Freud: the last great Enlightenment thinker

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Sigmund Freud is out of fashion. The reason? His heroic refusal to flatter humankind

Sigmund Freud contemplates a bust of himself, sculpted for his 75th birthday by Oscar Nemon

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Writing to Albert Einstein in the early 1930s, Sigmund Freud suggested that "man has in him an active instinct for hatred and destruction." Freud went on to contrast this "instinct to destroy and kill" with one he called erotic—an instinct "to conserve and unify," an instinct for love.

Without speculating too much, Freud continued, one might suppose that these instincts function in every living being, with what he called "the death instinct"—*thanatos*—acting "to work its ruin and reduce life to its primal state of inert matter." The death instinct provided "the biological justification for all those vile, pernicious propensities [to war] which we are now combating."

To be sure, Freud concluded, all this talk of *eros* and *thanatos* might give Einstein the impression that psychoanalytic theory amounted to a "species of mythology, and a gloomy one at that." But if so, Freud was unabashed, asking Einstein: "Does not every natural science lead ultimately to this—a sort of mythology? Is it otherwise today with your physical sciences?"

Today the idea that psychoanalysis is not a science is commonplace, but no part of Freud's inheritance is more suspect than the theory of the death instinct. The very idea of instinct is viewed with suspicion. Talk of human instincts, or indeed of human nature, is dismissed as a form of intellectual atavism: human behaviour is seen as far more complex and at the same time more amenable to rational control than Freud believed or implied. Theories of human instinct only serve to block those impulses to progress and rationality that (for all the scorn that is directed against the very idea of human nature) are considered to be quintessentially human.

Freud's ideas are today not simply rejected as false. They are repudiated as being dangerous or immoral; the "gloomy mythology" of warring instincts is condemned as a kind of slander on the species, the fundamental nobility of which it is sacrilege to deny. To be sure, righteous indignation has informed the response to Freud's thought from the beginning. But its new strength helps explain one of the more remarkable features of intellectual life at the start of the 21st century, a time that in its own eyes is more enlightened than any other: the intense unpopularity of Freud, the last great Enlightenment thinker.

Born in Austria-Hungary in 1856 and dying in London in 1939, Freud is commonly known as the originator of the idea of the unconscious mind. However, the idea can be found in a number of earlier thinkers, notably the philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer. It would be more accurate to describe Freud as aiming to make the unconscious mind an object of scientific investigation—a prototypically Enlightenment project of extending the scientific method into previously unexplored regions. Many other 20th century thinkers aimed to examine and influence human life through science and reason, the common pursuit of the quarrelling family of intellectual movements, appearing from the 17th century onwards, that formed the Enlightenment. But by applying the Enlightenment project to forbidden regions of the human mind Freud, more than anyone else, revealed the project's limits.

Starting with research into hysteria, where he concluded that hysterical symptoms often reflected the persisting influence of repressed memories, Freud developed psychoanalysis—a body of thought in which the idea that much of our mental life is repressed and inaccessible to conscious awareness was central.

The practice of psychotherapy that Freud began—the so-called "talking cure"—had the effect of promoting the idea that psychological conflict can be overcome by the sufferer gaining insight into the early experiences from which it may have originated. Later thinkers would attack Freud's emphasis on early experience and the claims attributed to him regarding the therapeutic value of psychoanalysis. Yet several generations of intellectuals were in no doubt that he was a thinker of major importance. It is only recently that his ideas have been widely disparaged and dismissed. Initially rejected because of the central importance they gave to sexuality in the formation of personality, Freud's ideas are rejected today because they imply

that the human animal is ineradicably flawed. It is not Freud's insistence on sexuality that is the source of scandal, but the claim that humans are afflicted by a destructive impulse.

The opprobrium that surrounds Freud is all the more intriguing given that the idea that humankind might be possessed by an impulse to destruction was never confined to him alone. Many thinkers entertained similar thoughts around the start of the last century, including one who was largely forgotten until an early part of her life story caught the eye of the filmmaker David Cronenberg. Sabrina Spielrein, the pivotal figure in *A Dangerous Method* (to be released on 10th February 2012), appears in the film as a hysterical young woman, exhibiting a predilection for sadomasochistic sex following abuse by her father, who after being confined in a mental institution receives treatment from Jung, who then becomes her lover.

The story of the film seems not far from what actually happened. Spielrein did experience a variety of personal difficulties, and was for a time confined in an institution. Whether she and Jung were lovers is not known; but the consensus among those who have studied the episode is that what happened between them went beyond what can be properly expected, then or now, in a professional relationship. Where Spielrein has been remembered, it is as a minor figure in the developing conflict between the two psychoanalytic founders.

This is a pity, for she was much more than that. Spielrein trained and practised as a psychotherapist (the developmental psychologist Jean Piaget being one of her patients) and made important contributions to psychoanalytic theory, some aspects of which are echoed in Freud's later work. Coming from a Russian-Jewish family of doctors and psychologists, she moved to the Soviet Union in the early 1920s, where she married and had children and worked with the neurologist Alexander Luria, among others. Information about her life and work after this point is sketchy. What is known is that Spielrein's husband and several members of her family fell victim to Stalin's terror, while Spielrien herself was shot, along with her children and the rest of the Jewish population of her native city Rostov, after being marched through the main street by the SS in 1942. She was then buried in a mass grave along with thousands of others.

If Spielrein's life was blighted, it was not by her encounter with Jung (though she may have regretted the relationship). She emerged from the experience to produce some of the most interesting ideas of the early years of psychoanalysis. Her paper "Destruction as a cause of coming into being," given as a lecture to a meeting of the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society chaired by Freud in 1911, prefigures Freud's claim that human beings are ruled by two opposing instincts. Spielrein suggested that humans are driven by two basic impulses, one impelling them to independence and survival, the other to propagation and thereby (she suggested) to the loss of individuality.

Spielrein's account differs from Freud's in some ways—notably the link she makes between the impulse of procreation and the destruction of the individual. These differences point to the influence of Schopenhauer, who shaped much of the central European intelligentsia's thinking at the start of the 20th century. Schopenhauer's impact on fin-de-siècle European culture can hardly be exaggerated. His view that

human intelligence is the blind servant of unconscious will informs the writings of Tolstoy, Conrad, Hardy and Proust. Schopenhauer's most lasting impact, however, was in questioning the prevailing view of the human mind—a view that had shaped western thought at least since Aristotle, continued to be formative throughout the Christian era and underpinned the European Enlightenment.

Schopenhauer posed a major challenge to the prevailing Enlightenment worldview. In much of the western tradition, consciousness and thought were treated as being virtually one and the same; the possibility that thought might be unconscious was excluded almost by definition. But for Schopenhauer the conscious part of the human mind was only the visible surface of inner life, which obeyed the non-rational imperatives of bodily desire rather than conscious deliberation. It was Schopenhauer who, in a celebrated chapter on "The Metaphysics of Sexual Love" in *The World as Will and Idea*, affirmed the primary importance of sexuality in human life, suggesting that the sexual impulse operates independently of the choices and intentions of individuals, without regard for—and often at the expense of—their freedom and well-being. Schopenhauer also examined the meaning of dreams and the role of slips of the tongue in revealing repressed thoughts and emotions, ideas that Freud would make his own. Though Freud rarely mentions him, there can be little doubt that he read the philosopher closely. So most likely did Spielrein, whose account of sexuality as a threat to individual autonomy resembles Schopenhauer's more even than does Freud's.

From one point of view, Freud's work was an attempt to transplant the idea of the unconscious mind posited in Schopenhauer's philosophy into the domain of science. When Freud originated psychoanalysis, he wanted it to be a science. One reason was because achieving scientific standing for his ideas would enable them to overcome the opposition of moralising critics who objected to the central place of sexuality in psychoanalysis. Another was that, for most of his life, Freud never doubted that science was the only true repository of human knowledge. Here he revealed the influence of Ernst Mach (1838-1916), an Austrian physicist and philosopher whose ideas were pervasive in Freud's Vienna. For Mach, science was not a mirror of nature but a method for ordering human sensations, continuing and refining the picture of the world that has been evolved in the human organism. If we perceived things as they are we would see chaos, since much of the order we perceive in the world is projected into it by the human mind.

Here Mach—like Schopenhauer—was developing the philosophy of Kant, who believed that the world we perceive is shaped by human categories. As is generally recognised, Kant is one of the greatest philosophers of the Enlightenment, who saw his task as rescuing human knowledge from the near-destruction that it had suffered under the assaults of David Hume, an Enlightenment philosopher of equal stature. What is less commonly understood is that Kant's impact was to reinforce the scepticism he aimed to resist. Taking his point of departure from Kant, Schopenhauer came to the view that the world as understood by science was an illusion, while for Mach it was a human construction. It was against this background that Freud took for granted that science was the only source of knowledge, while at the same time accepting that science could not reveal the nature of things.

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It is a paradoxical position, as the development of Freud's thought illustrates. If science is a system of human constructions, useful for practical purposes but not a literal account of reality, what makes it superior to other modes of thinking? If science is also a sort of mythology—as Freud suggested in his correspondence with Einstein—what becomes of the Enlightenment project of dispelling myth through scientific inquiry? These were questions that Freud faced, and in some measure resolved, in the account of religion he developed towards the end of his life. In *The Future of an Illusion* (1927), he had interpreted religion largely in the standard Enlightenment fashion that has been revived in recent years, and is now so wearisomely familiar: religion was an error born of ignorance, which was bound to retreat as knowledge advanced. Never placing too much trust in reason, Freud did not expect religion to vanish; but at this point he seemed convinced that the diminishing role of religion in human life would be an altogether good thing.

The account of religion he presented ten years later in *Moses and Monotheism* (1937) was more complex. In the earlier book he had recognised that, answering to enduring human needs—particularly the need for consolation—religious beliefs were not scientific theories; but neither were they necessarily false. While religions might be illusions, illusions were not just errors—they could contain truth. In *Moses and Monotheism*, Freud went further, arguing that religion had played an essential role in the development of human inquiry. The Jewish belief in an unseen God was not a relic of ignorance without any positive value. By affirming a hidden reality, the idea of an invisible deity had encouraged inquiry into what lay behind the world that is disclosed to the senses. More, the belief in an unseen god had allowed a new kind of self-examination to develop—one that aimed to explore the inner world by looking beneath the surface of conscious awareness. Freud's attempt to gain insight into the invisible workings of the mind may have been an extension of scientific method into new areas; but this advance was possible, Freud came to think, only because religion had prepared the ground. Without ever surrendering his uncompromising atheism, Freud acknowledged that psychoanalysis owed its existence to faith.

In accepting that illusion could be productive, Freud was retracing the steps of Schopenhauer's errant disciple Nietzsche. At the same time Freud was making a decisive break with a dominant strand of Enlightenment thinking. According to Alasdair MacIntyre, who developed the idea in his book *After Virtue* (1981), Nietzsche brought the Enlightenment to a close by showing that the project of a morality that rested solely on human will was self-defeating. MacIntyre's argument has the merit of recognising that Nietzsche was an Enlightenment thinker—rather than the crazed irrationalist of vulgar intellectual history—as well as one of the Enlightenment's more formidable critics. It was Freud, however, who made the more radical break with Enlightenment thinking. Even if he confines its scope to the absurd figure of the Übermensch, Nietzsche remains a militant partisan of human autonomy. Freud, by contrast despite almost everything that has been written about him—aimed as much to mark the limits of human autonomy as to extend it. His words of advice to a patient indicate how much his thinking diverged from the view of open-ended human possibilities that is asserted adamantly today: "I do not doubt that it would be easier for fate to take away your suffering than it would be for me. But you will see for yourself how much has been gained if we succeed in turning your hysterical misery into common unhappiness. Having restored your inner life, you will be better able to arm yourself against that unhappiness." The tone of this injunction—with its

use of the language of fate, prohibited among progressive right-thinking people—could not be further from contemporary ways of feeling and thinking.

In some respects Freud's conception of psychoanalysis has more in common with the ancient Stoic art of life than with any modern way of thinking. As Philip Rieff argued in *Freud: the Mind of the Moralist* (1959), which remains the most penetrating study of the subject, there are good reasons for thinking Freud was formulating a new version of Stoic ethics. The goal of the Stoics was self-mastery through the acceptance of a personal fate, a condition that was supposed to go with tranquillity of mind. In looking back to infancy and childhood, Freud was pointing to the fact that the choosing self—one of the central fictions of liberal humanism—is itself unchosen, formed in a state of helplessness and bearing the traces of that experience forever after. It was this beleaguered self that Freud aimed to fortify: by gaining insight into the early experiences that shape our habits of feeling, he believed, we can in some measure reorder our response to the world. This is the respect in which Freud was proposing a version of Stoic ethics. But his Stoicism differed from the ancients in at least two important ways.

In the *Meditations* of the Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius, self-mastery is achieved by identifying the self with the cosmos, a semi-divine order of things that is intrinsically rational. At bottom an uncompromisingly modern thinker, Freud had no such mystical faith in logic as the essence of the universe. The self-mastery he advocated—and practised—was not premised on the redemptive power of reason. Instead, it required accepting chaos as an ultimate fact. Here a second difference with ancient Stoicism appears: Freud never held out the hope of tranquillity. Rather, he aimed to reconcile those who entered psychoanalysis to a state of perpetual unrest. As has been argued by Adam Phillips, Freud's most creative contemporary interpreter, psychoanalysis does not so much promise inner peace as open up a possibility of release from the fantasy that inner conflict will end. In this Freud also differed fundamentally from Schopenhauer, who never ceased to cling to a tormenting dream of salvation.

It may now be clearer, perhaps, why Freud's thought is once again an object of scandal. His assault on the innocent verities of rationalism does not come from an avowed enemy of the Enlightenment—like that of Joseph de Maistre, say, whose attacks on reason were done in the service of revealed truth—but from one of its most resolute protagonists. An intrepid partisan of reason, Freud devoted his life to exploring reason's limits. He was ready to accept that psychoanalysis could never be the science he had once wanted it to be. At the same time he came to accept that science might be superior to other modes of thinking only in limited ways. The myth-making impulse, which functions as the bogeyman of infantile rationalism, could not be eradicated from the human mind or from science.

Freud's thought is a vital corrective to the scientific triumphalism that is making so much noise at the present time. But more than any other feature of his thinking, it is his acceptance of the flawed nature of human beings that is offensive today. Freud's unforgivable sin was in locating the source of human disorder within human beings themselves. The painful conflicts in which humans have been entangled throughout their history and pre-history do not come only from oppression, poverty, inequality or lack of education. They originate in permanent flaws of the human animal. Of course

Freud was not the first Enlightenment thinker to accept this fact. So did Thomas Hobbes. Like Hobbes, Freud belongs in a tradition of Enlightenment thinking that aims to understand rather than to edify. Both aimed to reduce needless conflict; but neither of them imagined that the sources of such conflict could be eliminated by any increase in human knowledge. Even more than Hobbes, Freud was clear that destructive conflict goes with being human. This, in the final analysis, is why Freud is so unpopular today.

In a well-known passage at the end of *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930), Freud declared: "I have not the courage to rise up before my fellow-men as a prophet, and I bow to their reproach that I can offer them no consolation…" What is most in demand at the start of the 21st century, in contrast, is consolation and nothing else. Enlightenment fundamentalism—the insistence by writers such as Christopher Hitchens and Richard Dawkins that our salvation lies in affirming a highly selective set of "Enlightenment values"—serves this emotional need for meaning rather than any imperative of understanding. Like the religions they disparage, but with less profundity and little evident effect, the varieties of Enlightenment thinking on offer today are balm for the uneasy soul. The scientific-sounding formulae with which they appease their anxiety—the end of history, the flat world, the inexorable but forever delayed process of secularisation—are more fantastical than anything in Freud's "gloomy mythology."

The incessant ranting uplift and adamant certainty of latter-day partisans of Enlightenment are symptoms of a loss of nerve. Baffled and rattled by the unfolding scene, requiring incessant reassurance if they are not to fall into mawkish despair, these evangelists of reason are engaged—no doubt unconsciously—in a kind of collective therapy. Inevitably, they find Freud an intensely discomforting figure. Among many of his followers, the practice of self-inquiry that Freud invented has been turned into a technique of psychological adjustment—the opposite, in many ways, of what he intended. In this respect, at least, contemporary hostility to Freud expresses a sound intuition. What Freud offers is a way of thinking in which the experience of being human can be seen to be more intractably difficult, and at the same time more interesting and worthwhile, than anything imagined in the cheap little gospels of progress and self-improvement that are being hawked today.

If Freud has been misunderstood, neglected or repudiated, he would have expected nothing else. He is rejected now for the same reason that he was rejected in fin-de-siècle Vienna: his heroic refusal to flatter humankind. As his correspondence with Einstein confirms, he did not share the hope that reason could deliver humankind from the "active instinct for hatred and destruction," which was clearly at work in Europe at the time. When he left Nazi-occupied Austria to spend the last year of his life in Britain, he knew that the destruction that lay ahead could not by then be prevented. But fate could still be mocked, and so defied. When leaving Austria, Freud was required to sign a document testifying that he had been well and fairly treated. He did so, adding in his own hand: "I can most highly recommend the Gestapo to everyone."