

# SIGMUND FREUD AND PSYCHOANALYSIS

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## I. INTRODUCTION

You can read five different books or articles about Freud and his theories and come away with five radically different impressions of the man and his work. Perspectives range from European disciples who took his every word as gospel, to American psychoanalysts committed to "medicalizing" psychoanalysis, to critics who claim that he was mistaken at practically every turn and created a psychology entirely in his own image. What is not in doubt is that he was probably the single most influential psychologist of the twentieth century. My own perspective involves unmasking what he was actually saying once we get past the terrible mistranslations into English, and in separating what was correct and enduringly valuable from what was mistaken or only narrowly applicable. The two greatest mistakes that others make in approaching Freud are to either:

(1) Accept almost everything he said and all his theories as gospel truth. Freud himself was unfortunately dogmatic regarding his formulations, and the best and brightest of his colleagues and students found their ideas rejected by him and his psychoanalytic circle, so that they had to step outside it and establish their own platforms in order to be heard. This included such geniuses as Alfred Adler, Carl Jung, Wilhelm Reich, and Karen Horney. OR

(2) Focus on his errors and reject everything in his formulations. This is a clear case of "throwing the baby out with the bathwater," since in fact Freud was brilliant, and his observations of unconscious processes provided a solid foundation for the subsequent development of psychotherapy. In my view he was about 50% correct, but that 50% was invaluable, and once we dismiss the mistaken ideas and leave them lying by the wayside, the correct 50% provide an insightful basis for much of the thinking that followed.

## II. TRANSLATION AND MISTRANSLATION

When I first read Freud as an undergraduate, I found him dull and extraordinarily difficult to read, with a few good ideas. That was the A.A. Brill translation of *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*. Later I read selections from his 5-volume

Collected Papers and found them largely easy to read and brilliant. Admittedly I read only groups of papers on those subjects where I considered Freud to be generally correct and did not bother with areas where I considered him badly mistaken. My method was to look in the two indexes for a topic that interested me, and then read all the papers that dealt with that specific topic.

We learn from Bruno Bettelheim, one of Freud's disciples and promoters and an important thinker in his own right, that the Brill translations were an abomination, a fractured caricature of Freud's writing in German. Psychoanalysts in the United States were committed to making psychoanalysis part of medicine, an idea toward which Freud felt only contempt. In Europe a historian, an anthropologist, or a playwright could become a psychoanalyst if that person had the proper aptitude. As part of the medicalization of psychoanalysis, words were deliberately chosen that were difficult and obfuscating, so that only the priesthood who were educated and anointed as both medical doctors and psychoanalysts could understand Freud. Freud was committed to writing clear and beautiful prose that ordinary people could understand, and in Germany he won prizes for the quality of his writing. In trying to make Freud sound biological and mechanistic, Brill took out all that made his writing vital and alive. (The patient lived, but never regained consciousness, so to speak.) Translations into French and Spanish, unencumbered by the political agenda that followers in the United States imposed on psychoanalysis, did not suffer the same fate and were largely faithful to the original language, using direct equivalents of Freud's German terms.

Later translations were made that were far better, such as those by Ernest Jones. The immense task of translating all of Freud's work into English was undertaken under the supervision of James Strachey, and this resulted in the "Standard Edition," which is the accepted authoritative version of Freud's work in English. This work, carried out by Strachey, Jones, and a number of other translators, is far clearer and more readable, but nonetheless retains many of the inaccuracies that resulted in imposing an American medical viewpoint on Freud's work. Indeed, Strachey even explicitly refers to some of the points at which he has departed significantly from Freud's language and gives his rationale for doing so. No parallel departures, we may note, were deemed necessary by the French and Spanish translators.

Bruno Bettelheim, near the end of his years, noted that most of the original members of the psychoanalytic circle were dead and few remained who could still recall the original discussions and meanings that Freud attributed to his

work. So he undertook to set the record straight. Bettelheim, we may note, was a native German speaker who as a young man read each new work that Freud released as it came out, and was engaged in animated discussion with others in the psychoanalytic circles, about them all. (If you're seriously interested in Freud, you should read Bettelheim himself; his brief work (112 pages) can easily be read in an evening.) Primary source: Bruno Bettelheim: *Freud & Man's Soul*. New York: Random House Vintage, 1984. Below I have merely table of the organized the principal distortions he identified into a table.

The I, It, and Over-I deserve special comment. The I is seen as a realm of tragic conflict. Our goal in coming to know our unconscious is to enlarge its scope so that more of our It and our Over-I (conscience; socially conditioned shoulds, etc) become accessible to our conscious selves. Bettelheim asserts that Freud never meant to imply that these were "entities" in the personality with separate existences. The I, It, and Over-I are inextricably linked and cannot be separated from each other except in theory. Spanish and French use the words directly as described here (*yo, moi, sur-moi, soi*, etc.)

FREUD'S TERM	ENGLISH MISTRANSLATION	COMMENTARY (BB OR MINE)
the I (das Ich)	ego	The English terms has implications of self-centeredness and selfishness
the It	id	The German—a sense of disowning that aspect of self
the over-I	superego	Narcissus in a Superman suit?
cultural achievement	reclamation work	What a difference!
a memory “visited” him often	a memory “troubled” him	In regard to reflections during a visit to the Acropolis
“soul” (German “seele”)	most references eliminated. “mind” is substituted. (German word for mind is “geistig.”)	Freud, an atheist, used “soul” to refer to our innermost being. He was a humanist in the best sense of the word. Almost all Freud’s references to soul were removed in translation.
“of the soul”	“mental”	
Attempt to grasp the deeper sense or significance of (deuting)	interpretation	This raises questions about the whole interpretive stance of American psychoanalysis

Mishandling (vergreifen)	Bungled actions	
“faulty achievement” (feblleistung)	(parapraxis)	Bizarre jargonizing. Sounds like something you do while brushing your teeth.
To occupy, occupation	cathexis	More truly bizarre jargonizing
parrying	defending	
repulsion	repression	Connotation: pushing away vs. pushing down
An idea that spontaneously comes to mind	Free association	
Self-reference with active voice and personal agency (which I should like to describe as)	Self-reference disappears, passive voice is used (“which might be described as”	
Mass psychology (masse)	Group psychology	
Narcissism is seen as destructive, alienating, and self-defeating (as in the myth)	Narcissism is seen as positive, normal, the outcome of natural selfishness	Freud held that the good life is “lieben and arbeiten” –to love and to work—love others and work for the common good.
The Uneasiness Inherent in Culture	Civilization and its Discontents	Problematical qualities as inherent in culture or in the individual
Fate or destiny	vicissitude	Here we go again!
Destructive or aggressive drives or impulses	“the death instinct”	Freud never used the term “death instinct”
Eros (implies deep love for Psche, to whom he is wedded in everlasting love and devotion)	Eros (narrowly sexual implication)	Freud’s usage can only be fully understood in terms of the Greek myth of Eros and Psyche
Psyche (connotations of beauty, fragility, and insubstantiaity that connect with the soul. Suggests great respect, care, and consideration from which psyche must be approached.	Psyche (refers to the mind)	

***Taken as a whole***, maintains Bettelheim, Freud's "writings are gentle...intimations that we, his readers, would benefit from a ... spiritual journey of self-discovery [and] greater self-awareness. (P. 4)

***Instead of instilling a deep feeling for what is most human*** in all of us, the translations attempt to lure the reader into developing a "scientific" attitude toward men and his actions.. . .With children afflicted by psychological troubles, Bettelheim writes that Freud held that we need "an emotional closeness based on an immediate sympathetic comprehension of all aspects of the child's soul. What was needed was. . . a spontaneous sympathy of our unconscious with that

of others, a feeling reesponse of our soul to theirs. (5)

***Through the use of abstractions*** [the translations] make it easy for the reader to distance himself from what Freud sought to teach about the inner life of man and of the reader himself. . . . Stujdents of psychoanalysis are not led to take it personally. . . to gain access to their own unconscious and everything else within them that is most human but nevertheless unacceptable to them. . . .Almost invariably, I have found that psychoanalytic concepts had become for [American] students a way of looking only at others, from a safe distance. . . . It was always someone else's unconscious they analyzed, hardly ever their own. . . . [Freud] was speaking about us all--about the rreader as much as about himself, his patients, and others. Freud's choice of words and his direct style serve the purpose of making the reader apply psychoanalytic insights to himself." (6,7)

***In An Outline of Psychoanalysis, Freud wrote,*** "If anyone speaks of consciousness, we know immediately and from our most personal experience what is meant by it." He added the footnote, "One extreme line of thought, such as the doctrine of behaviorism which originated in America, believes it possible to construct a psychology which disregards this fundamental fact!"

***We may recall that the central question for many of the ancient Greek philosophers was, "What is the Good Life?"*** Summing up his own view of Freud's viewpoint and life work, which we will recall comes from a native German speaker who had far more intimate contact with Freud than any contemporary authority, Bettelheim held that Freud saw the good life as one that is filled with meaning by the enduring, mutually helpful relations that we have with the people we love, and through knowing that we are working in ways that help others live better lives. (Lieben und arbeiten) Life is inevitably filled with conflict and painful difficulties. Living a good life does not deny either of these, but we do not let our troubles drag us into despair, or give in to the dark impulses that sometimes surface is each of us. By recognizing the character of our unconscious and becoming aware of as much as possible of it ("Where it and over-I were, there will I be," we are less at the whim of its forces. By giving as much energy as we can to Eros, our impulse toward life and love, we can resist giving expression to our chaotic, aggressive, and destructive impulses. We can learn to live in a way that is both more rational and more feelingful."In the end," writes Bettelheim, "Thanatos wins, but as long as there is life in us we can keep Eros victorious over Thanatos. This we must o if we wish to live well."

***I have only scraped the surface of Bettelheim's thinking here.*** He won both the National Book Award and the National Book Critics Circle Award for *The Uses of Enchantment*, one of his many books. If you are interested in Freud, read Bettelheim's book. I think it is quite possible that he has come closer than anyone else I've read to grasping the essence of Freud's humanism.

### **III. THE UNCONSCIOUS, REPRESSION, AND DEFENSE MECHANISMS**

The area of Freud's work that appears to me fundamentally correct and of the greatest enduring value is his exploration of the processes of repression and other defense mechanisms, and to a considerable degree in his explication of the unconscious. There were numerous ideas regarding unconscious lying around in Europe of his day, but no one else truly drew them together. His daughter Anna Freud was a close collaborator in the identification and description of the defense mechanisms. (I am using here the conventional terms rather than Bettelheim's alternative translations of "repulsion" and "parrying.")

**1. The unconscious is whatever is latent for a time and not known to the conscious mind during that time.** Freud viewed the unconscious as composed most centrally of motives, with their associated ideational content. Woodworth writes, "Those memories which his first patients got back while under hypnosis were, to be sure, memories of persons and events, but they were shot through with strong but unfulfilled wishes." (262) Often, I would add these were painful unfulfilled wishes, as evidenced in Freud's comments below about avoiding "unpleasure."

**2. The "preconscious" is one step closer to consciousness. A thought in the preconscious is not totally repressed but has the potential to enter consciousness.**

**3. Repression plays a central role in keeping painful memories and experiences out of the conscious mind.** In Freud's day sexual and aggressive feelings were especially subject to repression, but it is highly individual. We each may repress personal experiences that we find embarrassing, traumatic, or otherwise painful when we recall them.

Freud wrote, "repression. . . cannot arise until a sharp cleavage has occurred between conscious and unconscious mental activity--that the essence of repression lies simply in turning something away, and keeping it at a distance, from the conscious." The motive of repression is "nothing else than the

avoidance of unpleasure."

**a. "Primal repression"** a first phase of repression, involves denying the psychical representation of the impulse to consciousness. (Here and where appropriate I use Bettelheim's terms. "Impulse" or "drive" is obviously more accurate than "instinct." This results in a **fixation**; the psychical (ideational) representation remains unchanged in the unconscious from then on and the impulse is attached to it.

**b. "Repression proper"** is the second stage of repression. It affects thoughts that are derived from the repressed material or trains of thought that have originated elsewhere and have "come into associative connection with it." They are kept out of consciousness just as what is primarily repressed. "It is a mistake," writes Freud, "to emphasize only the repulsion which operates from the direction of the conscious upon what is to be repressed; quite as important is the attraction exercised by what was primarily repressed upon everything with which it can establish a connection" Each derivative of the repressed may have its own special fate.

**c. It is possible for an original impulse to be "split in two**, one part undergoing repression, while the remainder undergoes idealization."

**d. Repression is very individual and distinct in its operation, and also highly "mobile."** It is not an event that takes place once, but rather it "demands a persistent expenditure of force. . . . We may suppose that the repressed exercises a continuous pressure in the direction of the conscious, so that this pressure must be balanced by an unceasing counter-pressure." As a result, it is quite tiring to maintain a repression. It represents a continuing energy drain on the personality. The removal of a repression, through therapy or fortunate life events "results in a saving from an economic point of view." In other words, the energy that went into maintaining the repression becomes available for other functions.

**e. Besides the idea, another element of the drive or impulse, an emotional or affective component, may undergo a fate quite different from that undergone by the idea.** The idea vanishes from the conscious or held back from consciousness. The associated affect has three possible fates:

(1) It may be suppressed so thoroughly that we see no trace of it; or

(2) It appears in disguised form, in essence masked by another emotion; or

(3) It is changed into anxiety.

What happens to the emotional component of the repressed material is much more important than the fate of the idea, since avoiding painful feelings is the very point of repression.

My own observation is that a variety of other defense mechanisms can serve the function of repression. Repression is the more general act of keeping out of consciousness, and a variety of more concrete, specifically defined ways of doing this were identified by Freud, Anna Freud, and others.

## **V. OTHER IMPORTANT CONCEPTS AND CONSTRUCTS IN FREUD'S SYSTEM**

Freud did not pretend to try to describe and account for every psychological phenomenon, but he described quite a lot, largely using his own unique vocabulary that evolved into the language of mainstream psychoanalysis.

**1. The "pleasure principle,"** IT ("id") based. Calls for immediate reduction of any tension that may arise, immediate satisfaction.

**2. The "reality principle."** I ("ego") based. Involves doing what you need to do in relation to the world in order to get what you want or need. "Secondary process" refers to this process of taking steps in reality to attain fulfillment.

**3. "Primary process"** thinking has the specific meaning of attempting to gain satisfaction by daydreaming and imagining concrete fulfillment where it does not truly occur. Formation of a mental image of some object known to satisfy a drive. (A person would die pretty quickly if they depended on primary process for survival.)

**4. "Occupying." ("Cathexis.")** A psychological attachment to someone or something. When we care for another person, it is a little like what happens to them is happening to ourselves. We are concerned with more than just our own lives, and are psychologically extended in those other people and things.

- Besides "occupying," the German word "besetzung" that was translated into English as cathexis also has the simple meaning of "sitting

somewhere," sitting on something. It has an empathic quality, and can be seen as implying that we are not sure exactly where our body ends and the chair begins. It means to have a lot involved or invested in someone.

- Besetz is also related to besitz, which means "possession." A possession is that which is in some way a part of us, or which has us in its grip.
- Yet another kind of sitting is very stubborn. An opposition to. Like a siege, waiting for the other to break down. (Thanks to Bernd Jager for these insights about "besetzung.")

**5. Fixation.** (There may have been a nice simple German term for this too, like "hanging on," but Bettelheim didn't mention it.) Our psychological energy, or in Freud's terms our psychosexual energy or "libido" gets stuck on someone or something to an unhealthy degree. As in the term, being "fixated at the oral stage" (like Fromm's "receptive orientation,") or the anal stage (like Fromm's "hoarding orientation." There is an obsessive kind of quality to a fixation.

**6. "Freudian slips"** ("faulty achievements," "bungling actions," ("parapraxis." Sounds like a brand of electric toothbrush, no?) You know what they are: when you do or say something you didn't intend to, that gives an indication of your true unconscious or conscious but concealed motives, thoughts, feelings, or intentions. A little of your secret is seen. It spoils what you wanted to be saying or doing. These slips can *lead to the discovery of the hidden complexes of the psychic life.* They are usually easy to interpret.

**7. Reporting ideas that spontaneously come to mind, or "free association."** The psychological technique in which a person uses a spontaneous, unconstrained association of ideas and feelings in order to elicit repressed thoughts and emotions. The "talking cure."

**8. Catharsis.** (From the Greek word for cleansing, "Katharsis,." According to Aristotle, the particular psychological effect that watching a tragedy has on people. People would watch a play and sigh and weep and free themselves of what was held in. A technique in which the person experiences release of tension and anxiety by bringing repressed or suppressed material to consciousness, this often involves an intense emotional release. Note that the unrestrained expression of tears or anger is not a catharsis if this is a customary and habitual mode of expression for the person.

**9. Transference.** The transfer of emotional reactions from someone in one's past onto someone in the present, as if they were that other person in the past. In the psychoanalytic context, it involves transferring feelings onto one's psychotherapist, and working them through there to the point of being able to experience the therapist as a real person in the present, after which one can presumably go out and do a better job of relating to other people as they are in the present too. Viewed as a crucial element in psychoanalytic therapy.

**10. Countertransference.** when the therapist transfers unresolved feelings onto the client.

### **11. Three kinds of anxiety**

- **Objective:** anxiety over real and immediate threats and danger in the world, such as war, crime, and accidents
- **Moral:** Anxiety produced by one's over-I. When the I or self-image is threatened by shame or guilt, anxiety is provoked.
- **Neurotic:** Anxiety that is developed by the It. Needs stabilizing from the I. If neurotic anxiety is explored, it could explode into serious emotional dysfunction. There are two kinds of neurotic anxiety. (a) **FREE-FLOATING:** A chronic sense of dread or hollowness (b). **FOCUSED:** Includes phobias.

### **12. Structure of the Personality**

- **IT:** Motives based on achieving pleasure or tension reduction immediately. Key motivator in survival behavior. Physiological drives are the province of the IT. Also important in wish fulfillment
- **I:** Based on the reality principle. Mediates between the IT and the OVER-I. Promotes rational interaction and confrontation with the outer world. Balances the rewards or punishments of any situation more or less rationally and decides how to benefit the self and preserve the individual.
- **OVER-I.** Includes the conscience and other internalized "shoulds" "oughts," and norms of society and admonitions from others about how we are supposed to act.

**13. Dreamwork.** Freud called dreams "the royal road to the unconscious." The

German word "traumdeutung" implies a much deeper process than the English term "interpretation." Like looking into tea leaves! It suggests connotations with ancient practices more than with modern scientific practices. Freud thought that nighttime dreams allow us to act out experiences, impulses, or traumas that we resist being aware of in daily life and the real world. Dreams can also be a way of working through unconscious turmoil and uncertainty. They also provide wish fulfillment. He recognized that in addition, dreams often contain a residue that is a reliving of parts of the preceding day's experiences that may or may not have any special meaning.

- **Manifest content of a dream:** What we remember of our dreams upon awakening. Our defensive I disguises our impulses into metaphorical and unconscious dream thoughts. May be a disguised fulfillment of repressed wishes.
- **Latent content of a dream:** The thoughts in the unconscious that contain a person's wishes, symptoms, and memories.
- Freud's approach to dreamwork has been widely criticized for relying far too much on the interpretations of the psychoanalyst and being too rigidly tied to a set of preconceptions about what given symbols mean. (snake=penis, for instance.) In fact, he was indeed considerably more tied to particular conceptions of meanings than the other great dream-masters Jung and Perls, but was not nearly so rigid about us as his harsher critics would have us believe.

**14. Psychic Determinism.** Freud believed strongly in determinism. He did not believe that any important act "just happened" or was "due to free will" In his view every act or thought or emotion has sufficient causes to determine it, though they may be complex and hard to disentangle.

**15. Neurosis.** Freud held that the neurotic wanted his neurosis or phobia or obsession, unconsciously if not consciously, that it has some meaning in terms of unconscious motives and satisfactions.

**16. Narcissism.** If a person meets rebuffs and frustrations in attempting to find satisfaction, libido is withdrawn from the original object, and if the person can find no suitable substitute for expressing it, it is withdrawn at least partly into the self. This is a form of regression to a condition existing during the early months of life, when the infant experiences the breast as in sense not separate. This is primary narcissism. Schizophrenia occurs when the person finds so little

satisfaction, or so much frustration, in life that he withdraws his libido completely from the world and invests it entirely in himself.

### **17. Stages of Development.** You probably already know this stuff.

1. **Oral:** Birth to one year old. Libido is concentrated on mouth and sucking reflexes. If stuck in this stage one is likely to be either (a) oral incorporative: doing things chronically to take in food/and or drink; either gullible or a hoarder; or (b) ORAL AGGRESSIVE: literally biting, and verbally abusive. Sarcastic and harsh in communicating.
2. **Anal.** 1 to 3 years old. Libido is in anus. Pleasure found in bowel movements, and usually proud of it. "Mama, look what I produced!" If stuck in this stage one is likely to be ANAL EXPULSIVE: Messy and gushing in expressing emotions; or ANAL RETENTIVE: Holding back, constipated. Cautious, stingy and precise. Often overcontrolled and perfectionistic.
3. **Phallic** (no sexism in this choice of a term, eh?) Three to five years old. Libido in genitals. Discovering that they bring pleasure. Some complexes at this state are the OEDIPUS COMPLEX: Boy wants to marry mother, longing sexually for her. Tends to have little interest in and even be jealous of father's role. There is widespread consensus that here Freud was making his own personal childhood psychodynamics into a general theory which does indeed explain some people, but is not nearly so widespread as he portrayed it. ELECTRA COMPLEX: Girl wants closeness with the father to the point of wanting the mother gone. Other dynamics include CASTRATION ANXIETY (oops--here comes mom or dad with the scissors. they're going to cut it off!) PENIS ENVY in girls, who feel inferior when they realize they have no penis. The presumed generality of such dynamics has been sharply critiqued by Karen Horney and others for his very substantial lack of understanding of women and the feminine psyche.
4. **Latency.** Age 5 to puberty. Libido diffused over the whole body. Discovery of the world is important and pleasurable. Most energy at his stage is focused on mastering the world around one.
5. **Genital:** Puberty to death. Libido is in the genitals. Pursues pleasure in the genital region and seeks out peers to satisfy sexual desires.

**18. Eros and Thanatos:** See chart on mistranslations above. Eros was a complex, multifaceted human being, not the cupid of Valentine cards. "Thanatos" came from an everyday Greek word for human beings, "thanatoi," or mortal ones. Eros includes the complexities of love and affirmation of life; thanatos is our destructive and aggressive impulses, the urge to injure or

conquer. When frustrated in external aggression it may turn back on the self as a suicidal tendency. Woodworth reflects, "Man's constructive activities are at the same time destructive. To build a house he chops down trees. . . . In his earlier thinking. . . Freud had emphasized the conflict between the sexual demands of the individual and the restrictions made necessary by social life. In his later works he laid at least equal emphasis on the natural hostility of man to man as the great obstacle to civilization. . . .Eros tends to bind men together in families, clans, and ever larger groups, always with love and justice within the group but with hostility and aggression for outsiders. Civilization develops through the conflict and fusion of these two major drives." (278) In contemporary science fiction there are the aliens . . . .Personally I think this may overstate the case for the "normal" being the "natural." Anthropologists have shown that the degree of hostility in a culture can vary radically according to the conditions of socialization.

**19. Repetition compulsion.** Although just one of numerous defense mechanisms, this one has a particular centrality in Freud's thinking. He observed repetition at all ages in many forms. We tell the same stories again and again; indeed habits in which we do the same things the same way are central to our functioning. But Freud noticed that his patients tended to repeat the same mistakes in their lives again and again, with failure after failure in one or another realm of life that showed the same pattern. Stopping these self-destructive patterns and substituting more flexible, more adaptive thoughts, feelings, or actions in their place was an essential goal of therapy.

**20. Training of Psychoanalysts.** As mentioned above, in Europe a degree in almost anything was an acceptable prelude to training in psychoanalysis if the person had the proper psychological aptitudes. There was never any attempt to make a part of medicine or the medical establishment. In later life Freud came to realize that often his medical training gave him no clue about what to do with a person, and found himself drawing more and more on his classical and literary background.

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