

Sigmund Freud (1856–1939)



Sigmund Freud, the father of psychoanalysis, was a physiologist, medical doctor, psychologist and influential thinker of the early twentieth century. Working initially in close collaboration with Joseph Breuer, Freud elaborated the theory that the mind is a complex energy-system, the structural investigation of which is the proper province of psychology. He articulated and refined the concepts of the unconscious, infantile sexuality and repression, and he proposed a tripartite account of the mind's structure—all as part of a radically new conceptual and therapeutic frame of reference for the understanding of human psychological development and the treatment of abnormal mental conditions. Notwithstanding the multiple manifestations of psychoanalysis as it exists today, it can in almost all fundamental respects be traced directly back

to Freud's original work.

Freud's innovative treatment of human actions, dreams, and indeed of cultural artifacts as invariably possessing implicit symbolic significance has proven to be extraordinarily fruitful, and has had massive implications for a wide variety of fields including psychology, anthropology, semiotics, and artistic creativity and appreciation. However, Freud's most important and frequently re-iterated claim, that with psychoanalysis he had invented a successful science of the mind, remains the subject of much critical debate and controversy.

3. The Theory of the Unconscious

Freud's theory of the unconscious, then, is highly deterministic—a fact which, given the nature of nineteenth century science, should not be surprising. Freud was arguably the first thinker to apply deterministic principles systematically to the sphere of the mental, and to hold that the broad spectrum of human behavior is explicable only in terms of the (usually hidden) mental processes or states which determine it. Thus, instead of treating the behavior of the neurotic as being causally inexplicable—which had been the prevailing approach for centuries—Freud insisted, on the contrary, on treating it as behavior for which it is meaningful to seek *an explanation* by searching for *causes* in terms of the mental states of the individual concerned. Hence the significance which he attributed to slips of the tongue or pen, obsessive behavior and dreams—all these, he held, are determined by hidden causes in the person's mind, and so they reveal in covert form what would otherwise not be known at all. This suggests the view that freedom of the will is, if not completely an illusion, certainly more tightly circumscribed than is commonly believed, for it follows from this that whenever we make a choice we are governed by hidden mental processes of which we are unaware and over which we have no control.

given time, but is rather one which *cannot*, except through protracted psychoanalysis, be brought to the forefront of consciousness. The postulation of such unconscious mental states entails, of course, that the mind is not, and cannot be, either identified with consciousness, or an object of consciousness. To employ a much-used analogy, it is rather structurally akin to an iceberg, the bulk of it lying below the surface, exerting a dynamic and determining influence upon the part which is amenable to direct inspection—the conscious mind.

Deeply associated with this view of the mind is Freud's account of instincts or drives. Instincts, for Freud, are the principal motivating forces in the mental realm, and as such they 'energise' the mind in all of its functions. There are, he held, an indefinitely large number of such instincts, but these can be reduced to a small number of basic ones, which he grouped into two broad generic categories, *Eros* (the life instinct), which covers all the self-preserving and erotic instincts, and *Thanatos* (the death instinct), which covers all the instincts towards aggression, self-destruction, and cruelty. Thus it is a mistake to interpret Freud as asserting that *all* human actions spring from motivations which are sexual in their origin, since those which derive from Thanatos are not sexually motivated—indeed, Thanatos is the irrational urge to destroy the source of all sexual energy in the annihilation of the self. Having said that, it is undeniably true that Freud gave sexual drives an importance and centrality in human life, human actions, and human behavior which was new (and to many, shocking), arguing as he does that sexual drives exist and can be discerned in children from birth (the theory of infantile sexuality), and that sexual energy (*libido*) is the single most important motivating force in adult life. However, a crucial qualification has to be added here—Freud effectively redefined the term "sexuality" to make it cover *any form of pleasure* which is or can be derived from the body. Thus his theory of the instincts or drives is essentially that the human being is energized or driven from birth by the desire to acquire and enhance bodily pleasure.

An Introduction to Psychoanalytic Criticism

Sigmund Freud is the author of the structural model of personality. In this theory, Freud explains that each person's personality is formed of three parts: the **Ego**, the **Superego** and the **Id**. Psychoanalysis is the process of using what we know about these three parts of someone's personality to analyze the ways that person behaves.

Literary critics sometimes analyze the actions of literary characters using the three personality structures that Freud identified. As critics explore the ego, superego, and id of characters in a work, they focus on the ways that these parts of the characters' personalities influence the work as a whole. This process is called psychoanalytic criticism.

In the next activity, you will use Freud's theory to analyze the characters in *The Cat In The Hat* by Dr. Seuss. To help prepare you for this activity, read the following explanations for id, ego, and superego.

Id

The id is the part of the personality that contains our primitive impulses—such as thirst, anger, hunger—and the desire for instant gratification or release. According to Freud, we are born with our id. The id is an important part of our personality because as newborns, it allows us to get our basic needs met. Freud believed that the id is based on our pleasure principle. The id wants whatever feels good at the time, with no consideration for the other circumstances of the situation. The id is sometimes represented by a devil sitting on someone's shoulder. As this devil sits there, he tells the ego to base behavior on how the action will influence the self, specifically how it will bring the self pleasure.

Superego

The superego is the part of the personality that represents the conscience, the moral part of us. The superego develops due to the moral and ethical restraints placed on us by our caregivers. It dictates our belief of right and wrong. The superego is sometimes represented by an angel sitting on someone's shoulder, telling the ego to base behavior on how the action will influence society.

Ego

The ego is the part of the personality that maintains a balance between our impulses (our id) and our conscience (our superego). The ego is based on the reality principle. The ego understands that other people have needs and desires and that sometimes being impulsive or selfish can hurt us in the end. It is the ego's job to meet the needs of the id, while taking into consideration the reality of the situation. The ego works, in other words, to balance the id and superego. The ego is represented by a person, with a devil (the id) on one shoulder and an angel (the superego) on the other.