



## Freud, Sigmund (1856-1939)

by J. Edgar Bauer

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Sigmund Freud in 1907.  
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Sigmund Freud is the founder of psychoanalysis and the discoverer of the unconscious. With his epoch-making contributions he initiated a fundamental transformation in the self-understanding of Western men and women.

In his lifetime, Freud published 24 books and 123 articles containing some 90 specifically Freudian concepts that form the core of his theory. With this corpus and thanks to a carefully planned strategy for disseminating his ideas, Freud exerted a profound influence in all branches of the arts and humanities.

As one of the most outstanding researchers and thinkers of the twentieth century, Freud has received critical attention from a wide range of perspectives. While many of his earlier critics focused on Freud's naturalistic conception of man and on his whole-hearted acceptance of the scientific worldview, contemporary analysis of his writings has convincingly exposed the patriarchal structures that underlie his most distinctive theories and the restrictions that heterosexual teleology imposes on his conception of sexuality.

Of late, a keener awareness of the complexity of the Freudian texts has led to a recognition that some of his basic insights can be turned against his own overall structuring principles, so that new theoretical spaces can be envisioned beyond the scope of what Freud himself was prepared to acknowledge.

### Life

Freud was born in the North Moravian city of Freiberg (present-day Příbor, in the Czech Republic) on May 6, 1856 as the eldest child of his father's third marriage. In 1873, he entered the university in Vienna as a medical student, where he was influenced by Darwinian biology and the dominant positivism of his day.

In 1875 Freud did research in Trieste on male eels and began to develop his theory concerning the functioning of nervous cells. Between 1876 and 1882 Freud worked as researcher at the physiological laboratory of Ernst Wilhelm von Brücke, a foremost representative of the antivitalistic school founded by Hermann von Helmholtz.

In 1882, Freud became engaged to Martha Bernays, whom he married in 1886. In spite of having entered clinical practice for financial reasons in Vienna, he continued to pursue neurological research.

Being interested in the organic manifestations of the nervous system, Freud travelled to Paris to study under Jean Charcot, the most eminent psychologist of his time, who had begun to treat apparently organic illnesses using verbal techniques.

Back in Vienna, Freud continued his medical studies, passed the qualifying examinations, and decided to earn his livelihood as a physician. In 1891, the Freuds moved to the now famous Berggasse apartment, where they lived with their six children and Martha's sister, Minna Bernays, and where they remained until

their exile from Austria in 1938.

In 1902, Freud founded--along with Alfred Adler, Wilhelm Steckel, Max Kahane and Rudolf Reitler--the "Psychological Wednesday Society," the first circle in the history of Freudianism. The application of psychoanalysis to such fields as anthropology, literature, and history was discussed.

In 1907, Freud met the Swiss psychiatrist Carl Gustav Jung for the first time in Vienna. Seeking to avoid the perception that psychoanalysis was a "Jewish science," Freud for a while regarded his Gentile disciple and friend as his possible successor, as one who, like Joshua, was destined to explore the promised land of psychiatry, which Freud himself, like Moses, saw only from afar. When the *Internationale Psychoanalytische Vereinigung* was founded in 1910, Freud designated Jung as president for an indefinite period.

From 1910 onward, questions of theory and treatment, as well as personal differences, led to dissension within the nascent psychoanalytical movement. Shortly before the beginning of World War II, Freud denounced the disloyalty of Jung and Adler, and created, as a reaction, the "secret council," whose members--"the best and most trustworthy among our men"--would take charge of the further development of the movement.

To each of the five original members of this council (Sandor Ferenczi, Karl Abraham, Ernest Jones, Hanns Sachs, and Otto Rank), Freud gave an antique Greek intaglio, which each mounted in a gold ring. Despite his efforts, however, Freud could not prevent further dissidence, the most notable of which was that of Wilhelm Reich.

With the gradual transformation of psychoanalysis into a mass movement, individual dissidence gave way to large-scale schisms, against which Freud's interventions were finally of no avail.

Although not a practicing Jew or a Zionist, Freud remained throughout his life a member of the Jewish community. After the Nazi occupation of Austria in 1938, Freud was able to leave Vienna thanks to the intervention of the American ambassador in France and the aid of his faithful disciple Marie Bonaparte. Freud then settled in London, where he wrote his last work: *Der Mann Moses und die monotheistische Religion* (The Man Moses and Monotheistic Religion).

After a malignant growth had been detected on his jaw and palate and after having undergone thirty-three operations since 1923, Freud died of cancer on September 23, 1939. His ashes repose at the crematorium of Golders Green in one of his favorite Grecian urns.

### **Sexuality, Drive, Libido**

Freud's psychoanalytical corpus rests upon the new conception of sexuality he developed in opposition to the biological conception dominant in the nineteenth century. Sexuality is for Freud a universal psychical disposition that constitutes the very core of human activity. To grasp this encompassing dimension of the sexual beyond anatomy, Freud created an instrumentality that included (1) the redefinition of bisexuality as psychical content; (2) a new approach to perversions; and (3) the psychic duality of the life and death drives.

According to an addition Freud made in *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* in 1924, the idea of "drive" is the "most relevant" and at the same time the "most unfinished part" of psychoanalytical theory. From a systematic overall perspective, the concept of "drive" marks the separation line between the psychic and the somatic, and has to be distinguished from the mere "instinct" that determines animal behavior.

In psychic life, the sexual drive manifests itself through the mental energy that Freud terms "libido." A central concept of psychological theory, "libido" plays a determinant role in the understanding of neurosis, perversions, and sublimation. Not surprisingly, in *Jenseits des Lustprinzips* (Beyond the Pleasure Principle,

1920), Freud identified the libido with the "Eros of poets and philosophers," which holds together everything that is alive.

### **The Oedipus Complex**

In *Abriss der Psychoanalyse* (An Outline of Psychoanalysis), a text begun in 1938 that remained unfinished, Freud points out that even if the discovery of the repressed Oedipus complex were the only accomplishment of psychoanalysis, it would warrant the claim to rank this discipline with "the valuable new acquisitions of humanity."

In Freudian theory, the Oedipus complex is understood primarily as the unconscious representation that manifests the child's sexual desire for the parent of the opposite sex and his hostility to the parent of the same sex. The Oedipus complex appears when the child is between three and five years old, and corresponds to the phallic phase of sexual development, which follows the oral and anal phases and is prior to the genital phase that begins in puberty.

For Freud, there is no actual parallel between the male and female Oedipus complex. In the case of the male child, the Oedipus complex comes to an end with the appearance of the castration complex, that is, the recognition by the child that the father figure constitutes an obstacle to the realization of his incestuous desires. He then renounces the mother and evolves towards an identification with the father that allows him to choose objects different from the mother, but of her same sex.

Contrasting with this development in the male child, the Oedipus complex in the female child is rendered possible by her awareness of castration, which results in penis envy. The complex is manifested in her desire to have a child by her father. The girl, then, has to renounce her mother as an object of the same sex in order to reorient herself toward the desire of the paternal penis. Despite this developmental asymmetry, Freud contends that the libido present from the outset in both sexes is of a male nature.

The assumption of this libidinal monism is corroborated, according to Freud, by the analogy between the female "refusal of femininity" in the form of penis envy and the male "resistance against the passive attitude" toward other men. Common to both sexes, the rejection of feminine passivity is rooted in the biological basis of sexuality, which psychoanalysis is incapable of altering.

### **The Unconscious and the Conscious Negations**

According to Freud, the unconscious is internal to the conscious and beyond the reach of an individual's awareness. Although Freud was not the first to intuit the reality of the unconscious nor was he responsible for the coinage of the term, his understanding and method of approaching the unconscious are essentially different from those of previous psychologists and psychiatrists (from Franz Anton Mesmer to Pierre Janet), and of the representatives of the German philosophical tradition (Wilhelm von Schelling, Arthur Schopenhauer, Friedrich Nietzsche).

Freud's unconscious is not a mere "subconscious" beyond direct accessibility by the conscious, but a psychic system that manifests itself to the conscious through dreams, word play, parapraxis (*Fehlleistungen*), slips of the tongue, and pathological symptoms.

Such manifestations of the unconscious are liable to psychoanalytical interpretation in a process that transforms their contents into articulations of the conscious. The unconscious itself, however, evades interpretation because the conscious mind articulates itself on the basis of negation and its derivatives (such as the mechanisms of disavowal, defense, and taboos), while in the unconscious there is "no negation" (*keine Negation*), only contents that are more or less strongly charged with psychical energy.

Not controlled by reason and logic nor touched by ethical imperatives, these contents are made out of

desires and wishes that the conscious mind refuses to acknowledge. Since they cannot be annihilated, the rejected contents are repressed and shifted into the unconscious, from whence they constantly try to find their way back to the conscious. The gap between the unconscious and the conscious, however, is not bridged by the repressed contents or representations themselves, but by the drives or energies formerly attached to them and now looking for new conscious representations that they can appropriate in order to manifest themselves.

For Freud, the psychic apparatus works like a dynamic and complex system of locations (or topology) that are constantly interacting with one another. Within this system, the conscious re-articulates the latent contents of the unconscious as manifest objects, while the unconscious itself remains beyond the grasp of conscious awareness

### **Perversions and Normative Heterosexuality**

While Freud assumes a perverse polymorphous disposition in every human being, he ultimately evaluates and assesses this disposition from the perspective of a sexual normativity that, in spite of its precariousness and instability, constitutes the aim of the individual's sexual development. In *Three Essays*, Freud characterizes neurosis as "the negative of perversion" (*das Negativ der Perversion*), and points out that, since perversions ignore the Oedipus complex, the incest prohibition, and the ensuing repression and sublimation, they are confabulated according to the patterns of raw, infantile sexuality.

Based on this assumption, Freud distinguishes between perversions with regard to their object and their aim. Object perversions imply a fixation on a single object and the neglect of all others, whereby the object can be either a human partner (incest, homosexuality, pedophilia) or a non-human entity (fetishism, zoophilia, transvestism). With regard to their aim, perversions relate either to visual pleasure or jouissance (voyeurism, exhibitionism), to the pleasure derived from causing pain or suffering it (sadism, masochism), or to the pleasure dependent on the exclusive concentration on a body region (fellatio, cunnilingus).

Around 1915, Freud left behind his descriptive approach to perversions and began to elaborate on perversion as an organizing principle of the ego in its relations to psychosis and neurosis. Although the neurotic repression of unconscious demands differs from the psychotic defense mechanism conducive to the disavowal of reality, both neurosis and psychosis are the result of an internal psychic conflict that presupposes a resolution--albeit in an unsatisfactory form--of the Oedipal situation.

Distinct from neuroses and psychoses, perversions imply the cessation of psychosexual development in a pre-Oedipal stage. Since they are not based on a resolution, but on a denial of the Oedipal situation and the castration complex, perversions are marked by the refusal to acknowledge the factuality of sexual difference.

Although Freud's understanding of perversions is to a large extent determined by his views on heterosexual normality, he insists that the exclusive sexual interest felt by men for women is "a problem that needs to be elucidated," since heterosexual object-choice is not a given of biology accompanying psychic development from the outset, but the culmination of this development that, in most cases, proves unsatisfactory and unstable.

These insights notwithstanding, Freud assumes that heterosexuality is the most appropriate object choice, for it warrants the propagation of the species. From this perspective, the survival of infantile polymorphous perversity in the psychic life of the adult is considered a deficiency that hinders the deployment of sexuality toward the aims of procreation.

### **Bisexuality, The Third Sex, and Homosexuality**

Contrary to the embryological and anatomical idea of bisexuality as a natural occurrence, Freud began to

develop in the years before the publication of the *Three Essays* a conception of bisexuality as a fundamental psychological structure common to all humans and independent of any biological substrate. According to Freud, bisexuality is the actual psychological basis of heterosexuality and homosexuality, for both constitute compromise formations based on the narrowing of sexual choice.

Since unconscious bisexuality is postulated as existing in a state of latency in all heterosexuals and as an explanatory principle of homosexual object choice, Freud rejects the hypothesis of a separate "third sex" as propounded, for example, by Karl Heinrich Ulrichs, one of the forerunners of the homosexual emancipation movement in Germany.

In this connection, Freud clearly asserted that "psychoanalysis is not called to solve the problem of homosexuality." In *Über die Psychogenese eines Falles von weiblicher Homosexualität* (The Psychogenesis of a Case of Homosexuality in a Woman, 1920), he emphasized that the elimination of the homosexual "form" (*Variante*) of genital organization is never an easy task and that the attempt to transform a fully developed homosexual person into a heterosexual would be as little promising as the other way around.

Fifteen years later, in a letter written in English to the mother of a homosexual man, Freud made it clear that "homosexuality is assuredly no advantage, but it is nothing to be ashamed of, no vice, no degradation, it cannot be classified as an illness."

Despite these reassuring words, however, Freud's next phrase reveals the teleological normativity that underlies his assessment of perversions in general: "we consider it [that is, homosexuality] to be a variation of the sexual function, produced by a certain arrest of sexual development."

In the last resort, homosexuality appears as a falling short of or a deviancy from heterosexual development that leads to procreation. Even if Freud underlines in his letter that several of the "greatest men" were homosexuals and that it is a "great injustice" to persecute homosexuality as a crime, his theoretical approach to the issue amounts at most to a tolerant attitude, not a radical dismantling of the ideological structures that privilege heterosexuality.

### **The Unique Male Libido and the Two Female Orgasms**

One of the most criticized aspects of Freud's psychoanalytical theory is its understanding of female sexuality. If psychoanalysis--as Freud once pointed out--does not intend to explain the essence of "male" and "female," but simply assumes the validity of their conventional and biological meaning, it is no wonder that Freud's account of female sexuality is seriously impaired by the ideological hierarchies and asymmetries he inherited from his background and intellectual environment.

The anatomical sexual difference of man and woman, and their divergent psychic organizations notwithstanding, Freud assumed in 1905 the existence in the unconscious of a unique male libido that determines the sexuality of both male and female individuals. The asymmetry implied by Freud's phallic monism forces the female child into a sexual regime determined by the organ she misses in herself.

Being marked in her sexual organization by phallic absence, the female child interprets her own clitoris as a castrated organ homologous to the penis. When during puberty, the child becomes aware of her vagina, her early clitoral sexuality has to be repressed in favor of what Freud assumed to be a mature vaginal sexuality that prepares the young woman for the procreational duties of motherhood.

In Freud's account, the attainment of female sexual maturity presupposes a displacement of the pleasure center from the male-like clitoris to the exclusively female vagina. Freud's claim regarding the occurrence of vaginal orgasm, however, cannot be substantiated by biological or medical evidence. At the most, such a claim could be interpreted, in the words of Thomas Laqueur, as a "parable of culture" in which anatomy is re-invented for the sake of prevalent cultural aims.

With the imagined migration of erotogenic sensibility to a functional non-site, Freud was granting, in the last resort, psychoanalytical sanction to the subordination of female sexuality to the social aims of cultural patriarchy.

### **Culture, Religion, and Drive Duality**

Freud never shunned daring analogical reasoning when it promised to enlarge the scope of application of his theories. Significant in this connection is the parallelism he drew between the equally menacing and protective father and the specific ambivalences of culture with regard to the individual. On this account, culture protects the individual against destructive natural forces at the price of imposing a hostile regime of privations that includes drive renunciation, or at least drive control.

Since there are natural forces against which culture is of no avail, however, man developed, according to Freud, a mechanism that humanizes and transforms these forces into protective "fathers" or "gods" capable of granting compensation for the constraints of civilized life.

Upon consideration of their psychological genesis, Freud concludes that religious ideas are illusions, which, although not necessarily false, are primarily the product of wishful thinking. In the last resort, Freud considered religion a phenomenon comparable to child neurosis, and, as such, liable of being overcome by "the education for the sake of reality" ("*die Erziehung zur Wirklichkeit*") fostered by psychoanalysis.

After reasserting in *Die Zukunft einer Illusion* (The Future of an Illusion, 1927) the non-illusory character of psychoanalysis, Freud not surprisingly ends the book with the sober injunction that it would be an illusion to believe one could obtain somewhere else what psychoanalysis is not capable of granting.

Besides its protective function against external nature, culture provides an instrumentality designed to cope with the human condition as expressed in Thomas Hobbes' classical formulation: *homo homini lupus* (Man is a wolf to man). In view of the hostility and destructiveness inherent in human nature, Freud postulated in *Jenseits des Lustprinzips* (Beyond the Pleasure Principle, 1920) a drive duality consisting of Eros (the life principle that includes the sexual and ego drives) and Thanatos (the destruction and death principle, which, when directed to the external world, takes the form of aggression).

With the introduction of this duality, Freud broaches a conception of psychic life that alternates between the affirmation of life and its dialectical negation, death conceived as the aim of life. By drawing death within the explicit scope of psychoanalytical theory, Freud produced one of his most powerful arguments to counter the often raised objection concerning his supposed pansexualism.

### **Psychoanalysis and Sexual Difference**

Some of his most innovative ideas of the 1920s Freud regarded as "speculations" or "working hypotheses" worth considering, although not necessarily sustained by previous psychoanalytical theory. Focusing on such hypotheses, Herbert Marcuse in *Eros and Civilization* (1957) sought to develop the "philosophy of psychoanalysis" implicit in Freud's theory of man. In Marcuse's interpretation, issues such as the revaluation of fantasy and the aesthetic dimension, the redefinition of progress, and the reassessment of the role of play in a non-repressive culture define the core of Freud's emancipatory potential.

Despite the centrality of Eros in his book, Marcuse made no serious effort to revisit Freud's theory of sexual difference, whose unexamined premises undermined the libertarian tendencies at work in the psychoanalytical conception of man. Marcuse's evasion of the issue is all the more surprising, because he could have easily recalled that, in the formative years of psychoanalysis, Freud's contemporary Magnus Hirschfeld had propounded a theoretical alternative to the disjunctive scheme with which psychoanalysis operates.

Although familiar with Hirschfeld's work, Freud never acknowledged the actual relevancy of his "doctrine of sexual intermediaries" that asserted the permanent intersexual condition of all human beings and that intended to replace the traditional sexual binary with a framework of sexual plurality in which each individual is marked by a unique sexuality.

It is not by chance that Hirschfeld's insights appear to necessitate the sort of critical readings of the Freudian corpus proposed mainly in the areas of feminism, queer, and transgender studies. Once the sexual Other is capable of being conceptualized in a framework of intersexual differences beyond the male/female scheme, the unconscious resources of sexuality can be set free to inform the cultural project of non-repressive sublimation.

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