

Psychoanalysis

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by Colin Wright

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Preface

Despite continuing reports to the contrary, psychoanalysis is not dead. It persists today, over a hundred years since its putative birth, though largely in a form with which its originator would not have been best pleased. In the Anglophone world at least, it exists primarily as a generalised cultural inheritance, and as a body of conceptual tools that theorists of all sorts have found it useful to pick up and use from time to time. Freud's dream of psychoanalysis as a widely accepted scientific and therapeutic practice may not have been realised, but his ideas continue to play a central role in both popular culture and critical intellectual activity.

This book focuses on psychoanalytic *theory*, rather than on clinical practice. The omission of any sustained engagement with therapeutic technique, analytical training, or indeed specific clinical case-studies, is regrettable for several reasons. Firstly, because Freud always arrived at his theoretical speculations via therapeutic interventions; secondly, because psychoanalysis has done so much to problematise the very distinction between theory and practice; and thirdly, because it reflects the comparative shunning of clinical psychoanalysis from within mainstream psychology. Nonetheless, this omission was necessary in order to maintain the brevity that a reader completely new to psychoanalysis would surely appreciate. Moreover, I would suggest that the decline in the popularity of *clinical* psychoanalysis is substantially off-set by the enthusiastic recent uptake of psychoanalytic *theory* in disciplines like continental philosophy, cultural studies, and political theory.¹

My simple hope is that readers will come away from this book with both a sense of the rich breadth of the psychoanalytic movement as whole, and a firm grasp of several key concepts used in today's theoretical discourses in the humanities and beyond. Yet, their appetite whetted, I hope readers will also go on to consider the therapeutic aspect of psychoanalysis explored in more comprehensive works than this, for without an understanding of the clinical process, the theory arguably remains *only* academic. One of the primary claims of psychoanalysis is that it *does* something, that it actively intervenes, and is therefore far from being a static 'knowledge'.

The book is structured in two halves. The first deals with Freud's seminal ideas on the unconscious, repression, sexuality and culture, and therefore introduces the foundations of a Freudian 'orthodoxy'. The second effectively has two sections, with chapters 6, 7 and 8 introducing the key post-Freudian thinkers Carl Jung, Melanie Klein and Jacques Lacan.

¹ The name of Slavoj Žižek increasingly evokes this enthusiasm. He is a Professor of Sociology at Lubjiana University in Slovenia whose prodigious output since the late 1980s has pioneered a Lacanian approach to popular culture which has been very influential on film theory.

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Chapters 9 and 10 address some of the important critiques of psychoanalysis coming from feminists, neuroscientists and philosophers. The second half therefore challenges the orthodoxy set up in the first. While many other post-Freudians could have been chosen for chapters 6, 7 and 8, it was felt that the very diversity of the theoretical systems of Jung, Klein and Lacan simultaneously indicated the eclecticism within the psychoanalytic movement as a whole. Crucially, the distance between Jungian ‘archetypes’, Kleinian ‘positions’, and the Lacanian ‘signifier’ militate against that monolithic version of psychoanalysis still occasionally built specifically for the purpose of being knocked down again. The last two chapters are intended to testify to the controversy which psychoanalysis has always inspired, and to ensure that the overall account given is balanced – even if my general aim is to advocate the relevance of psychoanalytic theory for numerous contemporary social, cultural, political and aesthetic phenomena. At the very end of the book, I have included a short supplementary bibliography designed to guide further reading.

1 What is Psychoanalysis?

The word ‘psychoanalysis’ conjures up various associations: the name ‘Sigmund Freud’; dreams and neuroses; lying on a couch and discussing your relationship to your mother; and the idea that, when you really analyse human behaviour, it all somehow boils down to sex! However, such banal associations hardly amount to a *definition* of psychoanalysis. To give that, something much more rigorous is required. In the particular case of psychoanalysis, however, this is a very difficult task.

We can account for this difficulty in various ways. Firstly, psychoanalysis is now well over one hundred years old (there is some disagreement, but the year 1895 is generally accepted as an agreed birth-date). As a body of thought, it has developed in multiple and perhaps contradictory directions since its founding statements in the late nineteenth century. When we use the word ‘psychoanalysis’ then, we can be talking about any part of this complex history. Secondly, from the very beginning, psychoanalysis has been internally contested. Even Freud’s own theory, while remarkably consistent in its central concerns, nonetheless shifts its paradigms and terminology many times: the early Freud is not the same as the middle or late Freud. Moreover, during Freud’s own lifetime, there were numerous psychoanalysts, such as Carl Jung and Alfred Adler, who came to disagree with certain crucial tenets of ‘Freudianism’. These apostates went on to formulate their own theories, so that very different interpretations of psychoanalysis were already proliferating well before Freud’s death in 1939. Thirdly, this fragmentation was compounded by the various national and international associations and societies of psychoanalysis which tended to present their specific interpretations as the ‘true’ psychoanalysis. Because of this institutionalisation of competing orthodoxies, trying to define what psychoanalysis is has become something of a political minefield. Fourthly, in its wide-ranging travels, psychoanalysis has been taken on in different ways by different national cultures: the kind of psychoanalysis predominant in France is very different from that which exists in Britain, which is different again from the American model, and so on around the globe.

However, it is important to emphasise a fifth point that side-steps the problem of the various filters through which any definition of psychoanalysis must pass, by stressing not what psychoanalysis is, but the uses to which it has been put. We can explore four such uses.

1. As a therapy
2. As an attempted science of the mind
3. As a social theory
4. As a way of reading

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Psychoanalysis as a Therapy

Freud was a doctor, and his primary hope for psychoanalysis was always that it would constitute a form of therapy. As a therapy, psychoanalysis postulates an unconscious realm of the psyche that has a profound bearing on an individual's emotional life and everyday behaviour, despite remaining outside their awareness. Such unconscious forces can create symptoms of depression, anxiety, and odd behaviour such as obsessive compulsive rituals, hysterical outbursts, or repeated negative patterns in personal relationships. Because the cause of these symptoms is unconscious, the individuals themselves cannot explain them. The role of the psychoanalyst, then, is to help the patient to bring these unconscious thoughts into consciousness, in order to understand what is causing them to feel and act in such strange ways.

In its therapeutic role, psychoanalysis is often referred to as the 'talking cure' because this process of making unconscious forces conscious is traditionally done via 'free association'. Free association simply involves the patient giving unrestrained expression to any words, thoughts, or images which leap to mind whilst on the therapist's couch. Gradually, these spontaneous associations reveal connections or complexes that can give the analyst clues as to what might be going on in the patient's unconscious. However, the most important (and difficult) moment in therapy occurs when the patient encounters a block in their ability to proceed with these free associations. This moment of 'resistance' is when the analysis has come upon the hard kernel of the unconscious forces affecting the patient's wellbeing. The analyst then pursues the *origins* of these unconscious forces into the patient's personal life history, where there is usually some traumatic childhood experience that has been repressed and thereby excluded from conscious recollection. The patient's resistance to analysis is born of their reluctance to face and re-experience this repressed memory, which is nonetheless struggling for some kind of expression (and finding it, in a distorted form, in their neurotic symptoms). Yet by bringing these deeply submerged experiences to intellectual and emotional awareness, it is claimed that psychoanalytic therapy can enable patients to understand the unconscious motivations behind their behaviour, and therefore to find ways of adapting that behaviour.

Although convinced of its specific value, Freud did not make any exorbitant claims for psychoanalysis as a form of therapy. For example, he remained adamant throughout his career that schizophrenia – what he called 'dementia praecox' – was not suitable for psychoanalytic forms of treatment, since sufferers were incapable of 'transference'. Transference is the process whereby a patient projects feelings associated with important figures from their previous life history, such as parents or siblings, onto the

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analyst. At the beginning of his own psychiatric practice, Freud viewed transference as a problem, since patients would often become aggressive towards him and withdraw from the analysis altogether. Later, he understood that this was an essential part of 'working through' their unconscious problems and the only way of breaking down their resistances. However, individuals with what he called 'narcissistic neuroses', which is to say those who were incapable of identifying with other people, were beyond the reach of psychoanalytic treatment. Freudian *therapy* therefore made few in-roads into what we might now refer to as full-blown 'mental illness' (although psychoanalytic *theory* has certainly been an important tool in describing the mechanisms of mental illness). Instead, it generally restricted itself to non-psychotic psychiatric complaints whose symptoms we are still familiar with today, such as compulsive self-harm, obsessive cleanliness, agoraphobia, melancholia and depression.

If Freud did not present psychoanalytic therapy as a panacea for all mental suffering, this is perhaps because its aim is actually comparatively modest. Psychoanalysis does not promise cure in any final sense, but aspires instead to the attainment of a level of normality and integration acceptable to the culture and society in which the patient lives. After all, a traumatic event in someone's past does not cease to exert its effects just because it has been recalled and faced. Nonetheless, psychoanalytic therapy does claim to be able to resolve the psychological problems caused by the repression of this experience or feeling, which were in turn preventing that individual from enjoying a full and normal social life. In this sense, psychoanalysis deals with constructions of social norms, and the emotional price which is paid for deviance from those norms: its therapeutic goal is therefore to rectify stalled or defective processes of socialisation. This can be seen as a conservative side of psychoanalysis, in that it reinforces the status quo. On the other hand, however, there is a much more critical aspect implicit in psychoanalytic therapy which emphasises the repressive nature of these social norms themselves. Such a view opens up the possibility of blaming society for the neuroses it creates, rather than individuals for suffering from them, and this can be seen as the radical or critical side of psychoanalysis.

In general then, the twentieth century, with its rampant modernity, traumatic world wars, ethnic cleansing, and threat of nuclear annihilation, proved fertile ground for psychoanalysis as a therapy. After World War II, psychoanalysis was the dominant force in psychology, and remains the foundation of all dynamic approaches to psychotherapy today, particularly in cognitive psychology and attachment theory, as well as family and group therapies.

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Psychoanalysis as an Attempted Science

Throughout his writings, Freud is concerned with the scientific status of psychoanalysis. In this, he is very much a product of his time. The nineteenth century – which witnessed, in the industrial revolution, the unleashing of technological modernity, and, in Darwinism, the apparent victory of rational observation over theological doctrine – was a century obsessed with science. This was particularly true of Vienna, Freud's home town in Austria, and one of the most culturally and intellectually vibrant cities in Europe. Freud's general intellectual milieu, then, as well as the radical nature of what he was proposing, demanded that a claim to scientific status be made on behalf of psychoanalysis. But Freud's professional training too, as a medical doctor with a particular interest in physiology (his first piece of research was into the anatomy of the eel!), also led him to present psychoanalysis as, at least potentially, a scientific form of knowledge. Thus, in describing the structures and tendencies within the human psyche, he repeatedly makes references to biological and even chemical processes. He also generally tries to ground his theoretical speculations in the observation of neurotic patients, treating the psychoanalyst's office rather like a laboratory. Although psychoanalysis has certainly taken on a theoretical life of its own since Freud, it still retains roots in clinical practice and therefore in lived experience. Just as Darwin based his theory of natural selection on observations of the natural world, so psychoanalysis bases its theory of the unconscious on observations of the psychic world of human beings.

However, whether psychoanalysis can in fact be described as a science is still very much open to debate. There have been out-and-out critics, like Hans Eysenck,¹ who dismisses psychoanalysis precisely because it is not scientific enough. There have even been psychoanalysts, like H. J. Home,² who themselves deny that psychoanalysis is, or should try to be, a science. There have also been hybrid arguments, like that of Charles Rycroft,³ who claims that psychoanalysis creates a bridge between the biological sciences and the humanities. But in the 1950s, fully halfway into the life of the discipline, Jacques Lacan was still admitting that psychoanalysis was not yet a science.⁴ All of these arguments, of course, depend on what notion of science is being assumed. If science is understood along classical Newtonian lines, as a practice that must be measurable, conducted in controlled conditions, and capable of verification by repetition, then

¹ Eysenck, H. J. *Fact and Fiction in Psychology* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965).

² Home, H. J. 'The Concept of the Mind', *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis* 47 (1966), pp. 43-9.

³ Rycroft, Charles. *Psychoanalysis and Beyond* (London: Hogarth Press, 1991).

⁴ Lacan, Jacques. *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Routledge, 1997).

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psychoanalysis obviously falls very far short of being scientific. Human emotions are not conducive to quantitative analysis. Human beings generally live very complex lives, so that isolating variables is almost impossible. And finally, because psychoanalytic therapy constitutes a dynamic intervention into the object of its own study, it follows that, far from verifying psychoanalytic hypotheses, simple repetition might be said to contradict those hypotheses.

And yet, a more generous understanding of science, as simply the accumulation of systematic knowledge based on empirical observation, allows psychoanalysis to make a much more plausible claim to scientific status. After all, Freud and his successors have undoubtedly created a systematic and yet flexible vocabulary for describing observable tendencies in human behaviour. They have also constructed explanatory models that seem to have genuine descriptive, even predictive, power when applied to actual living people. That is, psychoanalysis continues to be practised because it seems to continue to describe the way people behave and feel. Moreover, because of its therapeutic dimension, psychoanalysis is arguably more concerned with tangible results than with absolute logical coherence. Indeed, one could argue that the attempt to prove the scientific worth of psychoanalysis may have been a response to nineteenth century rationalism, and, moreover, that this should be seen in the context of the torrid objections to which psychoanalysis was initially subjected.

In fact, this debate can be subsumed under the broader debate about the scientific status of psychology generally, as an attempted science of the mind, as psychoanalysis can be seen as that branch of psychology which advocates the existence of an unconscious.

Psychoanalysis as a Social Theory

As already stated, psychoanalysis deals with what is considered normal and abnormal, so that it also deals with society at large, as the place where these values are constructed and circulated. It is society – through individuals like policeman and judges, and institutions like schools and workplaces – that determines what counts as normal, as well as what disciplinary measures result from flouting that ‘normality’. Neurotics usually seek psychoanalytic therapy because they are only too aware that their behaviour is seen by the wider world as weird, irrational, embarrassing, or even crazy. However, what is judged weird, irrational, embarrassing, and even crazy is partially dependent upon the society in which the individuals live, as well as their place within it. One way to think of this is in terms of cultural differences around displays of grief: while tremendous wailing and gesticulating and even writhing around on the floor might appear excessive

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to a restrained British person, to a resident of a Middle Eastern country, it might register as quite normal. Conversely, grim, tight-lipped stoicism in the wake of the loss of a loved one might appear totally pathological to a Middle Eastern person. Clearly, in such different social and cultural contexts, neurotic symptoms will arise in different ways and for different reasons. One should probably add to these influential differences the factors of race, class and gender (particularly because classical psychoanalysis seems largely blind to its own roots in the social and cultural norms of the European male bourgeoisie).

Nonetheless, in so far as psychoanalysis describes the formation of subjectivity from infancy, through adolescence, and on into adulthood, it also describes the individual's progressive encounters with various agents of these societal norms. This process obviously starts with parents (especially the father), but soon moves on to teachers and school peers, bosses at work, even traffic wardens, tax collectors, and perhaps university lecturers. These figures have in common a certain insistence on rules and regulations and 'good' behaviour, as well as, usually, the capacity to exert institutionally recognised punishments for 'bad' behaviour. Part of 'growing up' then, is submission to wider social norms and acknowledgment of the violence with which those norms are backed up. The primary insight of psychoanalysis as a social theory is therefore that society is fundamentally based on the repression of instinctual drives, and that this repression is reinforced by law, broadly conceived.

According to this view, society, as an ordered, usually hierarchical and rational place, begins with the renunciation of total freedom. We cannot just go around doing whatever we want whenever we feel like it, as that would result in utter chaos. Rather, we must defer our immediate desires in the interests of a wider collective goal. Think of animals that hunt in packs as a very basic social unit. The assignment of roles in such a pack – shepherding prey into a collectively organised trap, as opposed to directly catching and killing that prey – demands the renunciation of immediate gratification, on the understanding that some form of gratification will be met with later on. Hunting in packs is predicated upon the deferment of pleasure. In an intuitive sense then, co-operation involves giving up total selfishness. In fact, this was the theory of the seminal political philosopher, Thomas Hobbes. In his book *Leviathan* (1651), Hobbes claimed that, left to their own devices, people live in a cruel state of nature in which everybody is relentlessly selfish and life is 'solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short'. The only way out of this state is to submit to a single, all-powerful sovereign who can enforce law and order. For Hobbes, who was writing just after the tumult of the English Civil War, this was an eloquent argument for a society based on centralised, even personalised, power, and the renunciation of certain freedoms in the interests of social stability.

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Freud would agree with Hobbes that society involves controlling our primordial instincts. However, according to psychoanalysis, even in a society governed by an all-powerful sovereign, the aggressive and destructive instincts that characterise the state of nature do not simply evaporate after the imagined signing of this social contract. On the contrary, they remain and have to be actively repressed, which is to say, socialised. For full socialisation to take place (although it is an on-going process, rather than a single event), the psychoanalytic social theorist would argue that there needs to be a combination of three key components. Firstly, a prohibitive law; secondly, an identification with the agent of that law; and thirdly, an internalisation of that agent, so that the individual becomes self-policing. Clearly, society would be impossible to regulate if people were only law-abiding when they happened to be within the eye-line of a policeman! Much more efficient is the setting up of an *internal* policeman, which Freud, in his later career, was to refer to as the ‘super-ego’.

It should be obvious that all of this is more complicated than simply saying that as people get older they encounter various external forces which domesticate them into being good citizens, rather as toddlers get potty-trained. For according to psychoanalysis, subjectivity itself emerges from such encounters and cannot be separated from them. In a very subtle way – and this is what has been so problematic for attempts to reconcile Freud with emancipatory politics – the subject that is formed by these encounters ends up investing in, and identifying with, the very social forces which repress it. On this view, the relationship between the dominators and the dominated becomes analogous to the complicity between sadists (people who get pleasure from other people’s pain) and masochists (people who get pleasure from having pain inflicted on them). Just as masochists willingly expose themselves to sadistic treatment, so social subjects are magnetically attracted to the forces that socialise them. For some radical social theorists influenced by psychoanalysis who were writing just after World War II, this complicity between subjection and subjectivity was the only way to understand the participation of the German people in Hitler’s Final Solution. By the time of the sexual revolution of the 1960s, many of these same theorists were arguing that the solution to this sado-masochistic structure of power lay in overthrowing the social order that demanded such severe repression in the first place. On this point, Freud was perhaps more ambivalent, arguing that civilization is composed of an unceasing play between destructive *and* affirmative forces. Nonetheless, he was certainly critical of the hypocrisy of the prim Victorian moral order that surrounded him – even though it was that order which provided him with so many neurotics to treat and study!

Psychoanalysis as a Way of Reading

Perhaps the most unexpected way in which psychoanalysis has been taken up, at least from the point of view of Freud's aspirations for the discipline, has been as a tool within literary theory. This fact may seem rather strange, given all that we have said so far. And yet, if we set aside its larger therapeutic, scientific, and perhaps social goals, it can be seen that, in terms of its methodology, psychoanalysis was always in essence a subtle theory of reading.

After all, the classic formulations of the nature of the unconscious, which provide the very cornerstone of psychoanalysis, arose in direct conjunction with the minute analysis of *latent meanings*. Latent meanings are those that are hidden from view, but exist nonetheless. That is to say, intimations of the existence of the unconscious, elusive by its very nature, can be had only by means of the detailed interpretation of hidden meanings. Freud first 'discovered' the unconscious whilst studying two seemingly unrelated phenomena: *lapsus linguae*, or slips of the tongue ('Freudian slips'), and people's accounts of their own dreams. Both of these phenomena provided 'texts', taken in the broadest sense, which then became the raw material for psychoanalytic analysis.

Yet these texts, rather like literary texts, are not at all straightforward. What you see (or read) of the unconscious is not what you get. We can all confirm this if we think of our own dreams, which often strike us as utterly bizarre. This is because the unconscious occupies a realm somehow outside, or before, or below, literal language. Freud said again and again that the unconscious knows nothing of time, or space, or causality. The unconscious ignores the rules which govern rational experience, so that any messages which float up from its mysterious depths are unlikely to be readily legible to the average mind trained (again by socialising processes) in rational forms of interpretation. It does not follow, however, that such messages are meaningless or irrational. Indeed, a large portion of Freud's early work consisted in demonstrating the symbolic grammar of unconscious utterances, and therefore in providing a theoretical system for interpreting, for consciousness, the enigmatic texts of the *unconscious*, such as slips of the tongue, dreams, and of course neurotic symptoms.

The major work which underpins the literary theoretical appropriation of psychoanalysis, is Freud's monumental *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900). It is here that, through painstaking readings of a host of collated dreams, Freud makes the distinction between latent and manifest meanings, and between the primary processes of the unconscious and the secondary processes of consciousness. It is also where he manages to identify the four mechanisms of what he calls the dream-work, but which apply to all primary or unconscious processes (and are therefore at work in neurotic

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symptoms as well): they are ‘condensation’, ‘displacement’, ‘symbolisation’, and ‘contradiction’. Condensation involves at least two mental images or meanings being combined in a single mental image which is nonetheless invested with meaning from both of its composite elements. Displacement is the process whereby psychic energy, which Freud calls ‘cathexis’, can be transmitted from one mental image to another. Symbolism refers to the capacity of something to stand for something else, the stereotypical example in terms of unconscious symbolism being, say, an umbrella, or a pen, or even a car, standing in for the penis. Finally, the unconscious displays a remarkable tolerance for contradiction, so that during dreams the most absurd and indeed impossible situations are experienced as quite normal.

To the extent that dream-interpretation starts with the manifest content of the dream and undoes the mechanisms of the dream-work to reveal a latent (unconscious) meaning, it is a process analogous to the literary critic’s interpretation of a difficult poem to arrive at its deeper signification. A psychoanalytic interpretation of a literary text can therefore settle for profiling an author’s psychological make up via his or her literary works; or it can identify psychoanalytic ‘themes’ on the surface of a work, for example, by interpreting Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* through the Oedipus complex; or it can be more radical, by applying a ‘symptomatic reading’ which pays attention to the gaps, silences and outright contradictions which reveal a text’s ‘unconscious’ concerns irrespective of what its author’s intentions in producing it may or may not have been.

Freud himself often utilised examples from literature, art, and ancient Greek mythology in order to explain his theories, but, through the concept of sublimation, he also sketched a psychoanalytic role for literature specifically, and culture generally. Sublimation describes the redirection of libidinal energy away from sexual aims, and towards socially validated forms of practice. Thus what we might describe as ‘high culture’, from the arts to the sciences, is a result of the mobilisation of psychic energy for social, rather than sexual, ends. Unlike classical Marxism, which makes such high culture a secondary superstructure built upon a material base, classical psychoanalysis really makes cultural expression a prerequisite of social life. Literature and the arts in general therefore become privileged points of entry into the inner psychological workings of social systems.

Conclusion

These are just four uses to which psychoanalysis has been put. There are many more. For instance, we could mention the use of psychoanalysis in advertising and marketing, in art, in politics, and even in warfare. Indeed,

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psychoanalysis is really best described as an extremely broad cultural phenomenon that has impacted on many areas of our contemporary lives, from the language we use to the films we watch. It is difficult to define precisely because, in a sense, we always already enjoy its rich legacy. But despite our initial reluctance to establish a definition of psychoanalysis, we are not absolved from looking closely at its basic claims, its pre-eminent spokespersons, and the differences between them. In what follows, we shall be looking primarily at psychoanalytical theory, with Freud, and after Freud. That is, we shall be trying to clarify the most essential ideas of the psychoanalytic approach and asking whether it still has a place in today's world, so radically different from Freud's.