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Freud's Vienna and Other Essays



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apy that “it is in essence a cure through love.” To have this authoritative statement about the nature of psychoanalytic therapy, with its utter refutation of the technicians of the deep interpretations and the artisans of the dynamic dissection of the human psyche, makes one grateful for these volumes. As a collection of anecdotes, they are of very great merit. As a biography of Freud the man and as a statement about psychoanalysis, they have many shortcomings. As a history of the psychoanalytic movement, they do injustice to the personalities and contributions of many who were closest to Freud, and thus are misleading. And as a statement of the society and times out of which Freud (and with him psychoanalysis) grew, they are a failure.

II

FROMM ON FREUD

One cannot escape comparing Fromm’s one thin volume on Freud with Ernest Jones’s three huge ones, however different in approach and intention they are. Out of Fromm’s essay Freud emerges alive and of vital concern to us, and by showing how much still remains to be done, Fromm hands us a challenge. By contrast, Jones has erected a monument to his master, giving the impression that all problems related to Freud and psychoanalysis are solved; that all is said and done. In so doing, Jones turns Freud into a major historic figure, which he is—but of the past, which he is not.

Fromm begins with a psychologically convincing and balanced picture of Freud the man and his background, highlighting the tremendous achievements, but not glossing over Freud’s failings, always intent on showing how psychoanalysis flowed from both. This is followed by some startlingly new material; Fromm tells of Freud’s need and desire

This review of Erich Fromm’s book *Sigmund Freud’s Mission* (New York: Harper, 1959) appeared in *The New Leader*, May 11, 1959. It should be read together with the preceding essay on Jones’s biography of Freud, since it is a companion piece.

to become a world reformer, and of the consequences this had for psychoanalysis, which therefore became less a scientific society and more a semireligious movement.

The Janus-like character of psychoanalysis as both a new science and a reform movement finds its expression in the nature of those great men with whom Freud compared himself. Occasionally he likened himself to Columbus, the discoverer of a new continent, just as he himself had discovered the uncharted world of the unconscious. More frequently he compared himself with Copernicus and Darwin, because each of them, like Freud, inflicted a heavy blow on the self-love of man, the first by denying that man's abode is the center of the universe, the second by depriving man of his uniqueness, making him a link in the chain of evolution. Yet in spite of his comparisons of himself with these two great scientists, Freud never studied them psychoanalytically and did not explore the dynamics which led to their great discoveries. On the other hand, he devoted two major efforts to a psychoanalytic search into the life of the great world reformer and prophet Moses. These were, in a sense, the crowning achievements of his life.

Fromm's demonstration of Freud's desire to change the course of the world—to create a movement that was political in the sense that it would change man's morals and with it his life on this earth—not only explains Freud's fascination with the Moses problem but is crucial for our understanding of psychoanalysis as a movement. It explains one of the strangest contradictions in Freud: his assertion that psychoanalysis was a science, and as such was subject to all those criteria which should apply to scientific investigation; and his contrary insistence that psychoanalysis must be accepted as formulated by him, that any deviation or differing opinion was not something that could be expected to resolve itself as scientific evidence accumulated but was instead a heresy, to be eradicated by expelling the heretic from the movement.

Freud the man Fromm shows us to be basically very insecure, easily frightened and vulnerable to feelings of persecution, and with little confidence in others. Convinced of their selfish motives, deep down an isolated and lonely man, Freud did not even believe there could be security in love. Certainty for him was to be found only in reason, through knowledge. Therefore, he felt the need to master the world intellectually if he wanted relief from his doubts and feelings of failure. For Freud, as for Plato, there was certainty only in ideas, except that Freud brought



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his ideas down to our earth, into the human mind. Certainty lay only in reason, a reason he narrowly defined as intellect.

Freud believed that feelings and emotions were irrational and therefore suspect. Unlike Spinoza, he did not accept the view that emotions, like thoughts, can be both rational and irrational, and that the full development of man requires the rational development of both his thoughts and his emotions. Like many philosophers of the Enlightenment, Freud could not see that if man's thinking is split off from his feeling, both become distorted. So much was Freud dedicated to the absolute power of reason that it took him years to overcome the wishful notion that an intellectual grasp of the causes of neurotic symptoms would automatically cure them. His deep passion for rationality as the only basis for security was matched by an extraordinary courage, kept up even in the face of the heaviest obstacles.

Freud's relations to others have to be understood on the basis of his distrust of emotions and his single-minded pursuit of intellectual certainty. Fromm sketches the difficulties Freud met in his relations to women, and the entirely different ones which marred his relations to men. All this has been described in other biographies, though rarely with such acute psychological understanding.

Most biographers have neglected Freud's relationship to his father. Fromm stresses its importance and shows that first in relation to his father and then in regard to matters general, Freud was a rebel, not a revolutionary. He was a rebel when he defied public opinion and medical authority, but he was not a revolutionary, because he wanted to be, and became, an authority for others to submit to. Freud's rebellion was directed against those in authority who did not acknowledge him, and the first of these was his father.

According to Fromm, a person does not overcome his ambivalence toward authority until he frees himself from the attachment to authority that makes him wish to dominate others; only then can he change from rebel into revolutionary. In this sense Freud was and remained a rebel. While he defied authorities and enjoyed his defiance, he was still deeply impressed by the existing social order and its authorities. Gaining recognition from them was of utmost concern to him.

Fromm finds the root of Freud's authoritarian behavior in his wish to create a political movement and remain its leader. It was this "political" desire, and not a crude authoritarianism, for example, that made Freud



advocate purging the Jungians from the London Psychoanalytic Society, one of several expulsions to prevent the spread of “heretical” views. The nature of this movement can best be seen from Freud’s identification with Moses, which in his later years became ever more evident. Freud reinterpreted the Moses of Michelangelo to show that instead of breaking the tablets of the law, Moses calmed his wrath out of concern for his people. Thus Freud interpreted Moses as a man struggling successfully against inward passion for the sake of reason, and for a cause to which he had devoted himself. Freud identified closely with this Moses, the prophet not understood by his people and yet able to control his anger and continue the task of leading his people to the promised land.

Freud, who as a boy had aspired to become a great military leader or a cabinet minister, as a man yearned to bring a new and higher “law” to the human race, a new understanding of inner man and the world he lived in, a new covenant with pure reason. Neither nationalism, nor socialism, nor religion could be trusted to provide guidance toward the better life; only a full understanding of man’s mind, gained by exposing the irrationality of these other answers, could lead man as far as he was destined to go. Freud envisioned man’s sober, skeptical, rational appraisal of his past and his present, and an acceptance of the fundamentally tragic and lonely nature of his existence. Perhaps on this all-important point I should let Fromm speak for himself:

Freud saw himself as the leader of this intellectual revolution, which made the last step rationalism could make. Only if one understands this aspiration of Freud to bring a new message to mankind, not a happy but a realistic one, can one understand his creation: the psychoanalytic movement.

What a strange phenomenon, this psychoanalytic movement! Psychoanalysis is a therapy, that of neurosis, and it is at the same time a psychological theory, a general theory of human nature and specifically of the existence of the unconscious and its manifestations in dreams, symptoms, in character and in all symbolic productions. Is there any other case of a therapy or a scientific theory transforming itself into a movement, centrally directed by a secret committee, with purges of deviant members, with local organizations in an international superorganization? No therapy in the field of medicine was ever transformed into such a movement. As far as psychoanalysis as a theory is concerned, the nearest comparison would be Darwinism; here is a revolutionary theory,



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shedding light on the history of man, and tending to change his picture of the world more fundamentally than any other theory in the 19th century—yet there is no Darwinian “movement,” no directorium which leads that movement, no purges which decide who has the right to call himself a Darwinist and who has lost such a privilege.

Why this unique role of the psychoanalytic movement? The answer lies partly in the foregoing analysis of Freud’s personality. He was a great scientist indeed; but like Marx, who was a great sociologist and economist, Freud had still another aim, one that a man like Darwin did not have: He wanted to transform the world. Under the disguise of a therapist and a scientist he was one of the great world reformers of the beginning 20th century.

Speaking of the “quasi-political character” of the psychoanalytic movement, Fromm shows that it never was based on the spirit of a scientific society, but was organized from the start on rather dictatorial lines. Within it, Freud agreed that Plato’s rule by philosophers would be preferable to a more democratic organization. Some psychoanalytical congresses did have earmarks of political conventions. The idea of a secret committee of seven who were to assure the right direction of the movement suggests not so much a lack of trust in the validity of psychoanalytical findings as a desire for rigid and politically reliable control. Such distrust of the powers of reason and the convincing nature of scientific findings is in clear contrast to Freud’s philosophical beliefs; it can be explained only by the wish to create a political movement around his scientific discoveries.

In support of this analysis, Fromm notes how Freud spoke of one congress as a “diet” (*Reichstag*); of “the motherland” and “the colonies” of psychoanalysis; and of the need “to fortify our dominion against all things and everybody.” Even today, after so many years, the psychoanalytical societies and their international organization, with its branches and strictures as to who has a right to consider himself a psychoanalyst, are a spectacle rare among scientific societies. There are few other contemporary examples of attempts to chain the progress of scientific theory and practice to the discoveries of a founder, allowing little freedom to revise certain fundamental theses of the master.

As with Freud the man, there are contradictions. Freud denied that



psychoanalysis was a philosophy, and consciously he was dedicated to utter intellectual freedom. The excuse for the rigid organization of the psychoanalytic movement was the existence of its detractors. Against them, strangely enough, only a monolithic organization, not the convincing power of truth, seemed to offer protection. Freud's method of therapy and theories had nothing to do with political movements. Why, then, did Freud view the struggle for the recognition of psychoanalysis, both as a scientific theory and as a medical therapy, as a quasi-political battle?

The answer may be found in his belief that "psychoanalysis is the instrument destined for the progressive conquest of the id." While this is not a religious aim, it is certainly an ethical one: the conquest of passion by reason. Comparing Freud with Marx, Fromm remarks: "Just as Marx believed he had found the scientific basis for socialism, in contrast to what he called utopian socialism, Freud felt that he had found the scientific basis for an old moral aim and thus progressed over the utopian morality presented by religions and philosophies. Since he had no faith in the average man, this new scientific morality was an aim that could be accomplished only by the elite, and the psychoanalytic movement was the active avant-garde, small but well organized to bring about the victory of the moral ideal."

Fromm concludes that Freud might have become the leader of a socialist or an ethical-culture movement or, for other reasons, a Zionist leader, had he not had an all-absorbing interest in the human mind and a courageous commitment to the pursuit of truth as he saw it. Also, Freud was much too conservative and skeptical to become a political leader. But "under the disguise of a scientific school, he realized his old dream, to be the Moses who showed the human race the promised land, the conquest of the Id by the Ego, and the way to this conquest."

One of the most interesting parts of Fromm's analysis is the parallels he draws between Freud's system and nineteenth-century middle-class economic beliefs in the virtue of saving and accumulation of capital:

By nonsatisfaction of instinctual desires, so Freud thought, by self-deprivation, the elite, in contrast to the mob, "saves" the psychic capital for cultural achievements. The whole mystery of sublimation, which Freud never quite adequately explained, is the mystery of capital forma-



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tion according to the myth of the 19th-century middle class. Just as wealth is the product of saving, culture is the product of instinctual frustration.

Another part of the 19th-century picture of man was also fully accepted by Freud and translated into his psychological theory: the picture of man as being basically aggressive and competitive. . . . Man, for Freud, was primarily isolated and self-sufficient. He was a social animal only by the necessity for the mutual satisfaction of needs, not by any primary need or desire to be related to one another. . . . Man is basically a machine, driven by libido and regulating itself by the need to reduce painful tension to a certain minimal threshold. This reduction of tension constitutes the nature of pleasure. In order to arrive at this satisfaction, men and women need each other. They become engaged in mutual satisfaction of their libidinous needs, and this constitutes their interest in each other.

Thus Fromm presents Freud's concept of *Homo sexualis* as a deepened and enlarged version of the economist's concept of *Homo economicus*. Only in one respect did Freud deviate from the traditional picture: he declared that the degree of sexual repression was excessive, and causing neurosis.

Whether or not Freud's aim was to create around psychoanalysis a movement for the ethical liberation of man, a new secular and scientific religion for the elite to guide mankind by, he could not have succeeded without kindred needs within his immediate followers, and later within the vast public which became enthusiastically attracted. While Freud's hopes and those of his first loyal disciples are now a matter of the past, the fact that they are still active concerns us most.

Those who embrace psychoanalysis in the image of Freud today are mostly lonely urban intellectuals with a deep yearning to be committed to an ideal, to a movement, and yet without the ability to make real sacrifices for it—to relinquish status or success for an ideal. They are people without any deep religious, political, or philosophical ideals or convictions. The growing circle of analysts comes from the same background; the great popularity of psychoanalysis in the Western world, particularly in the United States since the 1930s, has this same basis. Here is a middle class for which life has lost meaning. Its members are without political or religious ideals, yet are in search of a meaning, an idea to devote themselves to, an explanation of life that requires neither



faith nor sacrifices, and that will enable them to feel part of a movement without any major commitment.

All these needs were fulfilled by the psychoanalytic movement. But as it began to serve this need for passive comfort, the new movement shared the fate of so many others which began with great courage and high resolve. The original enthusiasm, freshness, and spontaneity weakened, and a hierarchy took over which claimed its prestige from the correct interpretation of the dogma and exercised the power to judge who could be counted among the faithful. Eventually dogma, ritual, and idolatry toward the leader replaced that leader's creative daring and imagination.

The result is that many patients who enter therapy are more devoted to the ritual and dogma and care less for the essential search for truth and mastery over their own unconscious. They are attracted because through psychoanalysis they become "part of the movement, experience a sense of solidarity with all others who are analyzed, and a sense of superiority over those who are not. Often, they are much less concerned with being cured than with the exhilarating sensation of having found a spiritual home," not a home that serves as a secure haven from which to sail as yet uncharted seas of human experience, but a home which is a castle safely enclosing their empty lives.

Much in this review has been a paraphrasing of what, to me, seemed most important in Fromm's analysis, not of psychoanalysis, but of the psychoanalytic movement. Fromm sees the greatest weakness of this movement as its failure to extend the understanding of the individual's unconscious to a critical analysis of his society, and as the failure of Freudian psychoanalysis, past or present, to transcend a liberal middle-class attitude toward society. To these, Fromm ascribes its continuing narrowness and an eventual stagnation even in its proper field, the understanding of the individual unconscious. Psychoanalysis thus becomes a substitute satisfaction for a deep human yearning to find meaning in life, to be in genuine touch with reality and achieve closeness to others:

Here, in the Movement, they found everything—dogma, a ritual, a leader, a hierarchy, the feeling of possessing the truth, of being superior to the uninitiated; yet without great effort, without deeper comprehension of the problems of human existence, without insight into and criti-



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cism of their own society and its crippling effects on man, without having to change one's character in those aspects which matter, namely, to get rid of one's greed, anger and selfishness; basically without even escaping one's isolation. All they try, often successfully, to get rid of are certain libidinous fixations and their transference. And while this may be significant in relieving individual distress, it is not sufficient for the achievement of that characterological change which is necessary to be in full touch with reality.

And so, from a forward-moving and courageous idea, psychoanalysis became transformed into the safe cradle of those frightened and isolated members of the middle and upper-class who do not find a haven in the more conventional religious and social movements of their times.

From this book Freud emerges not so much a hero as one of the greatest men of this century, and the last to have radically altered human thinking about man and reality. From Fromm's critique of the psychoanalytic *movement*, it would appear that the *science* of psychoanalysis in its growing application to human affairs—quite apart from its sacred traditions as a “movement”—may still offer one of the best hopes for the future of mankind.