

Freud – His Theory and Impact

Andrew Cross

University of Calgary

March 22, 2008

Freud's ideas about the human mind were ground breaking and revolutionary. His naturalistic explanation for human behavior influenced sociology and anthropology in much same way as Darwin's theory of evolution influenced biology. This is not surprising when we consider that Freud built on Darwin's foundation. This paper attempts to summarize some of Freud's central theories and concludes with some thoughts on Freud's continuing impact on society.

Freud was born in 1856 into a Jewish home. Freud's father was well schooled in Judaism though it was not taught in the home. Thus Freud grew up essentially as an atheist. An Austrian Jew, Freud was raised in a hostile environment where anti-Semitic views were openly discussed and sometime acted upon. In Germany, Hermann Ahlwardt pressed for a halt to Jewish immigration, in France, Drumont openly attacked the Jews in his book *La France Juive* and in Kishniev there were the pogroms. No doubt, all of these events left their mark on Freud. But anti-Semitism seemed to have had the effect of freeing Freud from the opinions of the consensus. Freud's thinking was certainly 'outside of the box'.

Freud excelled in school and enrolled in the medical faculty at Vienna University. It was there that Freud came under the influence of the man who was, by his own admission, the greatest single influence in his life, Ernst Brucke. Brucke was a professor at University of Vienna and an avowed naturalist. He impressed on his students the idea that "no other forces than the common

physical chemical ones were active within the organism.”¹ Freud would take this principle and apply it to all of his research into the human mind. While in Vienna, he was offered a grant to study the reproductive organs of eels – the beginning of a long and illustrious research career.

It is important to keep in mind that Freud lived during a time of tremendous change and innovation. In 1848 Marx and Engels published their *Communist Manifesto* and in 1859 Darwin published his ground breaking book *On the Origin of Species*. Both of these works flew in the face of orthodoxy and their impact would shake the world. The last half of the 19th century was a time of increasing urbanization, industrialism, technological advancement, nationalism and imperialism. This was a time of upheaval and revolution that proved to be fertile ground for Freud’s ideas.

Freud taught that human consciousness was more complex than what might first appear. Human beings do not act only on ideas that come consciously into their minds but also on unconscious ideas.² Freud used the example of a person who was hypnotized and then instructed to carry out a certain action once awakened. When released from their hypnotized state, they showed no awareness of what had happened and were unable to recall any of the instructions given to them while hypnotized even though they carried out the instructions given to them while in their hypnotized state.² Freud used this experiment to show that we do things without necessarily having an awareness of why we do them. Freud further theorized that incidents in our past remain in our unconscious memory and can have a powerful influence on our subsequent actions.

¹ Adler - Psychotherapy and Freud. Heinz L. Ansbacher. 2004 *Journal of Individual Psychology* 60: 4

² Sigmund Freud, “Civilization and its Discontents” in *Sources of Western Civilization*, ed. by Marvin Perry, Joseph Peden and Theodore Von Laue, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin 2006) 280

As Freud delved into the unconscious of his patients, Freud began to recognize a pattern of repeated sexual abuse. Freud decided that many of these sexual abuses were fantasies but never the less they confirmed to him that “neuroses... [were] without exception disturbances of the sexual function,...”³ Freud would build all of his further research on this premise. Freud traced sexual neuroses all the way back to childhood. He argued that the “impression of that early period of life, though they were for the most part buried in amnesia, left ineradicable traces upon the individual’s growth and in particular laid down the disposition to any nervous disorder that was to follow.”⁴ With his newfound ‘insight’ into infant sexuality, Freud developed a theory that he termed the Oedipus Complex. In Greek mythology, Oedipus killed his father and married his mother. Thus Freud saw children as sexual beings and taught that sons naturally have sexual desire for their mothers and daughters for their fathers. The Oedipus Complex was offered as an explanation for many social problems.

Freud taught that people naturally repress these uncomfortable sexual feelings in a part of their minds that was inaccessible to their conscious - the ‘unconscious’.⁵ This repression was “... to avoid the ‘unpleasure’ which would be produced by the liberation of the repressed.”³ His desire to repress unhappy memories was later called the pleasure principle. Later on in the development of Freud’s theory, he divided the human consciousness into the Ego, the Id and the Super Ego. The Ego was the passionate and instinctual part of a person, the Id was the rational part of a person and the Super Ego was a sort of conscience that was shaped in a child by his

³ Sigmund Freud, “An Autobiographical Study” in *The Freud Reader*, ed. by Peter Gray (NY, W.W. Norton & Co. 1989) pg 15

⁴ Sigmund Freud, “An Autobiographical Study” in *The Freud Reader*, ed. by Peter Gray (NY, W.W. Norton & Co. 1989) pg 20

⁵ The unconscious is not to be misunderstood as the subconscious, an ambiguous word that Freud was careful not to use.

family and the society that they were born into. The Super Ego was the part of a person that is affected by the Oedipus Complex.⁶

Freud believed that the unconscious could only be accessed by professionals by means of psychoanalysis. The term 'psychoanalysis' was originally used in reference to a therapeutic method developed to help patients work through their neuroses but it later came to refer to an entire 'science', described by Freud as "the science of unconscious mental processes."⁷ The first therapeutic method adopted by Freud for psychoanalysis was hypnotism. Freud found that through hypnotism he could access the unconscious part of man and begin to discover and draw out the source of conflict responsible for neurosis. Later, Freud freed himself from the bonds of hypnotism and began to use a technique called free association. The patient was seated on a couch and asked to speak whatever came to their mind when a certain word or number was mentioned. Freud later used dreams, slips of the tongue (Freudian slips) and even literature (Freud tried to analyze Shakespeare) to discover what was hidden away in a person's unconscious.

Freud's theories on the human psyche influenced (and were no doubt influenced by) Freud's view on religion, art and philosophy. In all of these, Freud sought to be consistently naturalistic. He saw human beings as mostly neurotic creatures and for this reason religion, art and philosophy were all products of neurosis. Religion especially was a crutch for those who could not deal with reality.⁸ Freud elaborated further on the nature of religious illusion and placed its

⁶ Sigmund Freud. "An Autobiographical Study" in *The Freud Reader*, ed. by Peter Gray (NY, W.W. Norton & Co. 1989) pg 41

⁷ Sigmund Freud. "An Autobiographical Study" in *The Freud Reader*, ed. by Peter Gray (NY, W.W. Norton & Co. 1989) pg 41

⁸ Sigmund Freud. "An Autobiographical Study" in *The Freud Reader*, ed. by Peter Gray (NY, W.W. Norton & Co. 1989) pg 40

genesis in ‘wishful thinking’ and the desire for a Father figure. In Freud’s grandiose scheme of history, religion is but a stage on the path to maturity in which civilization passes from animism to science and the casting off of illusion. Freud states, “Religion is a primary neurosis... which will be discarded as humanity matures. We should not fight this change but ease its coming.”⁹

Freud also applied psychoanalysis to political theory in an essay written in 1929, not long after WW1. In it Freud states that turmoil exists within civilization because man is instinctually aggressive in nature. Freud states, “Civilization has to use its utmost efforts in order to set limits to man’s aggressive instincts and to hold the manifestation of them in check by psychical reaction-formations.”¹⁰ Freud felt that this natural male aggressiveness was a reason Communism could not work. Abolishing property rights only removes one source of aggression but does not change the innate nature of man. Men will find other sources of competition, ie. sexual relationships. Freud goes so far as to say that men cannot be happy in a civilization that has removed opportunity for aggression: “... the inclination to aggression is an original, self-subsisting instinctual disposition in man...”¹¹

Freud’s ideas of human nature ultimately led him to a very pessimistic view of the world. Freud did not share the prevailing sentiment that WW1 was the ‘war to end all wars’. A view for which he was quickly vindicated. Freud died (assisted by Schur, his physician) shortly after England and France declared war on Hitler’s Germany.

Freud has always attracted critics but never so much as today. Recent discoveries in genetics and the biological workings of the brain account for much of this criticism. The trend in

⁹ Michael Palmer. *Freud and Jung on Religion*. (London, Rutledge Press 1997) pg 34

¹⁰ Sigmund Freud. “Civilization and its Discontents” in *Sources of Western Civilization*, ed. by Marvin Perry, Joseph Peden and Theodore Von Laue, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin 2006) 281

¹¹ Sigmund Freud. “Civilization and its Discontents” in *Sources of Western Civilization*, ed. by Marvin Perry, Joseph Peden and Theodore Von Laue. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin 2006) 281

psychology has been away from esoteric theory to hard science. Charles Barber, quoting Michael Gazzaniga, a neuroscientist wrote, “Psychology itself is dead...Today the mind sciences are the province of... evolutionary biologist’s, cognitive scientists, neuroscientists, psychophysicists, linguists, computer scientists—you name it...”¹²

Another criticism of Freud is that his theories provide what amounts to a secular alternative to religion or, as the popular historian Jon Krakauer put it, “...a variety of secular faith- religion for the non religious.”¹³ If this is true (and to be fair, Krakauer does not argue that it is) then it could be argued that most have found it a very unsatisfying replacement in as much as Freudian theory attempts “to boil down the huge complexity of human motivation into one basic [sexual] drive.”¹⁴ It was Freud who coined the term ‘libido’ and he seems to blame just about every problem on it. This was one of Alfred Adler’s prime objections to Freud’s theories.¹⁵

C.S. Lewis, in a response to psychoanalysis written shortly after Freud’s death, pointed out that psychiatry may fix the natural stuff of man but ultimate decisions are moral in nature. Lewis used the example of three men who were sent to war. One had a normal fear of death while the other two had an abnormally high fear of death that made war a particularly terrifying experience. Lewis pointed out that even if psychoanalysis succeeded in restoring a normal fear of death in the two men, they still had a choice to make as to whether they were willing to sacrifice their lives for the sake of liberty.¹⁶

¹² How Freud Conquered America, *Then Lost It*. Charles Barber. 2008 *Wilson Quarterly*. 32: 1

¹³ Jon Krakauer. *Under The Banner of Heaven*. (NY:Random House 2003) pg. 309

¹⁴ <http://www.sparknotes.com/biography/freud/section2.rhtml>

¹⁵ Adler - Psychotherapy and Freud. Heinz L. Ansbacher. 2004 *Journal of Individual Psychology* 60: 4

¹⁶ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*. (NY: Harper Collins 1980) pg. 90

Perhaps the most succinct criticism of Freudian thought was made by Jesus when he said that, “Man does not live on bread alone...”¹⁷

Although much of Freud’s legacy may be relegated to the dust bin of history, there can be no doubt that Freud’s ideas have played and will continue to play a significant role in future discussion about the nature of man and why he acts the way he does.

¹⁷ *Luke 4:4. The Holy Bible. Revised Standard Version. Philadelphia: Westminster, 1952.*

