



SIGMUND FREUD 1856 – 1939 CE

Today, it is a common part of our daily vocabulary to consider the psychology of the mind – investigating what drives man to act the way he does, and determining the origins of psychic disorders. In the Greek and Roman eras, insanity was seen as a punishment from the gods or a problem with the soul. In 400 BCE, Hippocrates theorized that emotional illness was an imbalance of bodily fluids. Early Christian beliefs held that mental instability resulted from sin or demonic possession; treatments included confession and blood-letting as cures. Not long ago, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, patients with apparent mental illnesses were observed and diagnosed for symptoms that suggested a physical or biological affliction of the brain and, as a consequence, asylums prospered and became institutional custodians where people with mental disorders were confined.

It was a medical doctor practicing in Vienna, Austria, named Sigmund Freud, who was responsible for a massive revolution in science that recognized and exposed the working of the modern mind. Through his pioneering research, Freud claimed that it was deeply rooted psychic thoughts that were ultimately responsible for influencing our emotions, and not a physical disability of the brain. The operative concept, unlocked for the first time by Freud's original wisdom, was that repressed memories, desires and fears were hidden in man's unconscious mind, and need to be uncovered for a person to fully enjoy a healthy life. Repressed sexual and erotic desires, repressed infantile desires, and repressed wishes were all suspected of contributing to mental neuroses. Freud firmly believed

that consciousness alone could not be the essence of mental life, but only part of a larger mental process that included our repressed, unconscious thoughts.

“I arrive finally at ideas which surprise me, which I have not known to be mine...admitting that these thoughts are actually part of my psychical life, possessing a certain psychical intensity and energy. However...the thoughts could not become conscious to me. I call this particular condition Repression” (Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Chapter 3).

We are all able to recall simple, stored facts from the inner depths of our minds, like the example of remembering the date of someone’s birthday. But Freud taught that there is also another part of our makeup as people, imbedded as deep-rooted thoughts in the unconscious self, which determines our behavior. The existence of these thoughts could be revealed in three ways: (1) through accidental mistakes that unearth hidden thoughts or motives and expose our true intentions, commonly known as “Freudian slips;” (2) through the interpretation of dreams, considered by Freud to almost always reveal the fulfillment of an unconscious, suppressed wish; and (3) through the identification of more obvious symptoms of irrational behavior.

Freud’s revolutionary, therapeutic mechanism for uncovering these ingrained mental emotions was to psychoanalyze a patient by inviting the free association of thoughts while the doctor listened. He encouraged patients to talk openly, in an unrestricted play of ideas about their unconscious fears and desires. This approach to therapy also included an analysis of dreams, which he treated as “sacred text” and the “royal road to knowledge of the unconscious...the securest

foundation of psychoanalysis” (Freud, *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*). For Freud, the multiple symbols in dreams possessed an important means of realizing the patient’s concealed memories, which were often reminiscences of early childhood or repressed sexual desires. As patients confronted their emotions in this process of self-examination and revelation, he theorized that behavioral changes and a cure could be found because there was no longer a need to hide truths from the unconscious mind – “as the psychoanalytic technique affords us excellent means for bringing to light this concealed material” (Freud, *Leonardo da Vinci*).

“The unconscious must be accepted as the general basis of the psychic life. The unconscious is the larger circle which includes within itself the smaller circle of the conscious; everything conscious has its preliminary step in the unconscious” (Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Chapter 9).

In Freud’s practice, he avoided the criticism of arbitrariness by applying careful clinical research to the thoughts and dreams shared by his patients during psychoanalytical sessions. In the course of treating thousands of people, he came to the conclusion that a person’s normal development process begins in infancy with an oral desire for bodily pleasure, demonstrated by sucking and nursing; then advances to a stage where pleasure is released through the anus by the elimination of excrement; and finally, develops into an interest in sexual organs and attraction to the parent of the opposite sex, while hating the other parent. This third and last stage of infantile development occurs before the age of five, and was referred to by Freud as the “Oedipus complex” (alluding to the ancient legend by Sophocles wherein King Oedipus murdered his father and became the husband of his mother).

Freud refined his theory of human nature by advancing the idea that the individual mind struggles between three different realms: the id, ego, and super-ego. The id (“das Es” in German) is the unconscious instinct ruled by desire for pleasure that does not follow any logical laws. This division of the mind is the source of primitive, carnal wishes. The ego (“das Ich”) uses reason and common sense while adapting to reality and the surrounding world. Freud presented a metaphor where the id is like a horse supplying energy and the ego is a rider who must control the horse and make rational decisions. Mental illness results when the ego can no longer accept the urgings of the id. Finally, the super-ego (“Uber-Ich”) safeguards and censors the mind by observing, judging, and restraining the behavior of the id – enforcing rules and apprising what is right from what is wrong.

This domain of the mind is established when early childhood creates a conscience in the individual. To illustrate Freud’s theory of human behavior, imagine the id as a baby crying for food. As the baby gets older, the ego governs emotions by decreeing that it is no longer socially acceptable to cry whenever it is hungry. The super-ego instills a conscience that further suppresses urges of the id, giving rise to guilt and remorse if rules are not obeyed. In fact, Freud stated that our sense of guilt is “the most important problem in the development of civilization” in that it contributes to a loss of happiness – the pursuit of which is man’s sole “purpose and intention” in life (Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*).

In treating psychological disorders today, most doctors consider genetic and biological influences, often resorting to oral medication in lieu of psychoanalysis, discrediting many of Freud’s theories. The American Psychiatric Association accepts that personality disturbances can be traced back to infancy as Freud suggested, but the A.P.A. considers it equally important to diagnose deviant behavior as it relates to the self, people, events, and reaction to emotional triggers

(A.P.A. *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*).

Although many of Freud's dictums concerning the causes of mental instability have been vigorously argued, his claim that a large portion of human actions are guided by the unconscious mind is widely accepted. By introducing the term "libido" as a "sexual impulse" that often guides man's behavior (Freud, *Three Contributions to the Theory of Sexuality*), Freud was also largely responsible for expanding our awareness and attitudes toward sexual mores. He was confident that this aspect of our being had an underlying effect on the unconscious self, despite restrictions of freedom through cultural taboos, religious intolerance, laws, and customs.

Freud's influence on how we understand human behavior has been immense, and the impact on his legion of disciples in the field of psychiatry is incalculable. As one of the greatest thinkers in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Freud changed an entire world's perspective on what triggers man's deepest inner thoughts in the repressed memories of his unconscious mind.

PRINCIPLE WORKS

The Interpretation of Dreams

Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality

Civilization and its Discontents

The Ego and the Id

New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis