

Freud (1856-1939)

[rough notes for personal use only – not for reproduction]

Sex is a fundamental motivation of humankind; without it the species would cease to exist. It is fundamental to selection of partners, which enables the species to develop and evolve. It is also capable of devastating harm – not just in the obvious cases (e.g. rape, incest) but in sublimated sexual power, which influences views and behaviour in all spheres of life. Sex is therefore dangerous. It is identified with the earth, the emotions, the body, and may therefore be seen as opposed to the mind and higher aspirations. Any theory that takes sex seriously is likely to be seen as threatening to traditional religion.

On the other hand, seeing sex in everything may be an unnatural obsession. Joke about the man who is being examined by a psychologist, who gets him to do a series of Rorschach inkblot tests. Apply ink; fold paper; open to reveal pattern – ask “What do you see?” Patient keeps saying “Sex!” in the end the psychologist says “You’re obsessed with sex!” Patient says – “You’re only making me worse, showing me all those dirty pictures!”

The question is – Was Freud’s interest in sex a healthy, scientific one, or an obsession? He had much to say about obsessions, as we shall see in a moment. I leave you to judge.

Parenthood is also fundamental – for it is the need for children to be parented that sets the groundwork for the social conditioning and self-awareness that are key to successful adulthood. But like sex, parenting is problematic, and the relationship between parents and children can be both heaven and hell.

Freud’s work concerns both sex and parenthood. Whether that makes him sexually obsessed, or merely realistic about human life, is for you to judge.

Freud initially developed **psychoanalysis** as a technique for dealing with patients who came to him suffering from hysteria. He explored the unconscious mind and its relationship to the conscious. Through the analysis of dreams and the free association of thoughts, his patients were encouraged to express feelings which had been locked away within the **unconscious mind**, and which were therefore not recognised by the patient, although they produced patterns of behaviour which seemed bizarre.

Freud believed that each stage of life produced tensions. Those which were not faced and resolved at the time could become buried in the unconscious. Then, later in life, they came to the surface again in the form of emotional or behavioural problems. He was particularly interested in the ‘phallic’ stage of development, at which a small child develops an attachment to the parent of the opposite sex, which he described as the ‘**Oedipus Complex**’, from the story of Oedipus Rex, who inadvertently (since he had been separated from his parents at birth) kills his father and makes love to his mother – and suffered horribly because of it. His important early work is found in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1899), *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* (1904). Key to his work is that present psychological problems are related to repressed sexual feelings in childhood, and that they can be released through dream analysis and psychoanalysis.

His critique of religion –

Freud examined patients with compulsive tidying or washing routines. These he ascribed to a sense of uncleanness that had been instilled into them during their childhood. However much the adult washes or tidies, he or she still feels dirty. Freud called such conditions ‘**obsessional neuroses**’. He believed that, once the patient could locate the origin of their feelings of dirtiness, they would be free from their neurosis.

When he examined religion, Freud saw patterns in which people confessed sins and went through elaborate rituals to ensure that they were forgiven. In particular, he saw the meticulous detail in which people followed religious rituals as similar to the compulsive behaviour of his neurotic patients. **He therefore suggested that religion was a 'universal obsessional neurosis', motivated by unconscious guilt.**

[In his early work, Freud examined the idea of the primal horde. In this, young men in a tribe, frustrated by not being given access to women by their dominant father, rise up and kill him. This sets up guilt, which they later seek to overcome by being obedient to a religious 'father' or God. This part of his work is given little emphasis today, and is of secondary importance to the main thrust of his work, which is to see religion as essentially a projection of unconscious need.]

Freud – religion is based on a projected father figure and an obsession with guilt. It is therefore infantile, neurotic and irrational.

Why is it that a child develops a sense of guilt, of duty or of justice? Freud simply observed that it happens – and it led him to develop his “ego, id, superego” division of self by about 1923, and appears in *Civilisation and its Discontents*. The basic drives and needs are expressed by the id, and are repressed by the controlling 'superego', the whole process should be under the ego, or rational balanced individual self. Freud observes a process – and assumes that, once it is observed, it comes under the domain of science, rather than religion.

But is that necessarily the case? One might argue that there is, fundamental to human nature, a sense of moral order, or individual failure to live up to it, a sense of guilt when confronted with the holy. (Remember that, in terms of religious experience, there is the sense of personal unworthiness when confronted by the holy – so Otto.) Perhaps what Freud is pointing to is something that is rightly the starting point of religion – something universal and inescapable. I'm not arguing that we can suddenly bring in God as an explanation – but to point out that Freud's use of this information about developments in childhood etc do not simply negate religion

This is crucial for understanding Freud on religion. He did not so much ask 'Are religious beliefs true?' as 'What part do they play in human life?' He sensed that he had found a psychological reason why someone might become religious – quite independent of whether or not the beliefs of that religion were true.

Freud describes religious ideas as: 'illusions, fulfilments of the oldest, strongest and most urgent wishes of mankind...

Those who cling to them do so because of the comfort they bring, God taking the place of a benevolent father, needed later in life, where threats remain but an actual father is not there to help:

'... the terrifying impression of helplessness in childhood aroused the need for protection – for protection through love – which was provided by the father; and the recognition that this helplessness last throughout life made it necessary to cling to the existence of a father, but this time a more powerful one. Thus the benevolent rule of a divine Providence allays our fear of the dangers of life...

Religion is thus an illusion, created out of our adult need to find childhood comfort. But Freud is careful to define what he means by an illusion:

'An illusion is not the same thing as an error; nor is it necessarily an error... What is characteristic of illusions is that they are derived from human wishes... Illusions need not necessarily be false – that is to say, unrealisable or in contradiction to reality... Thus we call a belief an illusion when a wish-fulfillment is a prominent factor in its motivation, and in doing so we disregard its relations to reality, just as the illusion itself sets no store by verification.'

[from *The Future of an Illusion*, Penguin translation, quoted in *Faith and Reason*, ed Paul Helm]

Parents provide sustenance (or should do); the small child cannot live except with their help. They give rules. The child therefore fears that, if he or she breaks the rules, the result will be alienation from his or her parents and therefore the threat of being cast off alone in a hostile world.

In *The Future of an Illusion* (1927) he set out religion's benefits and problems:

The benefits:

- the threatening and impersonal forces of nature are tamed, by being seen as under the control of a loving and providential God;
- God provides the adult with the sense of protection that a child seeks from a human father;
- that the believer can hope to influence things that happen, by gaining God's help;
- there is a sense of dignity from having a relationship with God;
- that religions teachings diminish the threat posed by death;
- that religious offers an explanation of otherwise inexplicable events.

The problems:

- that faith is actually an illusion, based on what people would like to be true, rather than what is actually true;
- that religious rules and regulations, believed to come from God, may go against the personal needs and well-being of individuals, thus hampering their personal growth.

Through psychoanalysis, Freud took the view that one should probe beneath the conscious mind and locate the childhood source of those things which caused trauma later in life. His assumption is that **once something is confronted and its origins shown, its power is diminished and one is free from it.**

He seems to take the same view of religion – once its origin and power were shown, people would have no need of it. They would grow up, confront and come to terms with their deepest feelings, their mortality and their sexuality, and therefore have no need of religion.

But note – psychology and religion are competing systems – both aim at liberating a person, and making their life better and more satisfying. Therefore what Freud is offering is an alternative way of developing yourself. Either you take to religion in times when you need comfort or challenge, or you take to psychology. Naturally, each is going to regard the other with some degree of suspicion

If religious beliefs can be justified rationally, if they are based on a realistic understanding of life, and on decisions and commitments based on it, then that religion is healthy. On the other hand, if we find that things are believed without any basis in reason or evidence, there is a chance that they are simply delusions – things we would like to believe to be true, but for which we have no good reason to believe that they are actually true.

Psychology may show why a particular belief is accepted or rejected, but it may not necessarily show whether it is true or false.

My reasons for believing something are not the same as the thing I believe. I may believe something for perfectly good reasons, but I may be wrong. On the other hand, I may have an utterly neurotic and unreasonable fear which actually proves to be correct.

Just because your motive for loving or hating something is buried in your early childhood experiences, does not invalidate the fact that you love or hate it.

So where does this take us in assessing Freud and religion today?

There is religion as liberation – where it seeks to enable people to live to their fullest, to express themselves with integrity and to follow a path of acceptance of others that we refer to as ‘love’.

But there is also religion as a fortress against fear of the unknown and the self – those who turn away from understanding their own feelings, and prefer to live under a stern acceptance of religious ‘truths’ which are plainly attempts to support and bolster a sense of self-worth. e.g. you either come to terms with the fact that your life is relatively short, that one day you will have to die, and therefore that you should regularly turn over in your mind what you think is really worthwhile. If you died today, what would your life be worth, of what would you be most happy etc?

OR you believe that you are saved, chosen, on the way to heaven. That you do not have to come to terms with your own mortality because you are going to live for ever, and you know that fundamentally you are right. Comforting, yes. But how does it relate you to others. And is it wish-fulfilment?

Religion can be life-enhancing and healthy – giving a positive sense of who one is and what life is for. Or, religion can be neurotic, an attempt to bolster up a false sense of self-importance, wanting to belong to a chosen elite, wanting to feel moral certainty and to criticise others, wanting to live for ever and deny the reality of change and death.

Whether you agree with him or not, at least Freud has opened up that debate. Not just ‘is it true’ but ‘is it healthy?’

So was Freud obsessed with sex?

Possible – but probably no more than anyone else. And if he was, does that invalidate what he says about religion. Probably not – because his observations that led him to develop psychoanalysis were hugely significant, in starting to get to grips with a whole side of human life that had not been examined in a scientific way. Of course, some (particularly Karl Popper) thought that Freud was not true science, because he did not allow his propositions to be falsified. Perhaps Popper was right to say that Freud did not allow his central ideas to be challenged. However, whether genuinely scientific or not, they formed the basis of a whole new way of understanding human beings and what motivated them. And if we find that sex is fundamental to that motivation, should we really be surprised?

Thus Freud points to the dangers of religion – he does not prove its fundamental beliefs to be wrong, but shows the role they play in life, and suggests that they might be believed to be true for personal reasons, rather than logical ones. **Freud thought a mature person should have no need of the supposed comforts of religion.**

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