

Introduction:

The Revised Life and Work of Sigmund Freud

Sigmund Freud was born on May 6, 1856, in Moravia, the present-day Czech Republic, and relocated with his family to Vienna, Austria, four years later. He remained there for most of his life, becoming world famous for creating psychoanalysis and for establishing psychotherapy more generally in the Western world. Freud and his immediate family did not flee Nazi-controlled Austria until 1938, only a year before his death. After a lengthy battle with cancer of the jaw, Freud died in north London, England, on September 23, 1939.

The young Freud, a polyglot, was a gifted student who excelled in his studies. First he imagined for himself a career in politics or the law, and then in science, in particular in the field of neurology. At the University of Vienna, Freud stretched out his studies from five years to eight, taking personal interest courses in philosophy and conducting extensive laboratory research. For example, under the direction of Carl Claus and his Institute of Comparative Anatomy, in 1875 Freud dissected and examined under microscope the testes of four hundred eels. And in 1876 Freud began a six-year stint as a researcher under Ernst Brücke at the Institute of Physiology. There he worked on the spinal cords of the brook lamprey, the nerve cells of the crayfish, and the nervous system of the freshwater crab. On a holiday in 1878 the very keen young man also conducted research on the salivary glands of dogs in Salomon Strickler's experimental pathology laboratory. Finally, in 1881, Freud took his examinations for the doctor of medicine

degree, after which time he put in another three years of residency at the Vienna General Hospital.

Freud continued to conduct research at the hospital. In 1883 he worked with Theodor Meynert in the hospital's psychiatry department and took up neuroanatomy, eventually publishing articles in the field. Then, in 1884, Freud began his infamous studies of cocaine, a drug he used himself, promoted to friends and professional colleagues, and published gushing reports about.

A year later Freud became lecturer in neuropathology at the University of Vienna, and in that capacity won a grant to study at the Salpêtrière in Paris with the famous neurologist, Jean-Martin Charcot. There he studied hysteria and hypnosis with the man he always considered his master. Advancement as a university researcher, however, was largely barred to even secular Jews who, like Freud, refused to convert to Christianity. So in 1886, freshly married to Martha Bernays, Freud the neurologist reluctantly embarked on a career treating "nervous" illness. But he never abandoned his dream of becoming a recognized scientist and from the beginning viewed clinical practice as laboratory research by another name.

During the so-called prepsychoanalytic period of research, roughly 1887–1897, Freud sought to bridge the fields of neurophysiology and psychology. Often exchanging new speculations with his close friend Wilhelm Fliess, the Berlin ear, nose, and throat specialist, Freud wrote *The Project for a Scientific Psychology* in 1895. Invoking nineteenth-century science and speculative nature philosophy, Freud postulated ideas that would influence him, at first covertly and then explicitly, for a lifetime. That Freud never completed or published the *Project* does not mean that he forgot it. On the contrary, many ideas first introduced there return in his late texts. For example, the early and late Freud argued that repetitive behaviors once associated with railway and war traumas can be explained by invoking the theory of recapitulation and the inheritance of acquired characteristics; that existence itself is determined, if not undercut, by the theory of constancy (or entropy), the idea that all living systems seek rest as their natural state; that emotional trauma can be explained in quantitative or economic terms as the overflowing of affect into the interior of a delicate psyche; and, more generally, that life is governed by reality and pleasure principles.

From the prepsychoanalytic period Freud is better known for his contribution to *Studies on Hysteria* (1895). Freud had lobbied a very reluctant

Josef Breuer, a mentor and well-regarded Viennese physician, to collaborate on this book, which is remembered for the theoretical claims that strangulated affect causes hysteria; that talking is efficacious; and, more incredibly, that through such talk one can uncover layers of repressed memories leading back to some sexually charged traumatic event or “seduction.” Freud essentially came to believe that these memories were buried underneath the defensive mechanisms of the psyche and that psychology, like the exciting and relatively new science of archaeology, needed new methods and theories with which to reveal them.

Freud and Breuer’s sophisticated critics of that time were not convinced. Above all, they warned that the repeated, recovered, or abreacted memories central to the “talking cure” were almost certainly artifacts of the method; the critics pointed to Charcot, whose reputation for inducing patient compliance was settled by the time of his death in 1893, and to the history of medical hypnosis to make their case. Freud, characteristically, rejected their warnings even though he privately began to realize that the patient “memories” he had reported were indeed false. Freud faced a crisis—his published findings were in fact wrong and his reputation, already compromised by his advocacy of cocaine, could now be ruined. His response to this crisis was nothing less than the creation of psychoanalysis proper.

Although problematic, Freud’s own retrospective accounts of the abandonment of the seduction theory and birth of psychoanalysis are clear. What Freud had already called psychoanalysis in 1896 was after 1897 reconceived as the analysis of the emotional rapport, or transference, between patient and physician. Moreover, this rapport was now understood to be infused with sexual fantasy, itself a repetition of inner turmoil based on unresolved, repressed, and unconscious sexual conflicts. Freud claimed to have dropped hypnosis altogether from his practice, thus supposedly evading the problem of suggestion and of discovering the ubiquity of childhood sexuality and the doctrine of polymorphous perversity. His revised claim: hysteria and the neuroses are psychologically conditioned and are not caused by sexual abuse. And so while Freud had been fundamentally right to dig deep for some repressed and unconscious meaning at the heart of mental illness, he was wrong to have accepted the reports of his early patients. He had mistaken their fantasies of abuse for actual abuse.

Never again would Freud risk the future of his science, and of his reputation, on the objective (and therefore verifiable) reality of past events.

At its best, psychoanalysis took refuge in the fantasy life of the individual neurotic, if not in the self-analysis of Freud's own dreams and neuroses, which were not just objectively knowable but were in principle universally true of all people and cultures. At its worst, psychoanalysis dictated the conclusions it purported to find, brazenly manipulating case studies to reflect the ever-changing theoretical and political exigencies of the day. Such was the case of Anna O. We now know that this patient, Bertha Pappenheim, not only failed to recover from hysteria, as claimed, but also was addicted to morphine at the end of her treatment with Breuer and institutionalized in a Swiss sanatorium. Her new doctor's surprising diagnosis: hysteria. A year later Breuer confided that he wished Pappenheim would die so she would be released from suffering. Yet, at Freud's urging, they presented this utter failure of the talking cure as the foundation of the *Studies on Hysteria*.

Psychoanalytic methodology is no less a quagmire than its theory. Freud failed to say exactly what psychoanalysis was until years after its birth, publishing his "Papers on Technique" between 1911 and 1915. Until the *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* of 1905, readers were left to assume that by psychoanalysis Freud still meant the recovery of actual memories of childhood sexual abuse. In other words, although Freud dropped the seduction etiology in a private letter to Fliess in 1897, readers wouldn't know this for another eight years. Freud kept busy just the same, publishing works of "psychoanalysis"—most notably his lengthy self-analysis, conducted in the wake of his father's death in 1896, *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900).

Later on Freud would claim that his early work had been routinely ignored or misunderstood, and he wouldn't shrink from diagnosing the cause of this apparent resistance on the part of society and of his critics. This was the time of his self-mythologized "splendid isolation." But Freud's attitude was merely a romantic pose, a retrospective fiction behind which he spun his own legend, since he was hardly ignored in his own time. On the strength of his publications and the claims of efficacy drawn therein, in 1902 Freud was able to gather around himself a small group of loyal adherents for "Wednesday Evening Meetings," precursor of the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society of 1906–1915. This diverse group met weekly to discuss Freud's work and learn about psychoanalysis from the master himself. Indeed, these meetings were the primary activity required of people wanting to become analysts in the early days.

In 1907 Freud's fortunes brightened further when the Swiss psychiatrist Carl Jung became a follower. Not only would Jung's involvement bring psychoanalysis into contact with a respected research institute and discipline but it would take analysis out of the Jewish milieu in which Freud and his adherents, themselves largely Jewish, lived and practiced. In other words, Jung's very presence would lend weight to the claim that psychoanalysis was a science.

Jung did his part to advance psychoanalysis as a theory and movement. For example, it was Jung who introduced Freud to the Zurich experiments in word association, which became a core idea of psychoanalytic practice. Freud soon required his patients to "free associate," that is, to speak freely about whatever ideas popped into their heads, often in relation to a dream or fantasy. Jung also championed more institutional rigor among those who called themselves Freudians, arguing that all prospective analysts should be analyzed, an idea that would soon become a key feature of institutional psychoanalysis.

As in his past relationships with Fliess and Breuer, however, Freud demanded strict adherence to his ideas and was intolerant when anyone wavered on key points of doctrine or turned psychoanalysis against him. And so Freud, although once desperate to see Jung as his successor, broke with him in 1912. Freud's *Totem and Taboo* (1913), a fantastical work about the prehistorical origin of guilt and conscience in a presumed act of parricide, would be the first in a series of blows and counterblows between the two men.

Psychoanalysis nonetheless prospered. By this time those in the field were developing their own journals, publishing house, and training institutions, and enjoyed a growing international presence. Well-placed Freudians included Ernest Jones in London, Karl Abraham in Berlin, Sandor Ferenczi in Budapest, and Otto Rank in Vienna. When World War I came along, psychoanalysis quickly spread as a possible method for treating intractable war traumas and neuroses. In turn, medically trained followers increasingly surrounded Freud and a core group of disciples, the self-anointed "secret committee," who together established psychoanalysis throughout the Western world.

In the midst of this upswing, Freud, recommitting himself to the dualism he always favored, announced in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) that the theory of sexual fantasy needed a counterpart, a theory of

the death drive. But few of Freud's adherents shared his breadth of learning or intellectual curiosity, and not many of them accepted this new view. Fewer yet understood why he would complicate a perfectly good, and by then well accepted, theory of sexuality. To explain *Beyond*, some pointed to Freud's well-known pessimism and misanthropy; the death of a favorite daughter; the events of World War I, in which two sons served; unresolved emotional conflicts; and even boredom during the interwar period.

Even now insufficient attention is given to the connection between Freud's new "metapsychology" of 1915–1920—of which the death drive theory is the crowning achievement—and the oldest prepsychoanalytic ideas of the 1880s and 1890s. But once the connection is made one cannot ignore the entirely wrongheaded aspects of Freud's scientific worldview, including the intricate biologism that underwrites the enterprise. For example, in the wake of the rediscovery of Mendelian genetics in 1900, few serious scientists could believe in the inheritance of acquired characteristics. Freud did, however, figuring this lack of belief was a problem for others. As he plainly admits in *Moses and Monotheism* (1939), much to the embarrassment of his followers, "I cannot do without this factor [i.e., Lamarckian inheritance] in biological evolution."

Freud's retrograde biologism is even more ironic in that his final "cultural" works, all made possible by his biologically determined theory of the death drive, are now considered among his most famous and classic. This includes *The Future of an Illusion* of 1927, in which he reduces religion to an infantile attachment to Daddy, and *Civilization and Its Discontents* of 1930, in which he analyzes the persistent discomforts of civilized existence. Similarly, clinicians especially have not well appreciated that Freud's late turn toward ego psychology in *The Ego and the Id* (1923)—and along with it the shift from the conscious/unconscious model of mental functioning to that of the famous superego/ego/id—was conditioned by this old biologism. Unfortunately, Freud's explicit biological statements in these late works have been downplayed or simply ignored in favor of his more acceptable, if more trite, conclusions about the repressed, guilt-ridden individual of modern society. According to the sanitized view of Freud's late work, society often requires too much repression and deferred satisfaction of individuals. To compensate, the lucky few sublimate their discomfort with civilization into art and science, while the mob is consigned to infantile submission to God, neuroses, or both. Freud's vision is actu-

ally darker and more complex. He perversely claimed that human beings are driven to death by biology, one acquired and inherited over millennia. Consequently, the shape of human achievement—art, science, religion—is an aberration, however glorious, along a path to nonexistence. The upshot: psychoanalysis can do very little about our historically inevitable, biologically acquired neuroses. As he said in 1927, human progress is best measured not in hours, months, or even years, but in geological time. Psychoanalysis is therefore *unendlich*, or “interminable,” as Freud admitted in 1937, thus putting the unmistakable stamp of therapeutic pessimism on the entire endeavor.

After his death in 1939 Freud’s influence continued to spread throughout Western society, from medicine, psychiatry, and psychotherapy to literature, criticism, philosophy, and, more generally, postmodernism. A medicalized psychoanalysis prospered in the United States, at least until the late 1960s, whereas a more humanities-based psychoanalysis flourished in the 1970s and, energized by such French theorists as Jacques Lacan and Jacques Derrida, spread throughout the Western world. But today, after the advent of drug therapies and the decline of postmodern theory, psychoanalysis seems to have run its course. Naturally Freud remains one of the undisputed giants of twentieth-century thought. But his legacy has been radically undermined as critics continue to debate the scientific foundations of his work, including the theories of repression and of the unconscious; his clinical method, or lack thereof; the efficacy of his practice and of therapeutic talk in general; the ethics of his life and work; and the internecine politics of the psychoanalytic movement. Indeed, aside from motivated holdouts with reputations to lose, it is now widely believed that psychoanalysis as a viable theory and practice is dead or dying.