

Top 100 Thinkers of the Twentieth Century: Sigmund Freud

Psychoanalyst SIGMUND FREUD He opened a window on the unconscious--where, he said, lust, rage and repression battle for supremacy--and changed the way we view ourselves

By PETER GAY

There are no neutrals in the Freud wars. Admiration, even downright adulation, on one side; skepticism, even downright disdain, on the other. This is not hyperbole. A psychoanalyst who is currently trying to enshrine Freud in the pantheon of cultural heroes must contend with a relentless critic who devotes his days to exposing Freud as a charlatan. But on one thing the contending parties agree: for good or ill, Sigmund Freud, more than any other explorer of the psyche, has shaped the mind of the 20th century. The very fierceness and persistence of his detractors are a wry tribute to the staying power of Freud's ideas.

There is nothing new about such embittered confrontations; they have dogged Freud's footsteps since he developed the cluster of theories he would give the name of psychoanalysis. His fundamental idea--that all humans are endowed with an unconscious in which potent sexual and aggressive drives, and defenses against them, struggle for supremacy, as it were, behind a person's back--has struck many as a romantic, scientifically unprovable notion. His contention that the catalog of neurotic ailments to which humans are susceptible is nearly always the work of sexual maladjustments, and that erotic desire starts not in puberty but in infancy, seemed to the respectable nothing less than obscene. His dramatic evocation of a universal Oedipus complex, in which (to put a complicated issue too simply) the little boy loves his mother and hates his father, seems more like a literary conceit than a thesis worthy of a scientifically minded psychologist.

Freud first used the term psychoanalysis in 1896, when he was already 40. He had been driven by ambition from his earliest days and encouraged by his doting parents to think highly of himself. Born in 1856 to an impecunious Jewish family in the Moravian hamlet of Freiberg (now Pribor in the Czech Republic), he moved with the rest of a rapidly increasing brood to Vienna. He was his mother's firstborn, her "golden Siggie." In recognition of his brilliance, his parents privileged him over his siblings by giving him a room to himself, to study in peace. He did not disappoint them. After an impressive career in school, he matriculated in 1873 in the University of Vienna and drifted from one philosophical subject to another until he hit on medicine. His choice was less that of a dedicated healer than of an inquisitive explorer determined to solve some of nature's riddles.

As he pursued his medical researches, he came to the conclusion that the most intriguing mysteries lay concealed in the complex operations of the mind. By the early 1890s, he was specializing in "neurasthenics" (mainly severe hysterics); they taught him much, including the art of patient listening. At the same time he was beginning to write down his dreams, increasingly convinced that they might offer clues to the workings of the unconscious, a notion he borrowed from the Romantics. He saw himself as a scientist taking material both from his patients and from himself, through introspection. By the mid-1890s, he was launched on a full-blown self-analysis, an enterprise for which he had no guidelines and no predecessors.

The book that made his reputation in the profession--although it sold poorly--was *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900), an indefinable masterpiece--part dream analysis, part autobiography, part theory of the mind, part history of contemporary Vienna. The principle that underlay this work was that mental experiences and entities, like physical ones, are part of nature. This meant that Freud could admit no mere accidents in mental procedures. The most nonsensical notion, the most casual slip of the tongue, the most fantastic dream, must have a meaning and can be used to unriddle the often incomprehensible maneuvers we call thinking.

Although the second pillar of Freud's psychoanalytic structure, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905), further alienated him from the mainstream of contemporary psychiatry, he soon found loyal recruits. They met weekly to hash out interesting case histories, converting themselves into the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society in 1908. Working on the frontiers of mental science, these often eccentric pioneers had their quarrels. The two best known "defectors" were Alfred Adler and Carl Jung. Adler, a Viennese physician and socialist, developed his own psychology, which stressed the aggression with which those people lacking in some quality they desire--say, manliness--express their discontent by acting out. "Inferiority complex," a much abused term, is Adlerian. Freud did not regret losing Adler, but Jung was something else. Freud was aware that most of his acolytes were Jews, and he did not want to turn psychoanalysis into a "Jewish science." Jung, a Swiss from a pious Protestant background, struck Freud as his logical successor, his "crown prince." The two men were close for several years, but Jung's ambition, and his growing commitment to religion and mysticism--most unwelcome to Freud, an aggressive atheist--finally drove them apart.

Freud was intent not merely on originating a sweeping theory of mental functioning and malfunctioning. He also wanted to develop the rules of psychoanalytic therapy and expand his picture of human nature to encompass not just the couch but the whole culture. As to the first, he created the largely silent listener who encourages the analysand to say whatever comes to mind, no matter how foolish, repetitive or outrageous, and who intervenes occasionally to interpret what the patient on the couch is struggling to say. While some adventurous early psychoanalysts thought they could quantify just what proportion of their analysands went away cured, improved or untouched by analytic therapy, such confident enumerations have more recently shown themselves untenable. The efficacy of analysis remains a matter of controversy, though the possibility of mixing psychoanalysis and drug therapy is gaining support.

Freud's ventures into culture--history, anthropology, literature, art, sociology, the study of religion--have proved little less controversial, though they retain their fascination and plausibility and continue to enjoy a widespread reputation. As a loyal follower of 19th century positivists, Freud drew a sharp distinction between religious faith (which is not checkable or correctable) and scientific inquiry (which is both). For himself, this meant the denial of truth-value to any religion whatever, including Judaism. As for politics, he left little doubt and said so plainly in his late--and still best known--essay, *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930), noting that the human animal, with its insatiable needs, must always remain an enemy to organized society, which exists largely to tamp down sexual and aggressive desires. At best, civilized living is a compromise between wishes and repression--not a comfortable doctrine. It ensures that Freud, taken straight, will never become truly popular, even if today we all speak Freud.

In mid-March 1938, when Freud was 81, the Nazis took over Austria, and after some reluctance, he immigrated to England with his wife and his favorite daughter and colleague Anna "to die in freedom." He got his wish, dying not long after the Nazis unleashed World War II by invading Poland. Listening to an idealistic broadcaster proclaiming this to be the last war, Freud, his stoical humor intact, commented wryly, "My last war."

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