

# Sigmund Freud

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Sigmund Freud (born May 6, 1856, Freiberg, Moravia, Austrian Empire [now Příbor, Czech Republic]—died September 23, 1939, London, England) was an Austrian neurologist and the founder of psychoanalysis.

Freud may justly be called the most influential intellectual legislator of his age. His creation of psychoanalysis was at once a theory of the human psyche, a therapy for the relief of its ills, and an optic for the interpretation of culture and society. Despite repeated criticisms, attempted refutations, and qualifications of Freud's work, its spell remained powerful well after his death and in fields far removed from psychology as it is narrowly defined. If, as American sociologist Philip Rieff once contended, "psychological man" replaced such earlier notions as political, religious, or economic man as the 20th century's dominant self-image, it is in no small measure due to the power of Freud's vision and the seeming inexhaustibility of the intellectual legacy he left behind.

## Early life and training

Freud's father, Jakob, was a Jewish wool merchant who had been married once before he wed the boy's mother, Amalie Nathansohn. The father, 40 years old at Freud's birth, seems to have been a relatively remote and authoritarian figure, while his mother appears to have been more nurturant and emotionally available. Although Freud had two older half-brothers, his strongest if also most ambivalent attachment seems to have been to a nephew, John, one year his senior, who provided the model of intimate friend and hated rival that Freud reproduced often at later stages of his life.

In 1859 the Freud family was compelled for economic reasons to move to Leipzig and then a year after to Vienna, where Freud remained until the Nazi annexation of Austria 78 years later. Despite Freud's dislike of the imperial city, in part because of its citizens' frequent anti-Semitism, psychoanalysis reflected in significant ways the cultural and political context out of which it emerged. For example, Freud's sensitivity to the vulnerability of paternal authority within the psyche may well have been stimulated by the decline in power suffered by his father's generation, often liberal rationalists, in the Habsburg empire. So too his interest in the theme of the seduction of daughters was rooted in complicated ways in the context of Viennese attitudes toward female sexuality.

In 1873 Freud was graduated from the Sperl Gymnasium and, apparently inspired by a public reading of an essay by Goethe on nature, turned to medicine as a career. At the University of Vienna he worked with one of the leading physiologists of his day, Ernst von Brücke, an exponent of the materialist, antivitalist science of Hermann von Helmholtz. In 1882 he entered the General Hospital in Vienna as a clinical assistant to train with the psychiatrist Theodor Meynert and the professor of internal medicine Hermann Nothnagel. In 1885 Freud was appointed lecturer in neuropathology, having concluded important research on the brain's medulla. At this time he also developed an interest in the pharmaceutical benefits of cocaine, which he pursued for several years. Although some beneficial results were found in eye surgery, which have been credited to Freud's friend Carl Koller, the general outcome was disastrous. Not only did Freud's advocacy lead to a mortal addiction in another close friend, Ernst Fleischl von Marxow, but it also tarnished his medical reputation for a time. Whether or not one interprets this episode in terms that call into question Freud's prudence as a scientist, it was of a piece with his lifelong willingness to attempt bold solutions to relieve human suffering.

Freud's scientific training remained of cardinal importance in his work, or at least in his own conception of it. In such writings as his "Entwurf einer Psychologie" (written 1895, published 1950; "Project for a Scientific Psychology") he affirmed his intention to find a physiological and materialist basis for his theories of the psyche. Here a mechanistic neurophysiological model vied with a more organismic, phylogenetic one in ways that demonstrate Freud's complicated debt to the science of his day.

In late 1885 Freud left Vienna to continue his studies of neuropathology at the Salpêtrière clinic in Paris, where he worked under the guidance of Jean-Martin Charcot. His 19 weeks in the French capital proved a turning point in his career, for Charcot's work with patients classified as "hysterics" introduced Freud to the possibility that psychological disorders might have their source in the mind rather than the brain. Charcot's demonstration of a link between hysterical symptoms, such as paralysis of a limb, and hypnotic suggestion implied the power of mental states rather than nerves in the etiology of disease. Although Freud was soon to abandon his faith in hypnosis, he returned to Vienna in February 1886 with the seed of his revolutionary psychological method implanted.

Several months after his return Freud married Martha Bernays, the daughter of a prominent Jewish family whose ancestors included a chief rabbi of Hamburg and Heinrich Heine. She was to bear six children, one of whom, Anna Freud, was to become a distinguished psychoanalyst in her own right. Although the glowing picture of their marriage painted by Ernest Jones in his study *The Life and Works of Sigmund Freud* (1953–57) has been nuanced by later scholars, it is clear that Martha Bernays Freud was a deeply sustaining presence during her husband's tumultuous career.

Shortly after getting married Freud began his closest friendship, with the Berlin physician Wilhelm Fliess, whose role in the development of psychoanalysis has occasioned widespread debate. Throughout the 15 years of their intimacy Fliess provided Freud an invaluable interlocutor for his most daring ideas. Freud's belief in human bisexuality, his idea of erotogenic zones on the body, and perhaps even his imputation of sexuality to infants may well have been stimulated by their friendship.

A somewhat less controversial influence arose from the partnership Freud began with the physician Josef Breuer after his return from Paris. Freud turned to a clinical practice in neuropsychology, and the office he established at Berggasse 19 was to remain his consulting room for almost half a century. Before their collaboration began, during the early 1880s, Breuer had treated a patient named Bertha Pappenheim—or "Anna O.," as she became known in the literature—who was suffering from a variety of hysterical symptoms. Rather than using hypnotic suggestion, as had Charcot, Breuer allowed her to lapse into a state resembling autohypnosis, in which she would talk about the initial manifestations of her symptoms. To Breuer's surprise, the very act of verbalization seemed to provide some relief from their hold over her (although later scholarship has cast doubt on its permanence). "The talking cure" or "chimney sweeping," as Breuer and Anna O., respectively, called it, seemed to act cathartically to produce an abreaction, or discharge, of the pent-up emotional blockage at the root of the pathological behaviour.

## Psychoanalytic theory of Sigmund Freud

Freud, still beholden to Charcot's hypnotic method, did not grasp the full implications of Breuer's experience until a decade later, when he developed the technique of free association. In part an extrapolation of the automatic writing promoted by the German Jewish writer Ludwig Börne a century before, in part a result of his own clinical experience with other hysterics, this revolutionary method was announced in the work Freud published jointly with Breuer in 1895, *Studien über Hysterie* (*Studies in Hysteria*). By encouraging the patient to express any random thoughts that came associatively to mind,

the technique aimed at uncovering hitherto unarticulated material from the realm of the psyche that Freud, following a long tradition, called the unconscious. Because of its incompatibility with conscious thoughts or conflicts with other unconscious ones, this material was normally hidden, forgotten, or unavailable to conscious reflection. Difficulty in freely associating—sudden silences, stuttering, or the like—suggested to Freud the importance of the material struggling to be expressed, as well as the power of what he called the patient’s defenses against that expression. Such blockages Freud dubbed resistance, which had to be broken down in order to reveal hidden conflicts. Unlike Charcot and Breuer, Freud came to the conclusion, based on his clinical experience with female hysterics, that the most insistent source of resisted material was sexual in nature. And even more momentously, he linked the etiology of neurotic symptoms to the same struggle between a sexual feeling or urge and the psychic defenses against it. Being able to bring that conflict to consciousness through free association and then probing its implications was thus a crucial step, he reasoned, on the road to relieving the symptom, which was best understood as an unwitting compromise formation between the wish and the defense.

## Screen memories

At first, however, Freud was uncertain about the precise status of the sexual component in this dynamic conception of the psyche. His patients seemed to recall actual experiences of early seductions, often incestuous in nature. Freud’s initial impulse was to accept these as having happened. But then, as he disclosed in a now famous letter to Fliess of September 2, 1897, he concluded that, rather than being memories of actual events, these shocking recollections were the residues of infantile impulses and desires to be seduced by an adult. What was recalled was not a genuine memory but what he would later call a screen memory, or fantasy, hiding a primitive wish. That is, rather than stressing the corrupting initiative of adults in the etiology of neuroses, Freud concluded that the fantasies and yearnings of the child were at the root of later conflict.

The absolute centrality of his change of heart in the subsequent development of psychoanalysis cannot be doubted. For in attributing sexuality to children, emphasizing the causal power of fantasies, and establishing the importance of repressed desires, Freud laid the groundwork for what many have called the epic journey into his own psyche, which followed soon after the dissolution of his partnership with Breuer.

Freud’s work on hysteria had focused on female sexuality and its potential for neurotic expression. To be fully universal, psychoanalysis—a term Freud coined in 1896—would also have to examine the male psyche in a condition of what might be called normality. It would have to become more than a psychotherapy and develop into a complete theory of the mind. To this end Freud accepted the enormous risk of generalizing from the experience he knew best: his own. Significantly, his self-analysis was both the first and the last in the history of the movement he spawned; all future analysts would have to undergo a training analysis with someone whose own analysis was ultimately traceable to Freud’s analysis of his disciples.

Freud’s self-exploration was apparently enabled by a disturbing event in his life. In October 1896, Jakob Freud died shortly before his 81st birthday. Emotions were released in his son that he understood as having been long repressed, emotions concerning his earliest familial experiences and feelings. Beginning in earnest in July 1897, Freud attempted to reveal their meaning by drawing on a technique that had been available for millennia: the deciphering of dreams. Freud’s contribution to the tradition of dream analysis was path-breaking, for in insisting on them as “the royal road to a knowledge of the unconscious,” he provided a remarkably elaborate account of why dreams originate and how they function.

## The interpretation of dreams

In what many commentators consider his master work, *Die Traumdeutung* (published in 1899, but given the date of the dawning century to emphasize its epochal character; *The Interpretation of Dreams*), he presented his findings. Interspersing evidence from his own dreams with evidence from those recounted in his clinical practice, Freud contended that dreams played a fundamental role in the psychic economy. The mind's energy—which Freud called libido and identified principally, but not exclusively, with the sexual drive—was a fluid and malleable force capable of excessive and disturbing power. Needing to be discharged to ensure pleasure and prevent pain, it sought whatever outlet it might find. If denied the gratification provided by direct motor action, libidinal energy could seek its release through mental channels. Or, in the language of *The Interpretation of Dreams*, a wish can be satisfied by an imaginary wish fulfillment. All dreams, Freud claimed, even nightmares manifesting apparent anxiety, are the fulfillment of such wishes.

More precisely, dreams are the disguised expression of wish fulfillments. Like neurotic symptoms, they are the effects of compromises in the psyche between desires and prohibitions in conflict with their realization. Although sleep can relax the power of the mind's diurnal censorship of forbidden desires, such censorship, nonetheless, persists in part during nocturnal existence. Dreams, therefore, have to be decoded to be understood, and not merely because they are actually forbidden desires experienced in distorted fashion. For dreams undergo further revision in the process of being recounted to the analyst.

*The Interpretation of Dreams* provides a hermeneutic for the unmasking of the dream's disguise, or dreamwork, as Freud called it. The manifest content of the dream, that which is remembered and reported, must be understood as veiling a latent meaning. Dreams defy logical entailment and narrative coherence, for they intermingle the residues of immediate daily experience with the deepest, often most infantile wishes. Yet they can be ultimately decoded by attending to four basic activities of the dreamwork and reversing their mystifying effect.

The first of these activities, condensation, operates through the fusion of several different elements into one. As such, it exemplifies one of the key operations of psychic life, which Freud called overdetermination. No direct correspondence between a simple manifest content and its multidimensional latent counterpart can be assumed. The second activity of the dreamwork, displacement, refers to the decentering of dream thoughts, so that the most urgent wish is often obliquely or marginally represented on the manifest level. Displacement also means the associative substitution of one signifier in the dream for another, say, the king for one's father. The third activity Freud called representation, by which he meant the transformation of thoughts into images. Decoding a dream thus means translating such visual representations back into intersubjectively available language through free association. The final function of the dreamwork is secondary revision, which provides some order and intelligibility to the dream by supplementing its content with narrative coherence. The process of dream interpretation thus reverses the direction of the dreamwork, moving from the level of the conscious recounting of the dream through the preconscious back beyond censorship into the unconscious itself.

## Further theoretical development

In 1904 Freud published *Zur Psychopathologie des Alltagslebens* (*The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*), in which he explored such seemingly insignificant errors as slips of the tongue or pen (later colloquially

called Freudian slips), misreadings, or forgetting of names. These errors Freud understood to have symptomatic and thus interpretable importance. But unlike dreams they need not betray a repressed infantile wish yet can arise from more immediate hostile, jealous, or egoistic causes.

In 1905 Freud extended the scope of this analysis by examining *Der Witz und seine Beziehung zum Unbewussten* (Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious). Invoking the idea of “joke-work” as a process comparable to dreamwork, he also acknowledged the double-sided quality of jokes, at once consciously contrived and unconsciously revealing. Seemingly innocent phenomena like puns or jests are as open to interpretation as more obviously tendentious, obscene, or hostile jokes. The explosive response often produced by successful humour, Freud contended, owes its power to the orgasmic release of unconscious impulses, aggressive as well as sexual. But insofar as jokes are more deliberate than dreams or slips, they draw on the rational dimension of the psyche that Freud was to call the ego as much as on what he was to call the id.

In 1905 Freud also published the work that first thrust him into the limelight as the alleged champion of a pansexualist understanding of the mind: *Drei Abhandlungen zur Sexualtheorie* (Three Contributions to the Sexual Theory, later translated as *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*), revised and expanded in subsequent editions. The work established Freud as a pioneer in the serious study of sexology, alongside Richard von Krafft-Ebing, Havelock Ellis, Albert Moll, and Iwan Bloch. Here he outlined in greater detail than before his reasons for emphasizing the sexual component in the development of both normal and pathological behaviour. Although not as reductionist as popularly assumed, Freud nonetheless extended the concept of sexuality beyond conventional usage to include a panoply of erotic impulses from the earliest childhood years on. Distinguishing between sexual aims (the act toward which instincts strive) and sexual objects (the person, organ, or physical entity eliciting attraction), he elaborated a repertoire of sexually generated behaviour of astonishing variety. Beginning very early in life, imperiously insistent on its gratification, remarkably plastic in its expression, and open to easy maldevelopment, sexuality, Freud concluded, is the prime mover in a great deal of human behaviour.

## Sexuality and development

To spell out the formative development of the sexual drive, Freud focused on the progressive replacement of erotogenic zones in the body by others. An originally polymorphous sexuality first seeks gratification orally through sucking at the mother’s breast, an object for which other surrogates can later be provided. Initially unable to distinguish between self and breast, the infant soon comes to appreciate its mother as the first external love object. Later Freud would contend that even before that moment, the child can treat its own body as such an object, going beyond undifferentiated autoeroticism to a narcissistic love for the self as such. After the oral phase, during the second year, the child’s erotic focus shifts to its anus, stimulated by the struggle over toilet training. During the anal phase the child’s pleasure in defecation is confronted with the demands of self-control. The third phase, lasting from about the fourth to the sixth year, he called the phallic. Because Freud relied on male sexuality as the norm of development, his analysis of this phase aroused considerable opposition, especially because he claimed its major concern is castration anxiety.

To grasp what Freud meant by this fear, it is necessary to understand one of his central contentions. As has been stated, the death of Freud’s father was the trauma that permitted him to delve into his own psyche. Not only did Freud experience the expected grief, but he also expressed disappointment, resentment, and even hostility toward his father in the dreams he analyzed at the time. In the process of abandoning the seduction theory he recognized the source of the anger as his own psyche rather than

anything objectively done by his father. Turning, as he often did, to evidence from literary and mythical texts as anticipations of his psychological insights, Freud interpreted that source in terms of Sophocles' tragedy Oedipus Rex. The universal applicability of its plot, he conjectured, lies in the desire of every male child to sleep with his mother and to remove the obstacle to the realization of that wish, his father. What he later dubbed the Oedipus complex presents the child with a critical problem, for the unrealizable yearning at its root provokes an imagined response on the part of the father: the threat of castration.

The phallic stage can only be successfully surmounted if the Oedipus complex with its accompanying castration anxiety can be resolved. According to Freud, this resolution can occur if the boy finally suppresses his sexual desire for the mother, entering a period of so-called latency, and internalizes the reproachful prohibition of the father, making it his own with the construction of that part of the psyche Freud called the superego or the conscience.

The blatantly phallic bias of this account, which was supplemented by a highly controversial assumption of penis envy in the already castrated female child, proved troublesome for subsequent psychoanalytic theory. Not surprisingly, later analysts of female sexuality have paid more attention to the girl's relations with the pre-Oedipal mother than to the vicissitudes of the Oedipus complex. Anthropological challenges to the universality of the complex have also been damaging, although it has been possible to redescribe it in terms that lift it out of the specific familial dynamics of Freud's own day. If the creation of culture is understood as the institution of kinship structures based on exogamy, then the Oedipal drama reflects the deeper struggle between natural desire and cultural authority.

Freud, however, always maintained the intrapsychic importance of the Oedipus complex, whose successful resolution is the precondition for the transition through latency to the mature sexuality he called the genital phase. Here the parent of the opposite sex is conclusively abandoned in favour of a more suitable love object able to reciprocate reproductively useful passion. In the case of the girl, disappointment over the nonexistence of a penis is transcended by the rejection of her mother in favour of a father figure instead. In both cases, sexual maturity means heterosexual, procreatively inclined, genitally focused behaviour.

Sexual development, however, is prone to troubling maladjustments preventing this outcome if the various stages are unsuccessfully negotiated. Fixation of sexual aims or objects can occur at any particular moment, caused either by an actual trauma or the blockage of a powerful libidinal urge. If the fixation is allowed to express itself directly at a later age, the result is what was then generally called a perversion. If, however, some part of the psyche prohibits such overt expression, then, Freud contended, the repressed and censored impulse produces neurotic symptoms, neuroses being conceptualized as the negative of perversions. Neurotics repeat the desired act in repressed form, without conscious memory of its origin or the ability to confront and work it through in the present.

In addition to the neurosis of hysteria, with its conversion of affective conflicts into bodily symptoms, Freud developed complicated etiological explanations for other typical neurotic behaviour, such as obsessive-compulsions, paranoia, and narcissism. These he called psychoneuroses, because of their rootedness in childhood conflicts, as opposed to the actual neuroses such as hypochondria, neurasthenia, and anxiety neurosis, which are due to problems in the present (the last, for example, being caused by the physical suppression of sexual release).

Freud's elaboration of his therapeutic technique during these years focused on the implications of a specific element in the relationship between patient and analyst, an element whose power he first began

to recognize in reflecting on Breuer's work with Anna O. Although later scholarship has cast doubt on its veracity, Freud's account of the episode was as follows. An intense rapport between Breuer and his patient had taken an alarming turn when Anna divulged her strong sexual desire for him. Breuer, who recognized the stirrings of reciprocal feelings, broke off his treatment out of an understandable confusion about the ethical implications of acting on these impulses. Freud came to see in this troubling interaction the effects of a more pervasive phenomenon, which he called transference (or in the case of the analyst's desire for the patient, counter-transference). Produced by the projection of feelings, transference, he reasoned, is the reenactment of childhood urges cathected (invested) on a new object. As such, it is the essential tool in the analytic cure, for by bringing to the surface repressed emotions and allowing them to be examined in a clinical setting, transference can permit their being worked through in the present. That is, affective remembrance can be the antidote to neurotic repetition.

It was largely to facilitate transference that Freud developed his celebrated technique of having the patient lie on a couch, not looking directly at the analyst, and free to fantasize with as little intrusion of the analyst's real personality as possible. Restrained and neutral, the analyst functions as a screen for the displacement of early emotions, both erotic and aggressive. Transference onto the analyst is itself a kind of neurosis, but one in the service of an ultimate working through of the conflicting feelings it expresses. Only certain illnesses, however, are open to this treatment, for it demands the ability to redirect libidinal energy outward. The psychoses, Freud sadly concluded, are based on the redirection of libido back onto the patient's ego and cannot therefore be relieved by transference in the analytic situation. How successful psychoanalytic therapy has been in the treatment of psychoneuroses remains, however, a matter of considerable dispute.

Although Freud's theories were offensive to many in the Vienna of his day, they began to attract a cosmopolitan group of supporters in the early 1900s. In 1902 the Psychological Wednesday Circle began to gather in Freud's waiting room with a number of future luminaries in the psychoanalytic movements in attendance. Alfred Adler and Wilhelm Stekel were often joined by guests such as Sándor Ferenczi, Carl Gustav Jung, Otto Rank, Ernest Jones, Max Eitingon, and A.A. Brill. In 1908 the group was renamed the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society and held its first international congress in Salzburg. In the same year the first branch society was opened in Berlin. In 1909 Freud, along with Jung and Ferenczi, made a historic trip to Clark University in Worcester, Massachusetts. The lectures he gave there were soon published as *Über Psychoanalyse* (1910; *The Origin and Development of Psychoanalysis*), the first of several introductions he wrote for a general audience. Along with a series of vivid case studies—the most famous known colloquially as "Dora" (1905), "Little Hans" (1909), "The Rat Man" (1909), "The Psychotic Dr. Schreber" (1911), and "The Wolf Man" (1918)—they made his ideas known to a wider public.

As might be expected of a movement whose treatment emphasized the power of transference and the ubiquity of Oedipal conflict, its early history is a tale rife with dissension, betrayal, apostasy, and excommunication. The most widely noted schisms occurred with Adler in 1911, Stekel in 1912, and Jung in 1913; these were followed by later breaks with Ferenczi, Rank, and Wilhelm Reich in the 1920s. Despite efforts by loyal disciples like Ernest Jones to exculpate Freud from blame, subsequent research concerning his relations with former disciples like Viktor Tausk have clouded the picture considerably. Critics of the hagiographic legend of Freud have, in fact, had a relatively easy time documenting the tension between Freud's aspirations to scientific objectivity and the extraordinarily fraught personal context in which his ideas were developed and disseminated. Even well after Freud's death, his archivists' insistence on limiting access to potentially embarrassing material in his papers has reinforced the impression that the psychoanalytic movement resembled more a sectarian church than a scientific community (at least as the latter is ideally understood).



## Toward a general theory of Sigmund Freud

If the troubled history of its institutionalization served to call psychoanalysis into question in certain quarters, so too did its founder's penchant for extrapolating his clinical findings into a more ambitious general theory. As he admitted to Fliess in 1900, "I am actually not a man of science at all.... I am nothing but a conquistador by temperament, an adventurer." Freud's so-called metapsychology soon became the basis for wide-ranging speculations about cultural, social, artistic, religious, and anthropological phenomena. Composed of a complicated and often revised mixture of economic, dynamic, and topographical elements, the metapsychology was developed in a series of 12 papers Freud composed during World War I, only some of which were published in his lifetime. Their general findings appeared in two books in the 1920s: *Jenseits des Lustprinzips* (1920; *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*) and *Das Ich und das Es* (1923; *The Ego and the Id*).

In these works, Freud attempted to clarify the relationship between his earlier topographical division of the psyche into the unconscious, preconscious, and conscious and his subsequent structural categorization into id, ego, and superego. The id was defined in terms of the most primitive urges for gratification in the infant, urges dominated by the desire for pleasure through the release of tension and the cathexis of energy. Ruled by no laws of logic, indifferent to the demands of expediency, unconstrained by the resistance of external reality, the id is ruled by what Freud called the primary process directly expressing somatically generated instincts. Through the inevitable experience of frustration the infant learns to adapt itself to the exigencies of reality. The secondary process that results leads to the growth of the ego, which follows what Freud called the reality principle in contradistinction to the pleasure principle dominating the id. Here the need to delay gratification in the service of self-preservation is slowly learned in an effort to thwart the anxiety produced by unfulfilled desires. What Freud termed defense mechanisms are developed by the ego to deal with such conflicts. Repression is the most fundamental, but Freud also posited an entire repertoire of others, including reaction formation, isolation, undoing, denial, displacement, and rationalization.

The last component in Freud's trichotomy, the superego, develops from the internalization of society's moral commands through identification with parental dictates during the resolution of the Oedipus complex. Only partly conscious, the superego gains some of its punishing force by borrowing certain aggressive elements in the id, which are turned inward against the ego and produce feelings of guilt. But it is largely through the internalization of social norms that the superego is constituted, an acknowledgement that prevents psychoanalysis from conceptualizing the psyche in purely biologicistic or individualistic terms.

Freud's understanding of the primary process underwent a crucial shift in the course of his career. Initially he counterposed a libidinal drive that seeks sexual pleasure to a self-preservation drive whose telos is survival. But in 1914, while examining the phenomenon of narcissism, he came to consider the latter instinct as merely a variant of the former. Unable to accept so monistic a drive theory, Freud sought a new dualistic alternative. He arrived at the speculative assertion that there exists in the psyche an innate, regressive drive for stasis that aims to end life's inevitable tension. This striving for rest he christened the Nirvana principle and the drive underlying it the death instinct, or Thanatos, which he could substitute for self-preservation as the contrary of the life instinct, or Eros.



## Social and cultural studies

Freud's mature instinct theory is in many ways a metaphysical construct, comparable to Henri Bergson's *élan vital* or Arthur Schopenhauer's *Will*. Emboldened by its formulation, Freud launched a series of audacious studies that took him well beyond his clinician's consulting room. These he had already commenced with investigations of Leonardo da Vinci (1910) and the novel *Gradiva* by Wilhelm Jensen (1907). Here Freud attempted to psychoanalyze works of art as symbolic expressions of their creator's psychodynamics.

The fundamental premise that permitted Freud to examine cultural phenomena was called sublimation in the *Three Essays*. The appreciation or creation of ideal beauty, Freud contended, is rooted in primitive sexual urges that are transfigured in culturally elevating ways. Unlike repression, which produces only neurotic symptoms whose meaning is unknown even to the sufferer, sublimation is a conflict-free resolution of repression, which leads to intersubjectively available cultural works. Although potentially reductive in its implications, the psychoanalytic interpretation of culture can be justly called one of the most powerful "hermeneutics of suspicion," to borrow the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur's phrase, because it debunks idealist notions of high culture as the alleged transcendence of baser concerns.

Freud extended the scope of his theories to include anthropological and social psychological speculation as well in *Totem und Tabu* (1913; *Totem and Taboo*). Drawing on Sir James Frazer's explorations of Australian Aboriginal peoples, he interpreted the mixture of fear and reverence for the totemic animal in terms of the child's attitude toward the parent of the same sex. The Aboriginal person's insistence on exogamy was a complicated defense against the strong incestuous desires felt by the child for the parent of the opposite sex. Their religion was thus a phylogenetic anticipation of the ontogenetic Oedipal drama played out in modern human psychic development. But whereas the latter was purely an intrapsychic phenomenon based on fantasies and fears, the former, Freud boldly suggested, was based on actual historical events. Freud speculated that the rebellion of sons against dominating fathers for control over women had culminated in actual parricide. Ultimately producing remorse, this violent act led to atonement through incest taboos and the prohibitions against harming the father-substitute, the totemic object or animal. When the fraternal clan replaced the patriarchal horde, true society emerged. For renunciation of individual aspirations to replace the slain father and a shared sense of guilt in the primal crime led to a contractual agreement to end internecine struggle and band together instead. The totemic ancestor then could evolve into the more impersonal God of the great religions.

A subsequent effort to explain social solidarity, *Massenpsychologie und Ich-analyse* (1921; *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*), drew on the antidemocratic crowd psychologists of the late 19th century, most notably Gustave Le Bon. Here the disillusionment with liberal, rational politics that some have seen as the seedbed of much of Freud's work was at its most explicit (the only competitor being Thomas Woodrow Wilson, Twenty-Eighth President of the United States: *A Psychological Study*, a debunking psychobiography written jointly with William Bullitt in 1930 but not published until 1967). All mass phenomena, Freud suggested, are characterized by intensely regressive emotional ties stripping individuals of their self-control and independence. Rejecting possible alternative explanations such as hypnotic suggestion or imitation and unwilling to follow Jung in postulating a group mind, Freud emphasized instead individual libidinal ties to the group's leader. Group formation is like regression to a primal horde with the leader as the original father. Drawing on the army and the Roman Catholic Church as his examples, Freud never seriously considered less authoritarian modes of collective behaviour.

## Religion, civilization, and discontents

Freud's bleak appraisal of social and political solidarity was replicated, if in somewhat more nuanced form, in his attitude toward religion. Although many accounts of Freud's development have discerned debts to one or another aspect of his Jewish background, debts Freud himself partly acknowledged, his avowed position was deeply irreligious. As noted in the account of *Totem and Taboo*, he always attributed the belief in divinities ultimately to the displaced worship of human ancestors. One of the most potent sources of his break with former disciples like Jung was precisely this skepticism toward spirituality.

In his 1907 essay "Zwangshandlungen und Religionsübungen" ("Obsessive Acts and Religious Practices," later translated as "Obsessive Actions and Religious Practices") Freud had already contended that obsessional neuroses are private religious systems and religions themselves no more than the obsessional neuroses of humankind. Twenty years later, in *Die Zukunft einer Illusion* (1927; *The Future of an Illusion*), he elaborated this argument, adding that belief in God is a mythic reproduction of the universal state of infantile helplessness. Like an idealized father, God is the projection of childish wishes for an omnipotent protector. If children can outgrow their dependence, he concluded with cautious optimism, then humanity may also hope to leave behind its immature heteronomy.

The simple Enlightenment faith underlying this analysis quickly elicited critical comment, which led to its modification. In an exchange of letters with the French novelist Romain Rolland, Freud came to acknowledge a more intractable source of religious sentiment. The opening section of his next speculative tract, *Das Unbehagen in der Kultur* (1930; *Civilization and Its Discontents*), was devoted to what Rolland had dubbed the oceanic feeling. Freud described it as a sense of indissoluble oneness with the universe, which mystics in particular have celebrated as the fundamental religious experience. Its origin, Freud claimed, is nostalgia for the pre-Oedipal infant's sense of unity with its mother. Although still rooted in infantile helplessness, religion thus derives to some extent from the earliest stage of postnatal development. Regressive longings for its restoration are possibly stronger than those for a powerful father and thus cannot be worked through by way of a collective resolution of the Oedipus complex.

*Civilization and Its Discontents*, written after the onset of Freud's struggle with cancer of the jaw and in the midst of the rise of European fascism, was a profoundly unconsoling book. Focusing on the prevalence of human guilt and the impossibility of achieving unalloyed happiness, Freud contended that no social solution of the discontents of humankind is possible. All civilizations, no matter how well planned, can provide only partial relief. For aggression among people is not due to unequal property relations or political injustice, which can be rectified by laws, but rather to the death instinct redirected outward.

Even Eros, Freud suggested, is not fully in harmony with civilization, for the libidinal ties creating collective solidarity are aim-inhibited and diffuse rather than directly sexual. Thus, there is likely to be tension between the urge for sexual gratification and the sublimated love for humankind. Furthermore, because Eros and Thanatos are themselves at odds, conflict and the guilt it engenders are virtually inevitable. The best to be hoped for is a life in which the repressive burdens of civilization are in rough balance with the realization of instinctual gratification and the sublimated love for humankind. But reconciliation of nature and culture is impossible, for the price of any civilization is the guilt produced by the necessary thwarting of human instinctual drives. Although elsewhere Freud had postulated mature, heterosexual genitality and the capacity to work productively as the hallmarks of health and urged that "where id is, there shall ego be," it is clear that he held out no hope for any collective relief from the discontents of civilization. He only offered an ethic of resigned authenticity, which taught the wisdom of living without the possibility of redemption, either religious or secular.

## Last days of Sigmund Freud

Freud's final major work, *Der Mann Moses und die monotheistische Religion* (1939; *Moses and Monotheism*), was more than just the "historical novel" he had initially thought to subtitle it. Moses had long been a figure of capital importance for Freud; indeed Michelangelo's famous statue of Moses had been the subject of an essay written in 1914. The book itself sought to solve the mystery of Moses' origins by claiming that he was actually an aristocratic Egyptian by birth who had chosen the Jewish people to keep alive an earlier monotheistic religion. Too stern and demanding a taskmaster, Moses was slain in a Jewish revolt, and a second, more pliant leader, also called Moses, rose in his place. The guilt engendered by the parricidal act was, however, too much to endure, and the Jews ultimately returned to the religion given them by the original Moses as the two figures were merged into one in their memories. Here Freud's ambivalence about his religious roots and his father's authority was allowed to pervade a highly fanciful story that reveals more about its author than its ostensible subject.

*Moses and Monotheism* was published the year after Hitler invaded Austria. Freud was forced to flee to England. His books were among the first to be burned, as the fruits of a "Jewish science," when the Nazis took over Germany. Although psychotherapy was not banned in the Third Reich, where Field Marshall Hermann Göring's cousin headed an official institute, psychoanalysis essentially went into exile, most notably to North America and England. Freud himself died only a few weeks after World War II broke out, at a time when his worst fears about the irrationality lurking behind the facade of civilization were being realized. Freud's death did not, however, hinder the reception and dissemination of his ideas. A plethora of Freudian schools emerged to develop psychoanalysis in different directions. In fact, despite the relentless and often compelling challenges mounted against virtually all of his ideas, Freud has remained one of the most potent intellectual figures of modern times.