SIGMUND FREUD

Key Concepts

- psychoanalysis
- unconscious
- repression
- Oedipus Complex
- illusion

Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) was born to a Jewish family in Freiburg, Germany. The Freuds moved to Vienna when he was four. Throughout his school years, he was an outstanding student. He graduated with distinction from gymnasium in 1878 and took his medical degree at the University of Vienna in 1881. In 1885 he won a modest medical scholarship that allowed him to travel to Paris, where he worked under the great Jean-Martin Charcot (1825–1893) at the Salpêtrière hospital. Freud was fascinated with Charcot's work on hysteria, which he treated as a disease, and his use of hypnotism to reproduce symptoms of hysteria in his patients. In 1886 Freud began his practice as a physician in Vienna, where his focus was likewise on nervous disorders. Vienna remained his home until 1938, when he was forced to flee Austria for England following the Nazi *Anschluss*. He died in London.

Freud was the founder of **psychoanalysis**. In a 1922 essay for a general audience, Freud provided three interrelated definitions of psychoanalysis: (1) a discipline focused on investigating the unconscious, (2) a therapeutic method for treating nervous disorders, and (3) a growing body of research data (two encyclopedia articles). Together these three definitions provide a helpful introduction to Freud's work.

First, Freud defines psychoanalysis as an academic discipline whose aim is to investigate and analyze otherwise inaccessible mental processes, which Freud describes as the workings of the **unconscious**. The unconscious is, most simply put, the nonconscious part of the mind. As such, it affects conscious thought and behavior but is not directly accessible for interpretation. Freud's innovation

in psychology was not the discovery of the unconscious per se (others, including Nietzsche, had written about it), but rather the means to access and interpret it. He did so through analysis of slips of the tongue, jokes, and above all dreams, which he called the "royal road" to the unconscious. Dreams, Freud believed, represent fulfillments of unconscious wishes and desires that the conscious mind censors because they are socially taboo or a threat to the integrity of the self. For Freud, the content of the unconscious is essentially those drives that are inadmissible to the conscious self and are therefore forced out of consciousness through mechanisms of **repression**. These include drives and memories related to the "primal scene" (childhood recollection of seeing her/his parents having sex) as well as taboo desires related to the Oedipus Complex. Although repressed, they inevitably resurface in dreams, "Freudian slips," and other forms of expression.

The **Oedipus Complex** is particularly important to Freud's understanding of human consciousness and the origin of nervous disorders. The name comes from the Greek legend of Oedipus, who unwittingly kills his father, marries his mother, and then blinds himself when he realizes what he has done. For Freud, the Oedipus Complex concerns the young child's attraction to the parent of the opposite sex and jealousy of the parent of the same sex. Although girls and boys experience this attraction and negotiate this complex differently, in both cases the goal is to transition from jealousy of the same-sex parent to identification with her or him. Freud believes that the Oedipus Complex is a universal event, and the failure to negotiate it successfully is the primary cause of nervous disorders.

Freud's second definition of psychoanalysis is as a therapeutic method for treating nervous disorders. The method largely involves uncensored, free association by the patient (analysand), who lies on a couch while the analyst sits behind her or him and listens for subtle manifestations to the unconscious processes that are the source of the neurosis. The primary medium of psychoanalysis, then, is the spoken word. Indeed, one of Freud's early patients aptly characterized psychoanalysis as the "talking cure." It does not take words at face value, but it sifts through the language of the conscious mind for traces of the unconscious. The speaking human subject is approached as a divided subject, a site of conflict between conscious and unconscious drives that do not come together into a single, integrated, whole self. In this respect some have suggested that Freud's approach bears some influence from the Jewish rabbinic methods of interpretation, which approach the biblical text as an infinite wellspring of meaning, attending to the minutest details and subtlest lexical connections between texts.

Freud's third definition of psychoanalysis is as a growing body of active scientific research, including case studies, research data on the mind and brain, and interpretations of other aspects and works of culture. Indeed, Freud did

not restrict himself to analyzing individual human subjects, nor did he ignore other fields of academic research in the natural sciences and humanities. In fact, he was a prolific interpreter of culture, approaching it through scholarship in archeology, anthropology, linguistics, and literature.

Freud was particularly interested in religion. In addition to the many articles pertaining to the personal and social functions of religion, he wrote three major books on the subject. The first, *Totem and Taboo* (first published in German in 1913) develops a theory of religion based on a reconstruction of the psychological origins of primitive society. Following other religionists of his time, Freud notes two prohibitions, or taboos, common among most tribal cultures: incest and eating the tribe's totem animal. Unlike others, however, Freud insists that these actions would not have been prohibited unless there had also been the desire to do them. Freud sees both prohibitions as manifestations of the Oedipal Complex. Behind these prohibitions, he hypothesizes, was a tribal scene in which the sons collectively murdered their father, the chief, in order to have his wives/their mothers. Then, wracked with guilt, they identified that same father with a totem figure that became the sacred symbol of the tribe. In this way, the original patricide was symbolically prohibited. The two taboos, therefore, are prohibitions against an original Oedipal sin carried out by the tribal horde: incestuous desire for the mother and patricide.

Freud continued his speculations on religion in *The Future of an Illusion* (1927). Whereas *Totem and Taboo* explores the prehistoric past of human civilization, *The Future of an Illusion* focuses on present-day religion—more precisely, belief in God—and offers a projection concerning its future in modern society. If an **illusion** is something that one very much wishes to be true, then belief in God is, for Freud, an illusion. The reality of life in this world is brutal and final, and we humans seek something to help us cope with that reality. As children, we had parents to protect us from that reality and, above all, to help us believe that everything will be okay, that we are safe amid the storm. (Of course, the parent knows that such assurances are ultimately illusory.) As adults, we still need that kind of assurance in the illusion of safety and security, but we no longer have our parents to provide it. And that is the function of religion. It is a projection of what we want to be true, of a God who is the ultimate, ideal parent. Thus religion is an expression of wish fulfillment. The secret of the strength of religion, Freud contends, "lies in the strength of those wishes" (*The Future of an Illusion,* p.30). In this respect, Freud speculates, society's belief in God is something like a collective neurosis arising from the Oedipus Complex. As human society continues to evolve, to mature, thereby outgrowing childhood wishes and desires, Freud believes it will outgrow its need for such a father figure. Modern reason will replace illusion.

Freud's best known if also most imaginative work on religion is *Moses and Monotheism* (written between 1934 and 1938), in which he reconstructs the

origins of ancient Israelite religion through a reading of the exodus story in the Hebrew Bible. As one might expect, Freud does not take the biblical account of Moses and the exodus at face value, but rather attempts to discover within it traces of a nearly forgotten story of the true origins of Israelite religion. Moses, he argues, was not originally Hebrew. He was an Egyptian prince who followed the teaching of Pharaoh Akhenaton, a religious revolutionary who wanted to replace the polytheism of Egypt with devotion to one god, Aten, a god of love and moral goodness. Akhenaton died and his monotheism lost favor in Egypt. His disciple Moses adopted the Hebrew slaves as his people and fled to the wilderness. In time, however, the Hebrews became disillusioned with Moses and his monotheism. They killed him, took their former tribal war god Yahweh as their deity, and renamed the high priest of that god Moses. The complex law codes and rituals of sacrifice in the Torah, Freud argues, are the legal remnants of this period in Israel's religious history. Centuries later, prophets such as Amos and Isaiah arose, rejecting the bloody rituals of that priestly god and calling for a return to the one god of love and morality advocated by the original, the Egyptian Moses. Their reforms led to the emergence of the higher moral religions of Jewish and Christian monotheism.

Needless to say, few historians of ancient Israelite religion have found Freud's imaginative reconstruction of the origins of Jewish monotheism compelling. However, despite his conclusions, his interpretive approach to this literature does provide an interesting way of looking at the religions of Judaism and Christianity as represented in their canons of scriptures. By reading biblical literature as a manifestation of conflict over time between two very different forms of religious belief and practice, Freud draws attention to it as a site of conflict and ambivalence, which, like the dreams and verbal slips of his patients, reveals far more than it consciously intends.

Further Reading

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