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Driving Impulses

Freud is comparable only really to **Marx** among the thinkers discussed in this volume; his ideas have not only influenced those in his own discipline, he did in fact found a discipline, and he has influenced thinkers across all the social sciences and humanities, medicine and biology. More than this, however, he has changed our common-sense understanding of vital aspects of our lives; it is not just that his most crucial ideas are present in our everyday references to 'Freudian slips', but our views about sexuality, childhood, mental health and illness and psychological therapy have been permeated by his thought to the point where even those who regard themselves as critical of, or opponents of, psychoanalysis, do not realise how profoundly they have been influenced by his ideas. Like Marx he changed the world, and like Marx, a century after his ideas were formulated, he is subjected not only to intellectual criticism but also to personal vilification – he was a cocaine addict, dishonest, he was scared of making public what he knew about incest, he developed an essentially fraudulent treatment for which gullible people pay large sums of money. A good rule of thumb in intellectual life is that somebody who comes under such sustained personal attack for a century or so probably has something important to say.

Freud was born in Freiberg in Moravia in 1856, the son of a Jewish wool merchant, and the family moved to Vienna when Freud was four. Families are always complex networks and thanks to Freud we now know the emotional energy and intellectual creativity that we devote as children and as adults to making sense of our place in the family. In the late twentieth century it is divorce, step-parenting and single-parenting which add to the complexities of the fantasy we have of a 'normal' family; in the mid-nineteenth century, it was death and disease which created step-parenting and single-parenting. Freud's mother was his father's third wife, 20 years younger than his father and younger than Freud's oldest half-brother. He had his work cut out.

Growing up in what was then Austria, Freud was able to make use of some three to four decades of liberalism in which to develop his ideas, but anti-Semitism was always in the air and towards the end of the nineteenth century it grew ever stronger. To add to his confusion Freud's early years in his profoundly Jewish family were complicated by an influential Roman Catholic nursemaid. But his mother was all important: she adored Freud and thought he was destined for great things, as had apparently been predicted at

his birth. Freud adored his young and beautiful mother and perhaps thought he was a more suitable partner for her than was his ageing father.

It is not unusual for children adored in such a way to feel that they are special, and will achieve great fame. Given that he also had to sort out his place in a complicated family, and that his family, as did many middle-class Jewish families, encouraged disciplined study and that during his years of education it was still possible for middle-class Austrian Jews to build successful careers, it is not surprising that Freud was an immensely successful student. When he went to university to study medicine, it was not through any great desire to ease suffering but through what he described as a 'greed for knowledge'. There is still an ambivalence in psychoanalysis between a desire to know and a desire to help and although Freud made his living through practising as an analyst it was his search for knowledge which really drew his energy; he did not have a very high opinion of many of his patients.

In his medical studies Freud moved to neurology, and then through studying under Charcot, the renowned French psychologist in Paris, he became absorbed in psychology. It is difficult to pinpoint precise intellectual influences on Freud – he read widely and voraciously in philosophy and literature as well as medicine and the natural sciences and while one can see, for example, Marx emerging from the Hegelian tradition, Freud created his own tradition, becoming increasingly aware that he was opening up new fields of knowledge. He jealously organised his followers to protect it from early attacks. It developed outside of universities and even today in Europe (and especially in Britain) the major training organisations are private institutions, just beginning to form links with universities, and the institutions still carry the sectarian inheritance of Freud's fierce protective defences of his ideas. It is a pleasing paradox that, after a lifetime of splitting from close colleagues – most notably Jung – to protect his ideas, he escaped the Nazis by moving to England rather than America for the least sectarian of reasons: he disagreed profoundly with the American requirement that psychoanalysts should first undergo a medical training. He thought it vital that analysts should come from a wide range of disciplines. He spent his last few years practising in London, dying in 1939.

Rather than seeing Freud as emerging from an intellectual background, it might be more useful to see him as emerging from a particular social development: the development of the city and modern metropolitan life. From a more sociological point of view **Simmel** (1971) has talked about the way urban life bombards the individual with stimuli and involves each of us in short-term shallow relations – something which the development of late capitalism has accentuated. In such situations we build protective shells around ourselves. This is not quite what psychoanalysts call defence mechanisms but we can regard Freud as looking at what goes on under the defences, under the shell.

Key Issues

It is often thought that Freud's psychology is the opposite of sociology, that it is concerned with the individual rather than society. It should be clear that this is a profound mistake, but, more than this, even when he is most concerned with individual psychology Freud has an important message for sociology.

The Unconscious

His most important 'discovery' was the unconscious; I put 'discovery' in inverted commas because, as Freud pointed out, the existence of an unconscious dimension to the human psyche had been apparent to philosophers and artists for centuries. What distinguishes Freud is his attempt to give the unconscious a content, to bring it into the range of a scientific or rational understanding. The unconscious consists of wishes and desires, ideas which are too socially or personally dangerous to allow into consciousness – literally the 'unthinkable'. Freud thought these ideas were primarily sexual but later analysts have added destructive ideas, and our awareness of our vulnerability to the list.

The unconscious is, of course, not quite unconscious. At some level we know what is going on. One modern analyst refers to the 'unthought known', something we know but do not allow to enter our thoughts. Of course it pushes through into consciousness despite our attempts to push it down. Freud refers to the unconscious desire as an unwanted party guest: you turn her away from the door and then she goes around the house trying to attract attention by tapping on the windows; when you draw the blinds you hear her climbing up to the roof and trying to get down the chimney; if you light a fire, she starts tunnelling in the garden.

The unconscious desire sneaks through in unexpected ways, hence the famous Freudian slip. A real Freudian slip is acutely embarrassing, when you find you have said something revealing about yourself and that you know you mean but which you would never consciously have revealed. My favourite personal example happened a few years ago when I was seriously ill: a colleague with whom I had once had an argument sent me a postcard offering me sympathy on my demise; this person would, I am sure, have been quite mortified had he realised what he had written.

The unconscious also appears through dreams, but the meaning of dream symbols is less obvious than Freudian slips. Freud suggests that the unconscious has no history, that it does not change and that unconscious desires demand immediate satisfaction: there is a sense in which a part of each of us is a screaming baby demanding that those around us fulfil our needs. He also suggests that the unconscious does not follow the laws of logic: that we can demand contradictory things at the same time, love and hate the same person, accept and reject intimacy and so on. In dreaming we are closer to the unconscious than we are in waking life. But dream symbols still have to be decoded, we need to find the latent content underneath the manifest content that we remember when we wake up. Freud found that his patients regularly told him their dreams and if he asked them to 'free associate' – just say whatever came into their mind as they thought about the dream symbol – they would undo the coding which had resulted from the 'dream-work' which attempted to hide the meaning of the dream. The dream-work involves a process of:

(a) condensation – of bringing together different meanings in one symbol, so that, for example, if I dream of a policeman, it could stand for my father and my boss, and my psychoanalyst, not to mention my own super-ego (see below);
(b) displacement – the dream symbol is a displacement of the unconscious object which occurs through similarity or some contingent conjunction or some linguistic

connection. Similarity covers the case of the train going through a tunnel signifying sexual intercourse that seems to be so well known. Contingent conjunction covers my dreaming about the table rather than the very attractive woman I saw standing next to it; the linguistic dimension is illustrated by the recent dream of a colleague: that her work was being rubbished by a Dr Martin whom she knew. The connection here is to the Dr Marten who produces boots – the dream figure was 'putting the boot in';

(c) symbolization or turning an idea into pictures; here the example is of a colleague who dreamt he was laying a table with knives and forks which had no handles – carrying the idea that he could not handle a particular situation;

(d) secondary revision – the 'story' of the dream which Freud thought was constructed as we awake to hide the dream's meaning, although most contemporary analysts would see the story as important.

Thus the unconscious is not just a repository for unwanted guests. Seen in this context, dreaming is an act of our imagination, a creative act undertaken during sleep, motivated by our need to live with ourselves. It is also an aspect of our lives which also goes on, usually unbeknownst to ourselves, when we are awake, investing our relationships and our surrounding world with levels of meaning which stretch back into our past and our parents' past.

Psychic Structure

Returning to the idea of the unwanted guests, Freud suggested that we develop an internal psychic structure to deal with their presence. The crucial psychological problem for any individual to deal with is the demand for immediate satisfaction in an external world where immediate satisfaction is not possible. This involves us in a constant internal conflict and negotiation.

Freud suggests that there are three crucial internal psychic structures. In the first English translation of Freud these were given Latin names in an attempt to gain respectability with the medical profession, but Freud used everyday German words which convey the meaning more clearly.

The basis is the 'id' or the 'it', the source of our drives which demand satisfaction. It is important to understand that Freud is not talking about biological instincts but about biological energies which are attached to psychological symbols – the instinct is biological, the drive is psychological and already to some degree social since symbols have a social origin and are given individual meanings. The 'it', like the other structures, is partly conscious and partly unconscious – I know that I have a sexual drive but I do not know all its dimensions and complexities, particularly its less salubrious aspects. The 'it' is most closely connected with our bodies – it is the thing that we are despite ourselves and which sometimes seems to take control and push us forward into actions where we do not feel that we have any choice.

At the other end of the psyche, so to speak, there is the super-ego, the 'over-I', in part representative of external authority and external reality. Its function is to control our drives by suppression and repression.

In between there is the 'ego', the part of my psyche that I refer to when I use the word 'I', the part which tries to mediate between my internal drives and the requirements of the outside world. It is common these days to find the word 'psychodynamic' used to describe psychoanalytic theories and this word offers a grasp of the way our psyches are constantly in movement – the three structures behaving like three warring armies, forming and breaking alliances in our internal conflicts.

These three structures are only the basis of the internal dynamics of the psyche; Freud also talks about the 'objects' of our drives, by which he means the people towards whom our drives are directed. They are 'objects' because at the most basic level – as babies – we simply require them to satisfy our needs. As we grow we can perhaps begin to treat our objects as people, but there is always a dimension in any relationship in which we use the other person for our own satisfaction. However, the objects of our desires are also 'introjected'. This is a concept with a stronger sense than 'internalisation' which is usually used in sociological accounts of socialisation and usually refers to ideas. We introject people, primarily parents and siblings, through identifying with them and giving over part of our internal world to them, and in this way we carry our families and their loves and hates, alliances and fights around with us as part of ourselves for the rest of our lives and they become involved in the dynamics of id, ego and super-ego. Freud did not develop this object relations part of his work very far, but it was taken much further by Melanie Klein and by the main school of British psychoanalysts. Some people see it as an alternative to Freud's emphasis on drives but I do not think the two are incompatible, and together they comprise a complex depth model of the human psyche.

Freud and Society

There is enough here to be able to begin looking at Freud's conception of society and social life. This operates on two levels, one a **meta-theoretical**, almost metaphysical level and the other the micro-level of day-to-day relationships.

META-THEORETICAL

This refers to a conception arrived at by philosophical or abstract reflection. Both ontology (conceptions of the sorts of things there *are* in the world – known as the 'theory of being') and epistemology (conceptions of how we *know* that there are these sorts of things in the world – known as the 'theory of knowledge') are aspects of meta-theory.

Freud's notion of drives demanding immediate satisfaction and the necessity of their repression leads to the meta-theory. He suggests a process by means of which the unacceptable object – the idea to which it is attached (for example in some societies homosexuality) – of a drive is repressed and the energy (the biological component of the drive) is attached to something else (same sex friendships). This may take the form of a neurosis – if for example I deal with my desire for oral satisfaction by overeating – or it

may take the form of a socially useful activity (sublimation), for example I might become an opera singer. Some people manage both outcomes at the same time. It is interesting that the activities we regard as socially useful and those we regard as a sign of mental illness bear the same structure and there is a thin and movable line between the two. Some theorists have argued that society itself is a form of neurosis.

However I do not want to follow this line of argument here. The important point is the relationship between society, civilisation and misery. Perhaps Freud's most important insight is that in order to live together with each other we sacrifice something, we cannot get all that we want when we want it. The more complex the society, the more sophisticated the level of civilisation, the more satisfaction we have to give up and the more misery we have to bear. This eliminates the possibility of a perfect society. If we compare Freud and Marx, the latter suggested that the foundation of human society is co-operative labour and what distinguishes the human species is that we change our environment and then change ourselves to adjust to the new environment. Freud suggests that labour is not basic but an achievement: in order to spend our days working we have to give up other satisfactions we want more urgently. The Marxist philosopher Herbert Marcuse (1969) argued that different societies require different levels of repression, of misery and the development of capitalism requires a particularly high level of repression. The more developed capitalist system can relax the repression, and sexual urges in particular are channelled into consumption.

This type of analysis seems suggestive, although it is not very popular these days. There have been various radical attempts to equate sexual liberation with political liberation. In the 1920s and 1930s, for example, the German communist psychoanalyst Wilhelm Reich (1957) made a very direct connection between the two and saw sexual education and especially the teaching of an ability to reach a full orgasm as an important part of socialist education. Both Reich and Marcuse effectively lose the insight that civilisation and misery are closely linked and that, as Freud pointed out, a radical reorganisation of property rights and wealth might make life easier but would not change fundamentally the human destructive urge which is generated by the sacrifice of immediate satisfaction. At its best this destructiveness can be put to use in the battle against threats from nature and human enemies of one's own society. After the First World War Freud developed a theory of a 'death drive' to explain the fact that so many apparently rational people can engage in mass destruction without rebelling. Later in the century, Melanie Klein gave this a very precise clinical meaning with her concept of envy.

On a micro-level we get a rather different picture, based on the object-relations dimensions of Freud's work. Again he himself did not develop this very far and we can find most of what he has to say directly about the issue in his discussion of groups. Here he talks about the way in which a group member surrenders part of him or herself – the ego-ideal – to the group leader. We also find in his development of a therapeutic technique his identification of 'transference', where the patient comes to perceive the analyst as he or she once perceived a parent and tries to solve early problems by projecting certain qualities on to the analyst. The treatment involves working through these projections.

What this offers is an understanding of everyday interaction which can take us into the less rational aspects of our behaviour. Primarily sociological conceptions of action assume that we act out our social roles and that our actions can be understood as a result of our ideas about the world, and there is a more or less rational connection between our ideas and our actions. Sociology has a distinct cognitive bias in the way it understands people's actions, it focuses on knowledge, whereas psychoanalysis takes us into the depths of our emotional attachment to our world, the forces which can push or pull us into actions which might have little to do with what we consciously think about ourselves.

Sex and Gender

It is not possible to write about Freud without saying something about his conception of sexuality and his view of women. It is impossible to think about modern conceptions of sexuality without some reference to Freud. I hope I have already said enough to show that he is not some form of sexual determinist, that the important point is that our sexual drive is always attached to some idea, some symbolic object. In this we are unlike other animals. Human sexuality is always in the head as well as the body and can in principle be attached to any object – members of the same sex, members of the opposite sex, other animals, physical objects and so on. The human infant is at least bisexual, if not, in Freud's felicitous phrase, 'polymorphously perverse'. Part of each of us remains so throughout our lives, whether or not we are conscious of it, whether or not we act out the more peculiar forms of sexuality.

If a society is to survive, it must make sure that enough of its members are attracted to the opposite sex enough of the time to allow the society to reproduce itself. Freud's theory of sexual development is about how the baby, whose first love object is the mother whether we are talking about a boy or a girl, comes to move its desire towards a member of the opposite sex – a different member of the opposite sex in the case of a little boy. It is in describing this process that Freud sometimes writes as if women are less able than men simply because they do not possess a penis. Largely, however, modern feminists have gone beyond simply condemning him for these statements. In her classic text *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* (1975) Juliet Mitchell has argued that Freud can be seen as showing how patriarchy reproduces itself, whereas **Nancy Chodorow** has used more modern object relations theories to argue that women's oppression is rooted in the relational consequences of women being assigned a central role in child rearing.

Seeing Things Differently

I have deliberately presented a fairly open account of Freud's ideas because I think that the way in which his work has been developed by the best modern psychoanalysts emphasises the depth and complexity of our conception of what we are, and encourages an openness and tolerance which often seems to be becoming rarer as we move further into late modernity, or as I would prefer to call it, late capitalism. Freud himself changed

the way we think about sexuality, and this was recognised while he was still alive. More recently it has been argued that Freud can be put into a line of major figures who have 'decentred' our conception of humanity. First there was Galileo, who showed that the earth was not at the centre of the universe, but just one planet among others. Then much later Darwin showed that human beings were not the centre of God's creation, but rather a possibly random result of a long evolutionary process. Then Marx showed that human beings were not creators of society but its creatures, and finally Freud showed that even as individuals we are not unitary, centred beings but complex entities subjected to internal forces that we struggle to control.

One way of reading Freud in the contemporary world is that of **Foucault** who sees him as developing yet another technique of social control; there is a degree of truth in this and psychoanalysts who see themselves as experts aiming to cure people would certainly fall under such a description. But I also think that there is a more radical way of using Freudian ideas which enables us to change our conceptions of ourselves and our relationships and make the best use of our limited freedoms and abilities.

The complexity of the human psyche, its various structures, desires and internal objects is something that is common to us all; what varies, from society to society, from historical period to historical period and from individual to individual is our ability to tolerate that complexity and the rich content of being human. A good example of the effect of looking at the world in this way is the way in which it changes our understanding of contemporary arguments about crime and morality. On the one hand there is the 'moral' argument about individual responsibility, good and evil, the necessity for firm moral guidelines and clear social duties. Crime is a matter of evil, or badness, and should be punished. On the other hand there is what we might call the sociological argument (or at least the argument with which sociologists might be expected to sympathise) that modern societies are inevitably pluralist and that there can be no firm common morality, and we must see crime primarily as a product of poverty and unemployment. This argument tends to lead to a concern for reforming rather than punishing the criminal. There is in fact much evidence to support the sociological arguments, but many people, if not most, have a gut reaction in favour of the moralistic argument, especially when it comes to violent crime, and the brutal and senseless murders which gain so much publicity.

The Freudian ideas I have discussed here enable us to develop a critical approach to both sides in this argument. I will start with the moral arguments, and ask why they seem to draw on such energy in the individuals who hold them, often fuelling demands for corporal punishment, capital punishment and imprisonment involving punitive prison regimes. Now the Freudian argument suggests that no person is exclusively good or evil (just as no individual is solely heterosexual or homosexual), and that we all have capacities for good and evil actions. If we are disturbed by our capacity for evil then one way of dealing with it is by projecting it on to others and trying to deal with it there, by suppressing or punishing it. The same mechanisms underlie homophobia. The rage of the moralistic argument fulfils the function of dealing with our own 'evil' desires – in other words one of its prime functions is to make its supporters feel better. If we are

aware of this emotional force, and allow for it, we can create the space to see the force of some of the sociological counter-arguments – that modern societies are too complex and variegated to develop a unifying morality except at the most general and therefore most meaningless level, and there are clear connections between levels of poverty and levels of crime.

The same sort of argument can be made on the other side in that the sociological arguments should leave us the space to understand our own psychological reactions and processes. In a complex and often a contradictory world morality raises difficult problems that seem hard, often impossible to think through. The moral relativism and the easy determinism that sociology tends to foster ease the anxiety posed by such problems and ease the anxiety posed by our own internal reactions. If the moral relativism argument is right, we do not have to worry too much about guilt or moral constraints on our actions; and if the deterministic arguments are right, then we do not have to worry about moral ambiguities and judgments. In other words the sociological arguments make us feel better in a different way from the moralistic arguments but they still make us feel better. And again, if this can be realised, it is possible to recognise some of the force of the moral arguments, for example, that it is not possible to lead a coherent life without some form of morality which joins and subordinates the individual to the social community, and that not everyone who is poor or unemployed becomes a criminal.

Once we recognise the limitations of both arguments we can ask intelligent questions about the basis of moral communities in modern societies – are they geographically based, professionally based, class or gender based, and is there some overall or totalising way of looking at this problem which requires elaboration of a morality to which we argue that everybody should be subjected. It is here that **Habermas**'s (1984, 1987) 'procedural ethics' becomes important: what matters is not so much the content of our collective decisions about public life but the way in which these decisions are arrived at, whether the procedure involves the informed participation of all those who will be affected by the outcome. We can also ask questions about the psychological bases of individual morality and the social conditions which enable a moral sensibility to develop, and the social conditions which tend to blunt such a sensibility – which are perhaps similar to those conditions which are associated with increases in the crime rate.

Legacies and Unfinished Business

Perhaps much of the last section would not have been what the reader might have expected from his or her knowledge of Freud. The legacy of Freud has not always been as open as the ideas I have discussed here – all too often psychoanalysis has been dogmatic, exclusive and even bigoted (most notably in its attitudes to homosexuality which are only now changing). All too often it has adopted a conformist approach to existing social conditions and those in power. Both traditions, the radical and open and the closed and conservative, can be found in the history of sociology.

DEVELOPMENTAL PSYCHOLOGY

Simply that branch of psychological thought that is concerned with the development of the psychology of babies and children as they grow and mature.
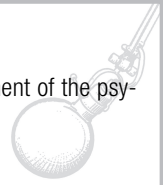
On the radical side there are first the thinkers I have already mentioned who have tried to equate sexual repression and social oppression, and second those who have employed Freud's **developmental psychology** to develop a critique of modern family structures and the way they are undermined by the development of the market and modern capitalism. Critical theory in the form of Adorno and other writers argued in the middle of this century that changes in social structure (the development of modern technology and large-scale bureaucratic organisations including the modern state) were undermining both the role of the father in the family and the effective working of the family itself as an agent of socialisation. The weakened family structure was producing the sort of personality that responds to authoritarian political leadership. More recently, in the same tradition, Christopher Lasch (1980) has argued that the continuation of these changes has tended to produce a typical narcissistic, dependent person unable to develop a moral, political or intellectual independence. Such personalities tend to close down their internal psychic space. I have suggested that the implications of Freud's arguments are that we have to open up our internal space and accept things about ourselves that we do not want to accept. In this sense Freud offers a standard, of intellectual and emotional openness, by which we make judgements about contemporary societies.

The conservative side of psychoanalysis has developed in sociology through its employment in theories of socialisation, most notably by **Talcott Parsons** (see for example Parsons 1973). In effect Parsons managed to change Freud's work on socialisation into something more closely approaching the ideas of G.H. Mead (Mead 1934). Socialisation must control biological drives and encourage their sublimation into socially useful activity and this achieves the integration of the individual into the social system. The result of this for Parsons seems to be the suppression of the conflict between individual desires and social constraints, and the suppression of internal conflict and complexity.

While it seems to me that the contributions of psychoanalysis to social theory as a whole are suggestive and interesting, its contributions to micro-social analysis and to the sociological understanding of the personality have yet to be realised. I suspect that one of the reasons for the failure to explore this area is life is much easier for the sociologist if he or she believes that people are not complex entities but creatures whose actions are based on knowledge and rationality; perhaps it is feared that if this were not the case, any sort of general sociological understanding on a structural or cultural level would be undermined. I do not believe that this is so. The more general levels of analysis tell us about the scenery within which we act, but the scenery tells us nothing of the depths of the ways that we relate to each other within its confines.

Further Reading

A fairly straightforward introduction to a psychoanalytic conception of the self can be found in **R. Stevens (ed.)** *Understanding the Self* **(London: Sage, 1996).** This book provides a useful comparison with other conceptions of the self.

Accessible discussions of Freud, psychoanalysis, society and sociology can be found in:

R. Bocock, *Freud and Modern Society* **(Walton-on-Thames, Surrey: Nelson, 1976).**
I. Craib, *Psychoanalysis and Social Theory* **(Brighton: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1989).**
I. Craib, *The Importance of Disappointment* **(London: Routledge, 1994).**

A stimulating and controversial use of psychoanalytic ideas to criticise modern societies can be found in:

C. Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism* **(London: Sphere Books, 1980).**