tongue or mistaken action.)

Consider next the basic postulate of unconscious mental states. Freud rightly dismissed the a priori view held by some philosophers that being mental entails being conscious; there are no such strict rules governing all use of the term "mental." Although Descartes may have thought in this way, and the behaviorists rejected any conceptions of mental state that were not definable in terms of observable behavior, psychologists these days go in for all sorts of theorizing about mental states of various levels or kinds. The relevant constraint is only that any such claim needs to be explanatory of the observable evidence to be accepted as true. So we must ask ourselves whether Freud's postulation of unconscious mental states offers any good explanation of what we can know in ordinary ways about human beings and their behavior.

After all, in explaining human action and behavior in everyday terms, we appeal to *conscious* perceptions, sensations, desires, and intentions—and none of these are literally observable states in other people, although people are introspectively aware of them. Some of Freud's theorizing goes only a little way beyond this everyday sort of mental explanation. Under hypnotic suggestion, a subject may deliberately perform unusual, even silly actions that the hypnotist has told him or her to do (e.g., opening an umbrella indoors); if asked why he or she is doing these things, the person does not seem to remember the hypnotist's instructions but offers rather lame rationalizations for the actions (e.g., there might be drips from the ceiling). In this case, it seems plausible to explain the subject's behavior (and rationalizations) in terms of an unconscious memory of the hypnotist's instructions. Some of the symptoms of Freud's hysterical patients invited very similar explanations. And sometimes such explanations can be confirmed by independent evidence about what the person has previously experienced or done, or does or says in new situations.

It has sometimes been suggested that psychoanalytic theory is not so much a set of scientific hypotheses to be tested empirically as a "hermeneutic" method; that is, a way of understanding people, of seeing a *meaning* in their actions, mishaps and errors, jokes, dreams, and neurotic symptoms. Because human beings, as conscious and rational beings, are so different from the entities studied by physics and chemistry, why—it is asked—should we criticize psychoanalysis for failing to meet criteria for scientific status taken from the *physical* sciences? Perhaps the psychoanalytic account of a dream or a symptom is more akin to the interpretation of a poem or painting, in which there may be reasons (of an inconclusive kind) for a variety of interpretations.

Many of Freud's theoretical conceptions can be seen as extensions of our ordinary ways of understanding each other in terms of concepts such as love, hate, fear, anxiety, rivalry, and so on. And perhaps the experienced psychoanalyst can be described as someone who has acquired a deep intuitive understanding of the springs of human motivation and a skill in interpreting the complexities of how they work out in particular situations, regardless of how well the analyst can articulate the reasons for his or her interpretations. However, there is still a perfectly reasonable demand (on both everyday and psychoanalytic interpretations) that any particular interpretation should be backed up with independent evidence about the relevant person and their life-context before it is accepted as *correct*.

The hermeneutic view of psychoanalysis has been given philosophical backing by the distinction between *reasons* and *causes*. The typical form of scientific explanation in terms of causes has been contrasted with the explanation of human actions in terms of the beliefs and desires that made it rational for the agent to do what they did. (See Chapters 6 and 9 for what Kant and Sartre have to say on this topic.) It has even been suggested that Freud misunderstood the nature of his own theories by presenting them as *scientific* discoveries about the causes of human behavior. However, the sharpness of this dichotomy has been questioned by those who argue that beliefs and desires are both reasons *and* causes, and that *unconscious* beliefs and desires can play this dual role too. There are deep philosophical issues here about how far the methods of investigation and explanation that are characteristic of the physical sciences are applicable to human beliefs and actions.

Even if we accept that unconscious mental states can explain behavior under hypnosis, some dreams and errors, and certain kinds of neurotic behavior, success in these special cases is far from proving the whole of Freud's theories. The trouble with many of the Freudian unconscious states is the lack of clarity of the criteria for inferring their presence or

absence in any particular person. If stamp collecting is asserted to be a sign of unconscious "anal retentiveness," how could one show that such an unconscious trait is *not* present in someone?

The developmental approach to individual character and the theory of the stages of infantile sexual development are rather more easily tested by observation. In this area, some of Freud's propositions seem confirmed by the evidence, others are not supported, while some are difficult to test. The *existence* of what Freud called the oral and anal characters has been confirmed by the discovery that certain traits of character (for instance, parsimony, orderliness, and obstinacy) do tend to go together. But the claim that these types of character *arise* from certain kinds of infant-rearing procedures is not so well supported. There are practical difficulties in establishing correlations between infantile experience and adult character, so the theory is hard to refute. For some other parts of Freud's psychosexual theories, there are conceptual difficulties about testing. How, for example, could one test whether infants get distinctively *erotic* pleasure from sucking?

Freud formulated some very speculative theories that go a long way beyond our everyday explanations in terms of reasons. In particular, he appealed to the concept of repression as a postulated process of pushing mental ideas into the unconscious and keeping them there by force. Here he is in danger of talking of persons within the person, internal "homunculi" with knowledge and purposes of their own. What exactly is it that does the repressing, and how does it know which items to select for repression? As we shall see in Chapter 9, Sartre asks a critical question at just this point.

One can describe as instinctive any form of behavior that is not learned in the lifetime of the individual (although it may be difficult to *show* that it has not been learned in some way). But is anything added by referring instinctive behavior to *an* instinct? And when Freud claims that there are only a certain *number* of basic instincts or drives, how can we decide which are basic, and how they are to be distinguished and counted? If the sexual drive is alleged to be behind behavior that we do not ordinarily recognize as sexual (such as artistic creation); how are we to decide whether this is right? A similar question arises when, in his late work, Freud suggested a "death" instinct to explain destructive behavior and explained aggression in terms of this. Could any evidence settle whether either of Freud's main instinct theories is right, as against, say, an Adlerian theory of a basic instinct of self-assertion or a Jungian theory of an instinctual need for God?

This treatment of a few examples suggests why there is serious doubt about the scientific status of Freud's key theoretical assertions. Some seem

untestable because of conceptual unclarities, and among those that *can* be tested only a few have received definite empirical support. He seems to have been overly confident about his own ability to synthesize ideas from a large number of sources into a single interdisciplinary science of mind.

CRITICAL DISCUSSION: FREUD AS MORALIST

Freud's theory of instincts or drives got out of empirical control, as is suggested by his vacillations on the subject. Often, his account seems unduly reductionist and physiological. In *The Question of Lay Analysis*, he wrote: "What, then, do these instincts want? Satisfaction—that is, the establishment of situations in which the bodily needs can be extinguished." Obviously, Freud had sexual intercourse in mind, plus eating and drinking. But is it plausible to say that *all* human behavior is driven, directly or indirectly, by short-term bodily needs? This is not true even of many animals. Consider parental behavior: many creatures expend tremendous energy on the feeding and defense of their young, and it seems that such behavior is instinctual, but with a different drive from that for copulation. Humans also show (however imperfectly) parental behavior that surely has an instinctive, biological component.

In *Civilization and Its Discontents* (Ch. II), Freud wrote that the question of the purpose of human life has never received a satisfactory answer; but what men show by their behavior to be the purpose of their lives seems to be merely the operation of "the pleasure principle" (i.e., the seeking of immediate satisfaction for their instinctual impulses). He also said that "in the last analysis, all suffering is nothing else than sensation." Both of these assertions express a very reductionist concept of human life, assimilating us far too closely to the animals, from which Plato, Aristotle, and Kant distinguished us. Are we not manifestly capable of *mental* forms of happiness and unhappiness?

Freud conceded that there is what we call a "finer and higher" joy for artists in creating and for scientists in discovering, but he remarked (a) that such satisfactions are mild compared with "the sating of crude and primary instinctual impulses," for they do not "convulse our physical being"; and (b) that such higher satisfactions are accessible only to a few people, with rare gifts. But he did not mention other less bodily forms of satisfactions or sources of happiness that do not depend on special talents, such as friendship, pleasure in the growth and successes of one's children or grandchildren, or the appreciation of nature, art, or music. These quiet joys may not convulse our physical being (like orgasm or drug-induced "highs"), but they are more reliable, long-lasting, relatively

independent of the body, and free of side-effects—and they can even be enjoyed in old age!

Freud no doubt had his reasons (or causes!) for the gloomy account of the human condition that he offered toward the end of his life. He was in continued pain from cancer of the jaw, and several operations could not cure it. He had lived through the First World War, knew all about its horrors, and had seen the aggressive and extremely nationalistic feelings that were aroused by it. And in the 1920s and 1930s he was witnessing the rise of Nazism and anti-Semitism, which eventually came literally home to him, forcing him to emigrate from Vienna in the last year of his life.

Freud refused to offer consolation where he thought none was to be had: his own morality sternly requires us all to face up to unvarnished reality! In *The Future of an Illusion*, Freud firmly rejects religious belief as an illusory projection onto the universe of our childhood attitudes to our parents. We would like to believe that our heavenly father, who brought us into being, is also in beneficent control of our lives, and we see ourselves as having a duty to live up to the standards he has set (see also the final lecture "The Question of a *Weltanschauung*" of Freud's *New Introductory Lectures*). Thus, Freud explains the immense power of religion, as compared with science and philosophy, as due to its having "the strongest emotions of human beings at its service."

In *Civilization and Its Discontents* (Ch. IV), Freud asserted, on the authority of his lifetime's study of the human mind, that those few saintly people who seem able to live up to the biblical injunction to "love thy neighbor as thyself" really derive the relevant mental energy from the sexual instinct. He wrote: "What they bring about in themselves in this way is a state of evenly suspended, steadfast, affectionate feeling, which has little external resemblance any more to the stormy agitations of genital love, from which it is nevertheless derived." One has to say that this is mere assertion without argument. It would seem more intuitively plausible to say that if Christian *agape* is derived from any natural tendency, the instinctual love of parents for their children (and the protective and affectionate feelings that many people have for most children) would be a stronger candidate.

Similarly, Freud's assertion that the energy that some people devote to art or to science must also be "aim-inhibited libido," a sublimation of the sexual drive, seems unproven. (Presumably, he would have to say the same about athletic and sporting achievement and many other human activities that do not involve food or sex.) Freud wanted a biological theory of human motivation, but he seems to have assumed that it must all reduce to nutrition and copulation, which is an oversimplified account of much animal behavior (see the discussion of ethology in Chapter 10). As

Sartre realized (see the end of Chapter 9), we have a need for meaning and purpose. We need to work, or at least to try to do something that serves some meaningful end; if our desires for food, drink, and sex are plentifully fulfilled (as in some gross conceptions of paradise) but there is nothing else to do, we soon get bored!

Freud remarked that, in his view, not everybody is worthy of love. He had little respect for the vast mass of humanity who, he thought, behave in accordance with "the pleasure principle," and he had little hope that human nature could be fundamentally changed, for instance, by the radical social experiments in Soviet Russia. In *Why War?* (an exchange of open letters with Einstein), Freud suggested a need for Platonic guardians of the state when he wrote that "more care should be taken than hitherto to educate an upper stratum of men with independent minds, not open to intimidation and eager in the pursuit of truth, whose business it would be to give direction to the dependent masses." At the end of his letter, Freud expressed a modicum of hope for the long-term future of humanity without war, if the evolution of culture will allow a strengthening of reason and an internalization of aggressive impulses.

No unambiguous verdict can be passed on Freud's work as a whole. His imaginative power in suggesting new psychological hypotheses is obvious. But his theorizing was overly ambitious and too distant from its empirical roots. And he was prone to dogmatism, refusing to learn from the progress of other disciplines and other approaches within psychology and psychiatry. He was blessed with a considerable literary gift, and many readers have been carried along by the stylishness of his prose. But, however influential and persuasive someone's writing may be, we should never excuse ourselves the task of critical evaluation.

FOR FURTHER READING

A good starting point for reading Freud is his *Five Lectures on Psycho-Analysis*, reprinted in *Two Short Accounts of Psycho-Analysis* (London: Penguin, 1962), and in *A General Selection from the Works of Sigmund Freud*, edited by J. Rickman (New York: Bantam Doubleday Dell, 1989). There is also Freud's second "short account," "The Question of Lay-Analysis," which introduces the later theory of id, ego, and superego. Exploration of his fundamental theory could continue with the *Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis* of 1915–17. Much of his social thought is reprinted in Volume 12 of the Pelican Freud library, entitled *Civilization, Society and Religion.*

For relatively brief, reliable introductions to Freud's thought, see Anthony Storr, *Freud* (Oxford University Press, 1989), and Richard Wollheim, *Freud* (London: Fontana, 1971).

Biographies started with the classic, if somewhat hero-worshipping, three-volume work by Ernest Jones, *The Life and Work of Sigmund Freud*, abridged version, by L. Trilling and S. Marcus (London: Penguin, 1964; New York: Basic Books, 1961). More recently, there has been Frank J. Sulloway, *Freud: Biologist of the Mind* (New York: Basic Books, 1979; London: Fontana, 1980). Jeffrey Masson, in *The Assault on Truth: Freud's Suppression of the Seduction Theory* (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 1987), controversially questioned Freud's integrity over the issue of childhood sexual abuse.

Among many general evaluations of Freud's theories, B. A. Farrell, *The Standing of Psycho-Analysis* (Oxford University Press, 1981) gives a clear, balanced survey. Patricia Kitcher, *Freud's Dream: A Complete Interdisciplinary Science of Mind* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1992), shows how his interdisciplinary theorizing rapidly became outdated, and draws lessons for our own day.

For a survey of post-Freudian psychoanalytical theory, see Morris N. Eagle, *Recent Developments in Psychoanalysis: A Critical Evaluation* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1984).

For discussion of philosophical issues arising from Freud's work, see R. Wollheim and J. Hopkins, eds., *Philosophical Essays on Freud* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), and Jerome Neu, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Freud* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).