

# FREUD'S UNCONSCIOUS AND THE REDEFINITION OF THE SELF

ESSAY PREPARED BY JAMES LOW IN 1984-85 FOR THE SCHOOL  
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*By oneself the evil is done  
By oneself the evil is undone.  
No one can purify another.*

The Dhammapada

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## Introduction

The work of Sigmund Freud passed through many phases, in particular there was a change in focus from the unconscious to complexities of ego function after 1920 as marked by the publication of *'The Ego and the Id'* in 1923. I will look at material from both main periods to try to give a fair representation of the Freudian picture of the personality.

Freud was the pioneer of psychoanalysis. It is not the function of the pioneer to say the last word, but to say the first word. That is the most difficult step. All the pioneer has to begin with is a problem – which has always been there – but he becomes the first to look at the phenomenon in this particular way. The pioneer suddenly asks a new kind of question.

After training as a medical doctor, financial reasons caused Freud to abandon his laboratory work as a neurologist in favour of clinical work with living patients in the eighteen eighties. He cast aside the hypnosis techniques he had learned from Charcot in Paris and began to formulate the creative idea that the symptoms of neurosis had a meaning which could be explained in terms of the patient's life history. Hitherto medical symptoms had been simply cold physical facts, but Freud found that some were different. Some psychoneuroses involved physical symptoms that were connected more with the patient's personal relationships in the family than with bodily faults.

## WHAT OTHERS HAVE MADE OF FREUD

Unfortunately popular opinion regarding 'psychoanalysis' is generally based on his very early writings when Freud first became both famous, and infamous! In 1908 he wrote a paper *'Civilized Sexual Morality and Modern Nervousness'*. This presented in an uncompromising way the classic psychoanalytical 'instinct or impulse theory'; that all our troubles are due to the repression of impulses. Since sublimation – diverting instinctive energies to socially approved goals – is so difficult, most of us are doomed to be either neurotic or criminal, that is to say, anti-social. Unfortunately this gave rise to the misinterpretations of the cathartic movement which has grown through this century with the simplistic motto of 'no repression'; the indulging of every desire and the expression of whatever feelings are present.

The other tendency that arose in the English speaking world was to regard the whole psychoanalytic enterprise as something very technical and abstract, dealing with things that other people might unfortunately have, but never oneself — for who could feel anything warm, human or personal about such things as Ego, Super-Ego and Id?

In *'Freud and Man's Soul'*, Bruno Bettelheim presented a clear analysis of how Freud's essentially humanistic orientation had been disguised and distorted by the often wilful inadequacies of the translators into English. Reading the versions

available to us today we could never imagine that Freud's literary style was inspired by many German writers.

For example Thomas Mann said of one of Freud's books that "*in structure and form it is related to all great German essay writing, of which it is a masterpiece.*" Herman Hesse praised Freud because his work, "*convinces both through its very high human and very high literary qualities.*"

I think it is important to stress this point here so that we do not forget that Freud was a human being describing some of the possibilities of human existence in order to help people attain a more honest and vital way of being themselves.

For this reason I shall employ the translation of technical terms suggested by Bettelheim, while giving the more familiar but less accurate terms used in '*The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*' in brackets where necessary. These points will be elaborated later.

## **THEORETICAL APPROACH**

Freud was influenced by the 19th century idea of dynamics, an idea which influenced the whole treatment of psychology. This was particularly true in his early period when the scientific models he had employed in his former work as a research neurologist were still fresh in his mind, for example in his breakthrough study of dreaming.

In '*The Interpretation of Dreams*' published in 1900 he sought to find one single explanation which would show what dreaming is. He wanted to find the *essence* of dreaming. He would have rejected any suggestion that he might be partly right but not altogether so. If he was partly wrong, that would have meant that he was altogether wrong — that he had not really found the *essence* of dreaming. He was looking for a definite process with clear-cut laws.

Yet what he found was that it was only through introspection that he could really prove the 'truth' (or perhaps rather the 'value') of the interpretive theories he was developing on the basis of his clinical experiences in psychoanalysis.. He was thrown back continuously to the search for self-knowledge, to know himself, to be clear about his own processes so that he could develop an intuitive feel for what his clients were saying.

Wittgenstein said, "*Freud is constantly claiming to be scientific. But what he gives is speculation — something prior even to the formation of an hypothesis.*"

With a basic acceptance of the scientific view of determinism, he believed that all the infinite variety of human behaviour arose from causes which could be discovered. An explanation could be found for everything. All that was required was a rigorous enquiry which refused to accept things at face value.

What distinguishes this from scientific method 'proper' is the fact that it deals with unique events; each moment in each individual's life is something that can be found nowhere else and at no other time. And so the approved method of scientific proof –

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the description of the repeatable experiments that produce the concrete validation of a reliable result – is missing. Right from the beginning, the methodology of psychoanalysis demanded that the freedom from objectivity be dispensed with, and that all participants make a clear commitment to their shared humanity.

Freud however kept insisting that it *was* still a scientific endeavour, for he was using ‘science’ in the accepted German sense of the ‘humanistic sciences’, or ‘sciences of the spirit’ (Geisteswissenschaften) as opposed to the ‘natural sciences’.

The human sciences use abstract ideas to illuminate individual situations whereas the natural sciences use particulars to find abstract truths and universal laws. To rephrase what was said above, the natural sciences require verification through replication by experiment. Their findings ought to permit mathematical and statistical analyses and most importantly, ought to permit exact prediction. This is in contrast with the human sciences which deal with events that never recur in the same form, and which can neither be replicated nor predicted.

I have felt it important to stress this here so that when we come to consider the structure of personality in detail we will not lose sight of the dynamic, wondrous quality of the psychic events. They require a sensitivity, an aesthetic warmth and an openness before they will unfold their richness and their secrets.

But early on, in the 1920s, and against the express wishes of Freud himself, the American psychoanalysts insisted that their subject be considered a speciality of medicine. They forced the courts in New York to make judgement that it was an offence for non-medically qualified persons to practice psychoanalysis. It became a tool for ‘experts’ to use on others.

The particularity, the humanity, the creativity with which Freud had imbued psychoanalysis was lost in a search for marketable techniques of ‘adjustment’, of adjusting the individual to fit a conformist social existence, rather than for exploring the conflicts inherent in existence. This behaviourist trend in American psychoanalysis has flavoured its public image and the private practice in the non-European countries.

## **DEVELOPMENT OF PSYCHOANALYSIS**

Freud held that even activities which seem outside of human control, which seem to somehow just happen by themselves, such as dreaming, forgetting, artistic creativity, ambition etc., were the results of identifiable causes. The causes consisted of driving forces within the individual and of influencing experiences arising from interaction with others and the world. The techniques of psychoanalysis developed as he attempted to probe the mystery by seeking the sources of thoughts, feelings and actions in hidden drives and conflicts, and by investigating the ways in which the early experiences of a person interact with basic human nature to create the adult personality.

Much of Freud’s theory developed out of questions that arose in the treatment he was giving patients. The treatment in turn was modified as his theory progressed. Another major influence was his own self-analysis which he commenced in the late 1890’s,

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examining his thoughts and feelings, dreams, childhood experiences — that is to say how he appeared to himself. The start of psychoanalytical theory was Freud's feeling that unconscious sexual conflicts were at the root of psychological problems. He began to feel that the mind was much vaster than the conscious realm which we know directly.

Darwin's theory of evolution propounded barely half a century earlier had set man squarely in this world, a part and product of nature, at one with all the myriad forms of life around him. No longer was man a lost soul, a mere traveller in this world on his way home to God in the distant heavens above (or to eternal exile in torments far below). Stripped of this elusive, spiritual dimension, man in nature became the perfect target for the mechanical metaphors and concepts so beloved of the nineteenth century.

Freud too was imbued with this urge to know precisely how man 'worked'. Yet his discovery of the unconscious was to recover the divine space of God and locate it not without but within. Instead of having to appease an invisible and unpredictable God outside, man now became aware that within himself, or perhaps in contrast to 'himself' there were aspects of his being he had never even dreamt about (though of course he had!). Unpredictability returns!

Man is not a machine. The rational self is just the tip of the iceberg of being, a being that is disclosed not by logical thought but rather by its opposite, by dreams, slips of the tongue, psycho-somatic illnesses etc. The unconscious cannot be put under a microscope or isolated in a test-tube, or statistically analysed, yet its existence is 'proved' by its heuristic value for it is the only way of making sense of certain observable facts.

At this point it becomes important to draw a distinction between Freud's clinical experiences – the psychic phenomena with which he was confronted in his patients – and the theories he formulated to coordinate and, if possible, explain them. This distinction is not always easy to make, because psychic phenomena are not visible as tangible "things" obviously existing in relative isolation from other "things". They are subjective experiences, which different people verbalize in different ways. Nevertheless, the description of certain common experiences by people of extremely different types were found to have a cumulative consistency. The psychoanalyst, being himself human, can recognise the meaning of what they say by reference to his own experience. Moreover, what is in this sense clinically observable is found to imply the existence of other subjective experiences which have to be inferred to make sense of what is more directly known. Thus, the unconscious is both a clinical fact and an inference or hypothesis.

## **LEVELS OF THE MIND**

Freud's study of personality delineates three levels of consciousness. The unconscious consists of all aspects of our personalities of which we are unaware. Freud believed that the really important causative factors involved in human behaviour reside in this unknown yet major portion of the personality. The preconscious consists of that which is not immediately at the level of awareness but is fairly accessible, thus with some effort or concentration one can summon up thoughts and memories which are

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not at the conscious level. The conscious consists of that which is within our awareness. Actually, these three states of consciousness are not absolute categories but points of a continuum, varying from that which is clear and present to that about which we are completely unaware, hidden deep within the recesses of our personalities.

The unconscious was for Freud always one of the major pillars of psychoanalytic psychology. In everyone of his popular presentations of psychoanalysis, which were quite numerous, he devoted most space to a delineation of the unconscious. If he had to refer to psychoanalysis briefly, he would call it the psychology of the unconscious or the psychology of the depths. Much of the opposition to psychoanalysis he attributed to its discovery of the unconscious and the consequent blow to man's fond narcissistic belief that he is in complete control of himself. The unconscious is merely shorthand for 'unconscious mental processes'. It has no anatomical locale and it is not some entity with an independent existence. Freud was in no hurry to simplify his theory, for he saw the complications of it as a direct reflection of the observations made in clinical practice. Honesty rather than neatness was his aim.

The unconscious consists of a variety of wishes which press for discharge. These wishes originally stem from instinctual needs but may develop far beyond them. It is only when such wishes are discharged in one form or another, either in fantasies, in dreams, in neurotic symptoms or in overt active behaviour of one kind or another, that the unconscious becomes known. Otherwise it acts silently and completely beyond the awareness of the observer, a timeless zone where psychic reality replaces external reality.

The "primary process" is that which reigns in the unconscious and it is a type of mental functioning that is radically different from ordinary rational thinking. Its chief characteristic is striving for immediate discharge of the emotional energy that has been accumulated, and it pays little attention to the content and proper meaning of the psychical elements through which it manifests discharge. Its two main devices are condensation in which one idea comes to stand for a great many, much as symbols do in a work of art; and displacement where ideas or feelings are shifted to some entirely different area which may have no obvious intrinsic relation to them.

Contrasted to the primary process is the "secondary process" which is the ordinary rational thinking which attempts to handle the impulses that emanate from the primary process, inhibiting and transforming them into patterns that do not cause conflict. Thus it repulses (represses) material which would produce too much anxiety. Repulsing (repression) is a protective process that wards off unpleasant experiences for the individual. One of the earliest observations Freud made was that neurosis involves a defence against unbearable ideas, and for all people, repulsing maintains balance, letting them seek pleasure and avoid pain.

But where do these impulses come from? For, with its dependence on the theory of instinct, the subject of the contents of the unconscious remained for Freud the most uncertain part of his system. Freud made two important changes to his theories of these contents. In 1917 he proposed that besides feelings and ideas, the unconscious also contains the unconscious image of another person, essentially that of the mother

and father. Then in 1920 Freud revised his theory of the instincts of impulses and introduced the dual theory of the life wish and the death urge.

Because the pattern and the meaning of the unconscious- conscious interaction of each individual is unique, so it is a cardinal principle of Freud's doctrine that unconscious material can be understood only when the associations of the individual are known, whereby a chain is formed from the particular production to its unconscious origin. There are no standard programmes. The conscious self is not aware of all the motives that inspire its actions. Yet the unconscious cannot enter consciousness directly. Rather it establishes connection with ideas that already belong to the preconscious. In earliest childhood wishing, which is the function of the unconscious, ended in hallucinating the gratification. The thinking process which developed later was nothing but a substitute for the hallucinatory wish.

A dream is wish-fulfilment, since only a wish can impel the psychic apparatus to activity. Dreaming is thus a piece of mental life that has been superseded. No matter what wishes come up, one need feel no concern — it is only a dream, and therefore now harmless. If the wishes break through the censorship into waking life, what results is a psychosis. For the secondary process, man's rational self, seeks to inhibit rather than discharge.

There is a close connection between censorship and consciousness. The inhibiting function of the secondary process causes a build-up of wishes which cannot be manifested and this energy leads to the formation of thought processes which are a new kind of regulation of displeasure and which constitute the superiority of men over animals.

## THE TOTAL OF PERSONALITY

Around the time of the outbreak of World War I, Freud began to reformulate some of his basic ideas. Within the next twelve years he built up a much broader basis for psychoanalytic thought, now generally referred to as 'ego psychology', in contrast to the earlier 'id psychology'. Although ego and id have become the standard terms, Bettelheim points out that, "*In naming the two concepts Freud chose words which are among the first words used by every German child. To refer to the unknown, unconscious contents of the mind, he chose the personal pronoun 'it' (es) and used it as a noun (das Es). But the meaning of the term 'the it' gained its full impact only after Freud used it in conjunction with the pronoun 'I' (Ich), also used as a noun (das Ich)*". The Latin translations, 'ego' and 'id' used in the English translations are cold technical terms which arouse no personal associations, in contrast to the German pronouns which are "*invested with deep emotional significance, for the readers have used them all their lives.*" Reading or speaking about the 'I' forces one to look at oneself introspectively. By contrast, an 'ego' which uses clear-cut mechanisms, such as displacement and projection, to achieve its purpose in its struggle against the 'id' is something that can be studied from the outside, by observing others in the behaviourist manner.

The assertiveness we often feel when we say 'I' is an image of how the person's I tries to assert its will over the 'it' and super-I, and over the external world. In ordinary usage when I say 'I', I mean my entire self, my total personality. With reference to

Freud's three part structure of personality its use serves to reaffirm that the reasonable, conscious part of our mind is the part that we wish to clearly identify with (while still accepting the existence and power of the other aspects). The 'it' is that which 'I' am not, the irrational, childish, entirely selfish tendencies that as rational beings we wish to repulse, to keep out of our conscious life, to prevent from invading our activity, both outer and inner.

It seems important to pursue this theme of language values in view of the attack made by the present-day humanistic psychology movements on the rigidity and abstraction of classical Freudian psychoanalysis. And it is of course always salutary to remind ourselves that no word or system of language is ever value-free. We cannot have a clear world out there, for if we have it, know it, use it, it is ours, dappled with the tones and shadows of our own unique being.

Thus in German the word 'child' (das Kind) is of neuter gender. During their early years all Germans have the experience of being referred to by means of the neuter pronoun 'es' (Latin: 'id'). This, fact gives the phrase 'das Es' a special feeling, reminding the German reader that this is how he was referred to before he learned to repress many of his sexual, aggressive, and otherwise asocial impulses; before he felt guilty or ashamed because of them; before he felt an obligation to resolve contradictions and bring logical order into his thoughts. In short, it reminds him of a time when his entire existence was dominated by the 'it'. These memories, even when one is not conscious of them, permit a much more immediate empathy with what Freud meant when he used this term for the unconscious.

In Freud's system, the I, the it, and the above-I (super-ego) are but different aspects of our psyche, each of them inextricably and permanently related to one another; they cannot be separated from each other except in theory. Each of them, in its own way, exercises an important and different, though overlapping, function in the psyche. There are no reified entities to be discovered here. Freud's perspective is a psychodynamic one in which the flow of life is unceasing and to extrapolate is to destroy. The analysis must be made in situ with a clear acceptance of the untidiness of life itself. The above-I is created by the I as a result of its own experiences, desires, needs, and anxieties, as they have been interpreted by the I and this institution attained its role of power because the I, the conscious person, internalised in its contents the demands it made, and continues to make, on itself.

In *'The Question of Lay Analysis'* Freud said, "*We base ourselves on common knowledge and recognise in man an organisation of the soul which is interpolated between the stimulation of his senses and the perception of his bodily needs on the one hand, and his motor acts on the other, and which mediates between them for a particular purpose. We call this organisation his 'I'. Now there is nothing new in this; each of us makes this assumption without being a philosopher, and some although they are philosophers. But we don't believe that by recognising this part of the apparatus of the soul we have exhausted the description. Besides the I, we recognise also another region of the soul, more extensive, grander, and more obscure than the I, and this we call the it.*"

And as regards the purpose of psychoanalysis as theory and as therapy he stated, late in life, in his *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, "*Where it was, there*

*should become I.*” By this he did not mean that the I should eliminate the it or take over its place in our psyche, since according to his theoretical constructs the it is the source of our vital energy, without which life itself could not continue. Rather he was indicating that in some instances with respect to certain aspects of life which have previously been dominated entirely or largely by the it, the I ought to exercise its constructive influence and successfully control the undesirable outcroppings of the it. The task of psychoanalysis is thus to allow the I to make additional inroads into the vast realm of the it, and to help the I gain ascendancy particularly over those aspects of the it which can disturb the person’s well-being.

## Conclusion

The development of this later psychodynamic theory was a major breakthrough in Freud’s work and one that seems to have been taken for granted by the humanistic psychologists who have developed many of his profound insights. What Freud did was to show that there could be no dogmatic statement of correct or normal mental behaviour. Each person has to confront the uniqueness of their being, the on-going experience of the interplay of causes past and present. No two people are the same and to try fundamentally to adjust to the self-identity afforded by social roles and accepted behaviour patterns is to become alienated from the completeness of *experiencing* what one is. This is tremendously important. Yet if there is no means of directly relating to one’s inner being in a non-dogmatic way, it is all too easy to prop up self-image and self-confidence with adherence to socially acceptable role models regardless of whether they are personally pertinent or not.

Conceptual identities reinforced with emotional responses have been the hallmark of western culture; non-dogmatic introspection and meditation having never been widespread. So in a very real sense Freud was supplying the method by which this external, adaptive orientation could be bypassed, making possible the attainment of greater self-knowledge.

To accept the existence of one’s own unconscious is to feel the vastness of human existence, its lack of limits and its truly dynamic quality. The conscious mind is but the sunlight sparkling on the surface of dark waters; the naive confidence of reductionism, behaviourism and logical positivism is a mere skating on the thin ice of concept.

Inscribed above the doorway to the temple of Apollo at Delphi were the words: ‘*Know thyself*’. Sigmund Freud must be thanked for deeply enriching the Western understanding of what that self might be.

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