

Preface: The King and I

❖ I AM ALWAYS DISAPPOINTED WHEN A BOOK LACKS A PREFACE:
IT IS LIKE ARRIVING AT SOMEONE'S HOUSE FOR DINNER, AND
BEING CONDUCTED STRAIGHT INTO THE DINING-ROOM.

Michael Dummett, *Frege: Philosophy of Language*

From childhood, I was brought into a peculiar ritual which I did not understand. Neither did anyone else. As far as I can remember, it began on the first day of real school, first grade. Leaning against the edge of her desk, the teacher, Mrs. Gilmette, explained that she was going to assign each of us our own desks for the year. She went in alphabetical order, and when she got to me she said, "Are you related to the king?" Obviously, I had no idea what she was talking about. But the idea that I might somehow be related to a king was placed in my mind when I was six years old. Perhaps that single grain of phantasy-sand would have been enough for my imagination to work over and make into a pearl; or perhaps I would have forgotten all about it. I wouldn't know: *every year*, on the first day of school, the teacher would ask if I were related to the king. It is hard to describe the bored fascination this question would arouse. On the one hand, I'd inwardly groan: here we go again. And I'd realize that in the intervening year I had done nothing to find out who this king was. On the other hand, as the years passed, I came to think that

the answer to this question had something to do with me. This was my special meaning. It would tell me who I was. But I didn't know what this meaning meant.

As a young man I learned that I was in fact related to a King Lear. My father's uncle Eli was a con man; and in Leavenworth Prison, where he died, the other inmates knew him as "King." According to family lore, my father was on his way to the Plaza Hotel to meet my mother's parents to ask for her hand in marriage when he glimpsed the tabloid headline "Toy-Gun Bandit Arrested!" If the headline-writers had only known, it could have said, "King in Dungeon!" I have often tried to imagine my father—then a young doctor, but from a humble Jewish home—trying to explain to these wealthy, Jewish-proper-Bostonian parents-in-law-to-be that yes, he was related to royalty, but not *quite* in the way they might imagine. This vignette set my mind moving toward crime. Two generations above me, on my father's side, there was a significant strain of sociopathy running through the family. In my father's generation there was enormous worldly success. Perhaps this represented a decline! Perhaps we were descended from a great line of crooks! This made some intuitive sense to me, for I could recognize a touch of larceny in my soul. And then I read Isaac Babel's "The King," in his *Odessa Stories*, a wonderful tale of a Russian-Jewish King of Crime—and for a passing moment I thought I had the answer. My family reputedly comes from Odessa. The King was my great, great . . . grandfather, a Jewish Moriarity, a Karla or Macavity—and from that golden age we have fallen into the bronze. Whether I considered my toy-gun-bandit uncle or my successful television-producer cousin, it was two sides of the same bronze coin. The mantle of truly great criminality had passed out of our family. The Great Violators of established norms were no longer to be found among the Lears. Our only choice now was between petty criminality and vast legitimate success. It didn't seem fair. How had we gone wrong?

Though I have played with this idea for years, and it does have some resonance for me, it has never had that convincing ring of truth. Neither did my first approaches to Shakespeare's King Lear. I know in the center of my soul that I would understand what Cordelia was saying to me and I

would love her for it. I also know absolutely that, even were I at the center of that drama, I would find Regan and Goneril's flattery as repellent as I do from the audience. Whatever my many faults, I simply do not have Lear's insecurity and vanity. Try as I might, I couldn't identify with him. This is a shame, because the play moves me deeply: I consider it one of a handful of the very best things a human being has ever made. And yet, I couldn't get from there to *being* King Lear. There things lay fallow for years. None of this was particularly pressing: it was just an occasional fancy which would not allow itself to be completely forgotten.

And then one night, during the time I was in analysis, I woke up with a start and realized I had it: I am Cordelia! I *am* related to the King! He's my father! I love him dearly, and he just doesn't get it. To identify with Cordelia is to want to be blunt, to avoid embellishment, flattery, or hypocrisy—and to want to be loved for *doing just that*. This is not a set of desires which get satisfied often. By and large, people prefer to be flattered. They find it hard to recognize love in a blunt appraisal; and they find it even harder to reciprocate such love. Cordelia's strategy is not the route to massive popularity. Nevertheless, I have no choice: I *am* Cordelia. Why do I tell you this? Because I want to say that there is something dead in the profession of psychoanalysis and something dead in the profession of philosophy—and I want to be loved for saying so. This book is above all a response to a sense of deadness: it is an attempt to bring some life into two activities which lie at the heart of our humanity.

It has crossed my mind to wonder whether it isn't the point of all professions—of medicine and law as much as of philosophy and psychoanalysis—to instill deadness. Of course, the conscious self-image of every profession is that it is there to maintain high standards. And there must be *some* truth in this image. But what does this image cover over? Don't standards themselves impose a kind of rigidity on a practice? Doesn't a professional set of standards enable the profession to forget about standards? That is, it enables the profession to stop thinking critically about *how* it ought to go on precisely because the standards present themselves as having already answered the question. The profession can then act as though it *already knows* what high standards are. This is a form of dead-

ness. Now for certain forms of professional activity, they are all right. Indeed, it is what we want. We do not want our dentists, for example, to be too creative in their activity. We want there to be a relatively fixed set of norms of dental hygiene, and we want our dentists to adhere to those norms rigidly, over and over again. We want our dentists to be dead!

But philosophy and psychoanalysis are activities which resist professionalization in this sense. Perhaps this is because they share the same fundamental question, posed by Socrates: in what way should one live?¹ In psychoanalysis, the accent is more on the first person singular—How shall *I* live? in philosophy, on the first person plural—How shall *we* go on? But as anyone who has engaged in either activity knows, you cannot investigate *I* without addressing *We*, and vice versa. For Socrates, human living consists in living openly with this question. And any fixed set of norms—whether the standards of a profession or the set morality of a culture—presents itself as having already answered the question. That is, the norms try to shut down the question of how to live by giving a packaged answer. Whatever other functions they may have, norms often serve as a defense against living openly with the fundamental question. For Socrates, this is an evasion of life. This is why, for Socrates, the unexamined life is not worth living: it is not a form of living, but a form of deadness. To live openly with the fundamental question is to avoid assuming that there are any fixed answers which are already given. It is, above all, to avoid all forms of “knowingness.”

No wonder Socrates was put to death! The citizens of Athens decided by democratic vote that in him and around him there was too much living going on for them to tolerate. The way they put it was that Socrates was corrupting the youth and introducing new gods. That's how living openly looks to a group which is tenaciously clinging to a desiccated form of life. And Socrates, for his part, did nothing to help the Athenians analyze their transference-distortion. Indeed, he seems to have invited and provoked the transference-storm which resulted in his death.

In the calmer worlds of the professions, symbolic murders go on all the time. How many times have I heard distinguished members of the philosophical profession say, for example, that Hegel and Heidegger are “not

really philosophers”! One well-known professor had on his office door a sign which read, “Just Say No to the History of Philosophy.” The psychoanalytic profession, at least in America, is no better. For decades the curriculum committees of institutes affiliated with the American Psychoanalytic Association systematically excluded the work of such creative thinkers as the British psychoanalyst Melanie Klein and the French analyst Jacques Lacan. And the method of exclusion was the same, whether it was occurring in analysis or in philosophy. Some extreme or obscure statement would be pulled out of context, there would be a contemptuous shrugging of shoulders—“What could this possibly mean!” “Isn't that absurd!”—and that one statement or position would be used as an excuse to dismiss the entire corpus of work. Each profession thus worked actively to reassure itself that it was all right, indeed, one *ought*, to remain ignorant. All in the name of maintaining high standards.

And this type of facile dismissal seeps effortlessly into the culture. In countless conversations—at cocktail and dinner parties, not to mention the informal conversations which go on in professional settings, like the grand rounds of a psychiatry department or a conference of historians or philosophers, I will hear someone say, “But, of course, Freud has been completely discredited.” There will be a tacit assent of the group, and then it will dawn on me that no one in the group has read a word of Freud. Already knowing that Freud is discredited gives the group permission to know nothing.

Psychoanalysis, Freud said, is an *impossible* profession.² So is philosophy. This is not a metaphor or a poetically paradoxical turn of phrase. It is literally true. And the impossibility is ultimately a matter of logic. For *the very idea* of a profession is that of a defensive structure, and it is part of *the very idea* of philosophy and psychoanalysis to be activities which undo such defenses. It is part of the logic of psychoanalysis and philosophy that they are forms of life committed to living openly—with truth, beauty, envy and hate, wonder, awe and dread. The idea of a profession of psychoanalysis or a profession of philosophy is thus a contradiction in terms. Or, to put it bluntly, there is no such idea. Before we began the inquiry, we might have thought we were thinking about something when we

tried to think about the profession of psychoanalysis or the profession of philosophy—we might have thought we had an idea in our heads. What we come to recognize is that there is no such idea and there couldn't be such an idea: there is really nothing we are thinking about.

But then, what are the American Psychoanalytic Association and the American Philosophical Association? Attempts to act on an illusion. An illusion, for Freud, is a belief, set of beliefs, or worldview caused by a wish rather than by perception of how the world is. These organizations spring from the wish to hold onto psychoanalysis and philosophy—and from the ensuing belief that one might do so by professionalizing them. I don't intend this as a criticism. Trying to act on an illusion can be among life's satisfying activities—just so long as one doesn't entirely lose one's sense of humor. One discovers philosophical or psychoanalytic activity, and *of course* one wants to try to preserve it and to pass it along. One has bumped into something fundamental, and one cannot bear the idea of its simply disappearing from the human scene. Erotically we strive for the immortality of these deeply valuable activities. And inevitably we face the vicissitudes of dogmatism. Dogma, belief: we want to pass on fundamental truths, and in our attempts to do so truth becomes rigid and dies. The only remedy I have found is to treat this as a comedy rather than a tragedy. At the end of the *Symposium*, Socrates enigmatically suggests that poets should be as good at writing comedy as they are at tragedy. And I suspect he meant that poets ought to be able to tell the same story both ways. (If one tries, as I do in Chapter 3, one *can* read Oedipus as farce.) I suppose one could shed tears that, really, it *is* impossible to preserve and pass on truth. Important insights die. Yet we contribute to that death if we lose the lighthearted sense that, indeed, we are engaged in an impossible profession.

Through a variety of life choices I won't bore you with, I found myself in my twenties in a tenured position at one of the world's great universities, the University of Cambridge. Though I adored being at Cambridge, the fact of tenure caused me anxiety rather than pleasure. And I have thought about that anxiety ever since. In America, the great East Coast universities think of themselves as modeled on Oxford and Cambridge—

but this is really a false-self presentation. In fact they are modeled on Heidelberg. In the German model, the older professor reigns and the younger academics work under him, often in servile submission, hoping that one day they too will be the senior. Tenure is the American-democratic form of a rite of passage which favors seniority. Oxford and Cambridge, by contrast, formed themselves around a phantasy of an ancient Greek ideal of homosexual love. In that world, what is best is to be the beautiful, brilliant young man. The older men, past their bloom, look with nostalgia, delight, admiration, and a touch of envy at their brilliant youngers. Read almost any biography of Keynes, Turing, Wittgenstein, Russell, Ramsey, and you will get some of this flavor.

It is in thinking about my anxiety that I came to realize that the American tenure system is a form of distraction. If I had had to spend the next decade or two worried about whether I would get tenure, I probably would have acted like so many assistant professors, obsessing about getting articles in the right journals, dealing with the issues which were currently fashionable in the profession, wondering what the professors in the department thought of me, and so on. And I might even have been seduced by the profession's self-image that this is all about maintaining high standards. As it was, with tenure out of the way, the only hurdle I seemed to face was the fact of my own death. It didn't seem to be all that far away. And I realized that before I died, I wanted to be in intimate touch with some of the world's great thinkers, with some of the deepest thoughts which humans have encountered. I wanted to think thoughts—and also to write something which mattered to me.

I set out to work my own way through the history of philosophy. I did this by teaching undergraduate courses on thinkers I barely knew—one of the best ways of learning about them—by talking endlessly to colleagues, and by reading voraciously. I wanted to know: in the world of ideas, *where are we?* And what I seemed to discover was not so much an answer to that question, as a mystery in its own right: the very idea of psychology seemed to have gone missing. The most philosophical formulation of this disappearance is expressed by Hegel. For him, the account of human beings in the Western philosophical tradition had become too

“abstract,” too formal, to yield anything substantive about who we are. If we want to learn anything valuable about the human condition, Hegel argued, philosophy has to become more “concrete.” But how can philosophy become more “concrete” without collapsing into an empirical discipline, like anthropology or empirical psychology? Can philosophy become “concrete” without itself disappearing? And if all that is left is, say, empirical psychology, has psychology itself survived? Plato’s answer would be “of course not.” And he is not alone. Everyone has his or her own version of “If I had a dime for every time . . . , I’d be rich.” My version is, “. . . for every time a student came to my office hours and said, ‘I tried taking a course in psychology, but it didn’t seem to be about *psychology*.’” The students can never clearly articulate their sense of *what* is missing, but they are filled with longing.

This is not in any way meant to criticize the valuable work in cognitive science, neuroscience, statistical research which goes on in the best psychology departments. It is only to say that a certain activity which Plato called “giving a logos of the psyche” has all but disappeared. An everyday way of rendering the Greek is “working out the logic of the soul.” In the twentieth century it has become difficult to understand this phrase because the remarkable advances in formal logic since 1879 have so colored our understanding of what logic is. We lose sight of Plato’s project, laid out so beautifully in the *Republic*, of giving a *nonformal* but rigorous, not-quite-empirical yet not nonempirical account of what it is to be human. Plato, one might say, is working out *the very idea* of what it is to be minded as we are. And he does this in the light of Socrates’ exemplification—a life spent showing—that one of the most important truths about us is that we have the capacity to be *open minded*: the capacity to live nondefensively with the question of how to live.

Human life in general is a study of why this capacity is not exercised: why open-mindedness is, for the most part, evaded, diminished, and attacked. Allow me to say something bold and without a shred of argument: one cannot understand the *Republic* until one can see the entire book as organized around the issue of how to avoid despair. Plato’s solution is to introduce matter. If we come to understand ourselves as living in a world in which ideas are realized in matter, then we can hold onto

the belief that ideas themselves are good, while recognizing that human life in general—whether in individual psychology or in politics—is, by and large, a falling away from those ideas. Matter eventually loses form. Disappointment is built into the very fabric of who we are. But in disappointment there is hope, if not optimism, and thus the avoidance of despair.

I have spent the past twenty years not so much trying to answer the question “What is psychology?” as trying to recover a sense of what the question is. I was led, almost simultaneously, back to Plato and Aristotle, to Freud and psychoanalysis, and to Wittgenstein. It may surprise readers to learn that I consider this as being led in one direction. Of course, that psychoanalysis is a continuation of the Platonic tradition is itself hardly news. In the *Republic*, Plato basically invents psyche-analysis. He divides the psyche into three basic parts—and though Plato comes up with slightly different parts from Freud, the method of division they use is the same. For Plato, the appetitive part, consisting largely of drives for sex and food, is more or less identical with Freud’s id. Then there is a narcissistic component, concerned with pride, winning recognition from others, anger, humiliation, and shame. In this way, Plato reveals himself as much more concerned with the vicissitudes of narcissism than Freud was, at least at the beginning of his career. Finally, there is a part concerned with thinking and finding out the truth about the world. And Plato understood, perhaps better than anyone else has ever understood, that even this thoughtful attempt to understand one’s world is basically an erotic engagement. It is for love of the world that we try to understand it. Again, Freud came upon this insight later in his career, when he reconceptualized and expanded the sex drive into eros. And he thanked “the divine Plato” for inspiration:

In its origin, function and relation to sexual love, the eros of the philosopher Plato coincides exactly with the love-force, the libido of psychoanalysis.³

. . . what psychoanalysis calls sexuality was by no means identical with the impulsion towards a union of the two sexes or towards producing a pleasurable sensation in the genitals; it had far more resemblance to the all-inclusive and all-embracing love of Plato’s *Symposium*.⁴

Plato also invented the first sophisticated object-relations theory. He understood that the human psyche is in dynamic interaction with the cultural-political environment, and that both are fundamentally shaped by the movement of meanings from polis to psyche and back again. He works out one of the most insightful accounts of psychosocial degeneration ever formulated. Contemporary object-relations theorists, if they go back to Plato, will study his account of psychopathology with awe. For Plato, the influence of polis on psyche or of psyche on polis is largely unconscious.⁵ And human life is, for the most part, lived in the midst of illusion. In Plato's famous image of the cave, we are, unbeknownst to ourselves, strapped to a wall and forced to watch the projections of images onto the opposite wall which we mistake not only for reality, but for ourselves.⁶ We are, on this account, strangers to ourselves. But for Plato as for Freud, there is therapeutic potential in pushing hard at contradictions inherent in the illusions themselves. Every image is a *shadow*, a distortion of something bearing more reality than it. In focusing on the distortion we can painfully and slowly work our way toward what the distortion is a distortion of. Once again Plato plants the hope of avoiding despair.

Plato understands the power and shape of unconscious wishes, which he calls lawless unnecessary desires:

Those that are awakened in sleep, when the rest of the soul—the rational, gentle, and ruling part—slumbers. Then the beastly and savage part, full of food and drink, casts off sleep and seeks to find a way to gratify itself. You know there is nothing it won't dare to do at such a time, free of all control by shame or reason. It doesn't shrink from trying to have sex with a mother, as it supposes, or with anyone else at all, whether man, god or beast. It will commit any foul murder, and there is no food it refuses to eat. In a word, it omits no act of folly or shamelessness.⁷

These desires are, Plato says, "probably present in everyone." In his diagnosis of tyrannical personality disorder, these lawless appetites come to dominate, turning waking life into a living nightmare and ushering in a disintegration of the soul. This is the first serious theoretical discussion of a person powerless to do anything other than act out his inner life.

Freud may have been more or less aware of these various influences upon him, but there is one thread running between him and Plato of which he was certainly unaware: that he, like Plato, was trying to work out a logic of the psyche. Freud could not see this because his self-image and ego-ideal are those of a working empirical scientist and medical doctor, perhaps one with cultural ambitions. Thus he is not well placed to see that his empirical research is not simply in the service of working out what, as a matter of fact, the human psyche is like, nor simply in the service of treating the psyche, but that it is also working out *what it is to be a human psyche*. So, for example, Freud doesn't just discover the fact of neurotic conflict; he lays before us the inevitable possibility of neurosis built into the very idea of a creature erotically bound to the world by different types of desires. Or, as I argue in Chapter 5, Freud did not just empirically discover the drives; he showed that the idea of drive is required for a minded creature, like us, who is embodied and working in an environment. There must be a place for, as Freud put it, a "demand made upon the mind for work."⁸ In this way, Freud offers what I take to be the most textured answer we yet have to one of Socrates' most important "What is it?" questions: what is the human psyche? Freud also shows us, in the most vivid way, what it might be for philosophy to become "concrete."



BUT IF ONE CAN SEE psychoanalysis as placed broadly in the Platonic tradition, what possible relation can there be between Freud and Wittgenstein? After all, Wittgenstein's few explicit remarks about Freud tend to be quite skeptical. For example: "I have been going through Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams* . . . and it has made me think how much this whole way of thinking wants combatting."⁹ Wittgenstein is suspicious that there are no real constraints on what it is to get a psychoanalytic interpretation right, and thus that the correct interpretation ends up being anything Freud says it is. I do not intend here to defend Freud against the charge. Rather, I want to point out that if we stick with these explicit criticisms, we remain at the conscious surface. But if we look at what Freud

and Wittgenstein *are doing*, we can see deep, unconscious affinities between the two thinkers. Starting with Wittgenstein, the *Philosophical Investigations* is essentially an attempt to work through a certain illusion.

The *Investigations* begins with a myth of origins, Augustine's account of how he entered into language:

When they (my elders) named some object, and accordingly moved towards something, I saw this and I grasped that the thing was called by the sound they uttered when they meant to point it out . . . Thus, as I heard words repeatedly used in their proper places in various sentences, I gradually learnt to understand what objects they signified; and after I trained my mouth to form these signs, I used them to express my desires.

Wittgenstein's opening comment is:

These words, it seems to me, give us a particular picture of the essence of human language. It is this: the individual words in language name objects—sentences are combinations of such names. In this picture of language we find the roots of the following idea: Every word has a meaning. This meaning is correlated with the word. It is the object for which the word stands.¹⁰

For "picture" read illusion. Reading Augustine's account, we find it so plausible and unexceptional that we think we are looking at something *obviously true*. What we do not understand, to put Wittgenstein's insight in psychoanalytic terms, is that we are being persuaded, not by obvious truth, but by the force of our own projective identifications. We are creatures who cannot help but create mythic accounts of how our mind works, of how we hook onto the world, of what reality is really like. We project this imaginative activity onto the world and then mistake it for "the way things really are." In this way, we systematically mistake a bit of ourselves, our imaginative activity, for the world.

This systematic mistaking we tend to call "philosophy." So, for example, we begin with what we might call this *core myth of meaning*—that individual words are names—a myth only implicit in Augustine, made explicit by Wittgenstein; a fantasy so seemingly innocuous that we are unaware that from it flows a theory of mind, meaning, and world. For if words are names, and if names stand for a meaning, then for me to be

speaking meaningfully must be for me to have ideas in my mind, the meanings, with which words are correlated. And thus we form a picture of the mind as a container of ideas which gives my words the meaning they have. It is as though the idea could exist independently of the word—just as the word without the idea would be a meaningless sound—and we form the picture of words naming objects in the world by being animated by ideas in the mind. Here is a picture of language hovering between mind and world. It is as though we were separated from the world, trying to talk about it. And from this picture, to give just one example, skeptical questions—"Are we getting the world right? How do we *really* know?"—become inevitable. And we take this inevitability to reflect the human condition: that it is our fate to live in separation from how things *really* are. Wittgenstein brings to conscious awareness that it is not so much our fate to live in separation as our fate to be tempted to create and be seduced by myths of separation. These are illusions we can work through and ultimately live without. In this way, proper philosophical activity is the working-through and undoing of "philosophy." In Freudian terms, remembering comes to replace repeating.

But if this is a Freudian Wittgenstein, we can also identify a Wittgensteinian Freud. As Freud's thinking developed, he came to think of an unconscious meaning less in terms of a particular idea whose content is hidden in another part of the mind and more in terms of an idiosyncratic activity or *form of life* whose meaning we actively keep ourselves from grasping. As Freud put it, "hysterics are undoubtedly imaginative artists, even if they express their phantasies *mimetically* in the main and without considering the intelligibility to other people; the ceremonials and prohibitions of obsessional neurotics drive us to suppose that they have created a private religion of their own."¹¹ And so when a person acts out a phantasy—for example, when the Rat Man opens the door to his house at night and exposes his penis—he is—how shall I put it?—*showing* more than he can *say*. His activity is meaningful—it expresses a meaning—but he does not understand it. This is one understanding of the unconscious: the meanings we show that we cannot (yet) say. And once Freud saw unconscious meaning in this way, he saw it everywhere:

When I set myself the task of bringing to light what human beings keep hidden within them, not by the compelling power of hypnosis, but by observing what they say *and what they show*, I thought the task was a harder one than it really is. He that has eyes to see and ears to hear may convince himself that no mortal can keep a secret. If his lips are silent, he chatters with his finger tips; betrayal oozes out of him at every pore.¹²

The aim of psychoanalytic interpretation, then, is to bring the meanings we show (repeat) into the domain of meanings we can say (remember). In this way we gain some freedom with respect to those meanings. (In Chapter 5, I show how the psychoanalytic understanding of interpretation bears a family resemblance to Wittgenstein's own account of how a prelinguistic infant is brought into language.)

This is, *of course*, not to say that Freud really became a behaviorist. (Neither did Wittgenstein.) Freud remained perfectly comfortable with the notion of unconscious meanings which remain entirely within the mind and do not get acted out or expressed in behavior. But even here, the accent of his thinking shifts from the unconscious as a hidden idea or mental *content*, to the unconscious as a peculiar form of mental activity. Twenty-five years after he first published *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud felt he had to insert a new footnote, which he placed at the end of his discussion of the dream-work:

I used at one time to find it extraordinarily difficult to accustom readers to the distinction between the manifest content of dreams and the latent dream-thoughts . . . But now that analysts at least have become reconciled to replacing the manifest dream by the meaning revealed by its interpretation, many of them have become guilty of falling into another confusion which they cling to with equal obstinacy. They seek to find the essence of dreams in their latent content and in so doing they overlook the distinction between latent dream-thoughts and the dream-work. At bottom, dreams are nothing other than a particular *form* of thinking, made possible by the conditions of the state of sleep. It is the *dream-work* which creates that form, and it alone is the essence of dreaming—the explanation of its peculiar nature.¹³

Analysts are making a mistake, Freud warns, if they take themselves to be looking for the hidden *content* of a dream—as though the unconscious were a hidden idea. Rather, the unconscious is a form of mental activity,

a form of (mental) life, which systematically escapes conscious notice. In our dreaming, we are showing more than we can (yet) say.

In its own way, this book is itself an attempt to show more than I can say. I am less concerned with trying to persuade the reader of any particular thesis than with showing various ways in which philosophical and psychoanalytic questions might be pursued with a sense of liveliness and openness. But perhaps it is time to let the rest of the book speak for itself.

On Killing Freud (Again)

This essay originally appeared in the New Republic on December 25, 1995, in response to the Library of Congress' decision to cave in to yet another instance of Freud-bashing. Since I consider this incident to be exemplary of many others, I have left the essay essentially as it was originally published and have made no effort to "bring it up to date."

In an extraordinary decision, the Library of Congress this week bowed to pressure from angry anti-Freudians and postponed for as long as a year a major exhibition called "Sigmund Freud: Conflict and Culture." According to a front-page story in the *Washington Post*, some library officials blamed the delay on budget problems; but others contended that the real reason was heated criticism of a show which might take a neutral or even favorable view of the father of psychoanalysis. Some fifty psychologists and others, including Gloria Steinem and Oliver Sacks, signed a petition denouncing the proposed exhibit. As Steinem complained to the *Post*, it seemed to "have the attitude of 'He was a genius, but . . .' instead of 'He's a very troubled man, and . . .'"

Though the library assured them that the exhibit "is not about whether Freudians or Freud critics, of whatever camp, are right or wrong," the critics refused an offer to contribute to the catalog or advise on the show.

Though this was perhaps the most blatant recent episode in the campaign against Freud, it is far from the only one. From *Time* to the *New York Times*, Freud-bashing has gone from an argument to a movement. In just the past few weeks Basic Books has brought out a long-winded tirade with what it no doubt hopes will be the sensational title *Why Freud Was Wrong*; and the *New York Review of Books* has collected some of its already-published broadsides against Freud into a new book.

In many cases, even the images accompanying these indictments seem to convey an extra dimension of hostility. "Is Freud Dead?" *Time* magazine asked on its cover, Thanksgiving week, 1993. Whether or not this was really a question, it was certainly a repetition; for in the spring of 1966, *Time* had asked, "Is God Dead?" From a psychoanalytic point of view, repetitions are as interesting for their differences as for their similarities. With God, *Time* avoided any graven images and simply printed the question in red type against a black background, perhaps out of respect for the recently deceased. For Freud, by contrast, the magazine offered what was ostensibly a photograph of his face, but with his head blown open. One can tell it is *blown* open because what is left of the skull is shaped like a jigsaw puzzle, with several of the missing pieces flying off into space. The viewer can peer inside Freud's head and see: *there is nothing there*.

How can we explain the vehemence of these attacks on a long-dead thinker? There are, I think, three currents running through the culture which contribute to the fashion for Freud-bashing. First, the truly remarkable advances in the development of mind-altering drugs, most notably Prozac, alongside an ever-increasing understanding of the structure of the brain, have fueled speculation that one day soon all forms of talking therapy will be obsolete. Second, consumers increasingly rely on insurance companies and health maintenance organizations, which prefer cheap pharmacology to expensive psychotherapy.

Finally, there is the inevitable backlash against the inflated claims that the psychoanalytic profession made for itself in the 1950s and 1960s, and against its hagiography of Freud. Many reputable scholars now believe

(and I agree) that Freud botched some of his most important cases. Certainly a number of his hypotheses are false, his analytic technique can seem flat-footed and intrusive, and in his speculations he was a bit of a cowboy.

It is also true that the American Psychoanalytic Association is a victim of self-inflicted wounds. In the original effort to establish psychoanalysis as a profession in this country, culminating in the 1920s, American analysts insisted that psychoanalytic training be restricted to medical doctors. The major opponent of such a restriction was Freud himself, who argued that this was "virtually equivalent to an attempt at repression." There was nothing about medical training, Freud thought, which peculiarly equipped one to become an analyst; and he suspected the Americans were motivated by the exclusionary interests of a guild. Freud lost: it was the one matter on which the American analysts openly defied the master. In the short run, this allowed the psychoanalytic profession to take advantage of the powerful positive transference which the American public extended to doctors through most of this century. Every profession in its heyday—and psychoanalysis was no exception—tends to be seduced by its own wishful self-image and to make claims for itself that it cannot ultimately sustain. In the longer run, though, psychoanalysis set itself up for revisionist criticism.

Yet, for all that, it also seems to me clear that, at his best, Freud is a deep explorer of the human condition, working in a tradition which goes back to Sophocles and which extends through Plato, Saint Augustine, and Shakespeare to Proust and Nietzsche. What holds this tradition together is its insistence that there are significant meanings for human well-being which are obscured from immediate awareness. Sophoclean tragedy locates another realm of meaning in a divine world which humans can at most glimpse through oracles. In misunderstanding these strange meanings, humans usher in catastrophe.

Freud's achievement, from this perspective, is to locate these meanings fully inside the human world. Humans make meaning, for themselves and for others, of which they have no direct or immediate awareness. People make more meaning than they know what to do with. This is what Freud meant by the unconscious. And whatever valid criticisms can

be aimed at him or at the psychoanalytic profession, it is nevertheless true that psychoanalysis is the most sustained and successful attempt to make these obscure meanings intelligible. Since I believe that this other source of meaning is of great importance for human development, I think that psychoanalytic therapy is invaluable for those who can make use of it; but, crazy as this may seem, I also believe that (psychoanalysis is crucial for a truly democratic culture to thrive.)

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TAKE A CLOSER LOOK at the culture of criticism which has come to envelop psychoanalysis. You do not need to be an analyst to notice that more is going on here than a search for truth. Consider, for example, the emotionally charged debate over alleged memories of child abuse. No matter what side an author is on, Freud is blamed for being on the other. Jeffrey Masson, the renegade Freud scholar who believes that child abuse is more widespread than commonly acknowledged, made a name for himself by accusing Freud of suppressing the evidence in order to gain respectability. On the lecture circuit and in books like *The Assault on Truth* and *Against Therapy*, Masson has emerged as the most charismatic of the Freud-bashers, a self-styled defender of women and children against Freud's betrayals of them. Yet his critique of Freud is dependent on a willful misreading.

It is certainly true that at the beginning of his career, Freud hypothesized that hysteria and obsessional neurosis in adulthood were caused by memories of actual seductions in childhood. Because these memories were so upsetting, they were repressed, or kept out of conscious memory, but they still operated in the mind to cause psychological disease. By the fall of 1897, Freud had abandoned this view, which came to be known as the seduction theory. His explanation was that he had become increasingly skeptical that all the reports of childhood seduction—"not excluding my own"—could be straightforward memories. Masson, however, argues that this was merely Freud's attempt to fall into line with the prejudices of his German colleagues and thus to advance his career.

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FIND IT IMPOSSIBLE to read through Freud's writings without coming to the conclusion that it is Masson who is suppressing the evidence in

order to advance his career. In fact, Freud never abandoned the idea that abuse of children caused them serious psychological harm, and throughout his career he maintained that it occurred more often than generally acknowledged. In 1917, for instance, twenty years after the abandonment of the seduction theory, Freud wrote: "Phantasies of being seduced are of particular interest, because so often they are not [merely] phantasies but real memories." Even at the very end of his career, in 1938, Freud said that while "the sexual abuse of children by adults" or "their seduction by other children (brothers or sisters) slightly their seniors" "do not apply to all children, . . . they are common enough." It is, therefore, misleading to say that Freud ever abandoned belief in the sexual abuse of children. What he abandoned was blind faith in the idea that alleged memories of abuse are always and everywhere what they purport to be.

Besides, to focus on child abuse is to miss the point. What is really at stake in the abandonment of the seduction theory is not the prevalence of abuse, but the nature of the mind's own activity. (In assuming, as he first did, that all purported memories of child abuse were true, Freud was treating the mind as though it were merely a recipient of experience, recording reality in the same passive way a camera does light. Though the mind might be active in keeping certain memories out of conscious awareness, it was otherwise passive. In realizing that one could not take all memory-claims at face value, Freud effectively discovered that the mind is active and imaginative in the organization of its own experience. This is one of the crucial moments in the founding of psychoanalysis.)

Of course, there is a tremendous difference—both clinical and moral—between actual and merely imagined child abuse. But from the point of view of the significance of Freud's discovery the whole issue of abuse or its absence, of seduction or its absence, is irrelevant. (Once we realize that the human mind is everywhere active and imaginative, then we need to understand the routes of this activity if we are to grasp how the mind works. This is true whether the mind is trying to come to grips with painful reality, reacting to trauma, coping with the everyday, or "just making things up.")

(Freud called this imaginative activity phantasy, and he argued both that it functions unconsciously and that it plays a powerful role in the organi-

zation of a person's experience. This, surely, contains the seeds of a profound insight into the human condition; it is the central insight of psychoanalysis; yet in the heated debate over child abuse, it is largely ignored. In fact the discovery of unconscious phantasy does not itself tilt one way or the other in this debate. Freud himself became skeptical about whether all the purported memories of childhood seduction were actual memories—but that is because he took himself to have been overly credulous. One can equally well argue in the opposite direction: precisely because phantasy is a pervasive aspect of mental life, one needs a much more nuanced view of what constitutes real-life seduction. Because phantasy is active in parents as well as children, parents do not need to be crudely molesting their children to be seducing them. Ironically, Freud's so-called abandonment of the seduction theory can be used to *widen* the scope of what might be considered real seductions.)

The irony is that while those who believe in the prevalence of childhood seductions attack Freud for abandoning the cause, those who believe that repressed memories of child abuse are overblown blame him for fomenting this excess. Its real origins, though, are in "recovered-memory therapy," an often quackish practice in which so-called therapists actively encourage their clients to "remember" incidents of abuse from childhood. After some initial puzzlement as to what is being asked of them, clients have been only too willing to oblige: inventing the wildest stories of satanic rituals, cannibalism, and other misdemeanors of suburban life.

The consequences of believing these stories have in some cases been devastating. "As I write," Frederick Crews observes in the *New York Review of Books*, "a number of parents and child-care providers are serving long prison terms, and others are awaiting trial, on the basis of therapeutically induced 'memories' of child sexual abuse that never in fact occurred." But instead of giving Freud credit for being the first person to warn us against taking purportedly repressed memories of abuse at face value, Crews continues: "Although the therapists in question are hardly Park Avenue psychoanalysts, the tradition of Freudian theory and practice unmistakably lies behind their tragic deception of both patients and jurors."

Crews, who is a professor of English at Berkeley and the *éminence grise* of Freud-bashers, acknowledges that his claim will "strike most readers as

a slur." But Crews is undeterred. He feels entitled to make this accusation, first, because Freud spent the earliest years of his career searching for repressed memories and, second, because Freud did suggest certain conclusions to his patients. That is, on occasion he took advantage of the charismatic position which people regularly assign to their doctors, teachers, and political leaders and told patients how to think about themselves or what to do—sometimes to their profound detriment. Like most successful slurs, there is truth in each claim.

What is missing is the massive evidence on the other side. No one in the history of psychiatry has more openly questioned the veracity of purported childhood memories than Freud did. No one did more to devise a form of treatment which avoids suggestion. Looking back, I regularly find Freud's clinical interventions too didactic and suggestive. But the very possibility of "looking back" is due to Freud. (It was Freud who first set the avoidance of suggestion as a therapeutic ideal—and it is Freud who devised the first therapeutic technique aimed at achieving it. Psychoanalysis distinguishes itself from other forms of talking cure by its rigorous attempt to work out a procedure which genuinely avoids suggestion.)

This is of immense importance, for (psychoanalysis thus becomes the first therapy which sets *freedom* rather than some specific image of human *happiness* as its goal. Other kinds of therapy posit particular outcomes—increased self-esteem, overcoming depression—and, implicitly or explicitly, give advice about how to get there. Psychoanalysis is the one form of therapy which leaves it to analysands to determine for themselves what their specific goals will be. Indeed, it leaves it to them to determine whether they will have specific goals. Of course, as soon as freedom becomes an ideal, enormous practical problems arise as to how one avoids compromising an analysand's freedom by unwittingly suggesting certain goals or outlooks.) But if we can now criticize Freud's actual practice, we can do so largely as a result of technical advances which Freud himself inspired.

One might wonder: Why isn't Freud the hero of both these narratives, rather than the villain? Why doesn't Masson portray Freud as the pioneer who linked memories of child abuse with later psychological harm; why doesn't Crews lionize Freud as the first person to call the veracity of such

memories into question? There are rational answers to these questions—in one case that he reversed his position, in the other that even though he reversed himself, he is responsible for a tradition—but neither of them is very satisfying. Rather, an emotional tide has turned, and reasons are used to cover over irrational currents. Part of this phenomenon may be a healthy reversal, a reaction against previous idealizations. But it is also true that Freud is being made a scapegoat, and in the scapegoating process, nuance is abandoned.



TO SEE NUANCE DISAPPEAR, one has only to look at the supposed debate over the scientific standing of psychoanalysis. In a series of books and articles, Professor Adolf Grunbaum of the University of Pittsburgh has argued that psychoanalysis cannot prove the cause-and-effect connections it claims between unconscious motivation and its visible manifestations in ordinary life and in a clinical setting. Grunbaum argues correctly that Freud made genuine causal claims for psychoanalysis; notably, that it cures neurosis. But Grunbaum goes on to argue, much less plausibly, that in a clinical setting psychoanalysis cannot substantiate its claims. It is remarkable how many mainstream publications—*Time*, the *New York Times*, *The Economist*, to name a few—have fallen all over themselves to give respectful mention to such abstruse work as Grunbaum's. Mere mention of the work lends a cloak of scientific legitimacy to the attack on Freud, while the excellent critiques of Grunbaum's work are ignored.

There is no doubt that the causal claims of psychoanalysis cannot be established in the same way as a causal claim in a hard-core empirical science like experimental physics. But neither can any causal claim of any form of psychology which interprets people's actions on the basis of their motives—including the ordinary psychology of everyday life. We watch a friend get up from her chair and head to the refrigerator: we assume she is hungry and is getting something to eat. We can, if we like, try to confirm this interpretation, but in nothing like the way we confirm something in physics. Of course, we can "test" our hypothesis by asking her what she is doing, and she may correct us, telling us that she is thirsty and getting something to drink. But it's possible that she's not telling us the

truth. Indeed, it's possible, though unlikely, that she believes that the refrigerator is capable of sending messages to outer space, which will save the world from catastrophe. We cannot prove that our ordinary interpretation is correct. At best, we can gather more interpretive evidence of the same type to support or revise our hypothesis.

What are we to do—abandon our ordinary practice of interpreting people? If we want to know what caused the outbreak of the Peloponnesian War, why there is a crisis in the Balkans, what were the origins of the Renaissance, how slavery became institutionalized, we turn to history, economics, and other social sciences for answers. No historical account is immune to skeptical challenge; no historical-causal claims can be verified in the same way as a causal claim in physics. But no one suggests giving up on history or the other interpretive sciences.

Meaning is like that. Humans are inherently makers and interpreters of meaning. It is meaning—ideas, desires, beliefs—which causes humans to do the interesting things they do. Yet as soon as one enters the realm of meaningful explanation one has to employ different methods of validating causal claims than one finds in experimental physics. And it is simply a mistake to think that therefore the methods of validation in ordinary psychology or in psychoanalysis must be less precise or fall short of the methods in experimental physics. To see this for yourself, take the following multiple-choice test:

Question: Which is more precise: Henry James, in his ability to describe how a person's action flows from his or her motivations; or a particle accelerator, in its ability to depict the causal interactions of subatomic particles?

Answers:

- (a) Henry James
- (b) the accelerator
- (c) none of the above

You do not have to flip to the end of the article or turn the page upside-down to learn that the answer is (c). Actually, a better answer is to reject the question as ridiculous. There is no single scale on which one can place both Henry James and a particle accelerator to determine which is more precise. Within the realm of human motivation and its effects, *The Portrait*

of a Lady is more precise than a *Peanuts* cartoon; within the realm of measuring atomic movements, some instruments are more precise than others.

(If psychoanalysis were to imitate the methods of physical science, it would be useless for interpreting people. Psychoanalysis is an extension of our ordinary psychological ways of interpreting people in terms of their beliefs, desires, hopes, and fears. The extension is important because psychoanalysis attributes to people other forms of motivation—in particular wish and phantasy—which attempt to account for outbreaks of irrationality and other puzzling human behavior. In fact, it is a sign of the success of psychoanalysis as an interpretive science that its causal claims cannot be validated in the same way as those of the physical sciences.)



HOW, THEN, MIGHT WE SET appropriate standards of confirmation for causal claims in psychoanalysis? This genuine and important question tends to be brushed aside by the cliché of the analyst telling a patient who disagrees with an interpretation which she is just resisting. The apotheosis of this cliché can be found in Sir Karl Popper's *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, in which Popper argues that psychoanalysis is a pseudoscience because its discoveries cannot be falsified: what counts as evidence is too large and elusive for the total claim of the discipline to be either checked or challenged. Of course, in this broad sense nothing could "falsify" history or economics or our ordinary psychological interpretation of persons, but no one would think of calling these forms of explanation pseudo. And there is something which would count as a global refutation of psychoanalysis: (if people always and everywhere acted in rational and transparently explicable ways, one could easily dismiss psychoanalysis as unnecessary rubbish. It is because people often behave in bizarre ways, ways which cause pain to themselves and to others, ways which puzzle even the actors themselves, that psychoanalysis commands our attention.)

Unfortunately, there is some truth to the cliché of the analyst unfairly pulling rank on the analysand. Would that there were no such thing as a defensive analyst! Yet I believe that (when psychoanalysis is done properly there is no form of clinical intervention—in psychology, psychiatry, or

general medicine—which pays greater respect to the individual client or patient. The proper attitude for an analyst is one of profound humility in the face of the infinite complexity of another human being. Because humans are self-interpreting animals, one must always be ready to defer to their explanations of what they mean. And yet, suppose just for the sake of argument that it is true that humans actively keep certain unpleasant meanings away from conscious awareness. Then one might expect that any process which brings those meanings closer to consciousness will be accompanied by a certain resistance. It then becomes an important technical and theoretical problem how to elicit those meanings without falling into the cliché, without provoking a massive outbreak of resistance, and all the while working closely with and maintaining deep respect for the analysand. We need to know in specific detail when and how it is appropriate to cite resistance in a clinical setting, and when it is not. Some of the best recent work in psychoanalytic theory addresses just this issue.

Consider this elementary example: an analysand may come precisely five minutes late every day for his session. For a while, there may be no point in inviting him to speculate about why. Any such question, no matter how gently or tentatively put, might only provoke a storm of protest: “You don’t know how busy I am, how many sacrifices I make to get here,” and so on. Even if the habitual lateness and the protests are examples of what analysts call resistance, there is one excellent reason not to say anything about it yet: (the analysis is for the analysand. Any interpretation which he cannot make use of in his journey of self-understanding is inappropriate, even if the interpretation is accurate. If coming late is a resistance, and if the analyst is sufficiently patient, there will come a time when the analysand will relax enough to become puzzled by his own behavior. He might say, “It’s funny, I always seem to come exactly five minutes late,” or “I’ve thought about asking you to start our sessions five minutes late, but I realized I’d only come five minutes later than that.” At this point it would be a mistake not to pursue the issue, for a wealth of material may spontaneously emerge: for example, that he wanted to feel that he was in control, that he wanted the analyst to acknowledge him as a serious professional in his own right, and so on. Once these desires are recognized, they can be explored—and sometimes that exploration can

make a big difference in how the analysand sees himself and how he goes on to live the rest of his life.) Should all of this be avoided because of some flat-footed assumption that the analyst is always pulling rank when she talks about resistance? The problem with the cliché is that it ignores all specifics. It uses the very possibility of invoking resistance to impugn psychoanalysis generally.

What is at stake in all these attacks? If this were merely the attack on one historical figure, Freud, or on one professional group, psychoanalysts, the hubbub would have died down long ago. After all, psychoanalysis nowadays plays a minor role in the mental health professions; Freud is less and less often taught or studied. There is, of course, a certain pleasure to be had in pretending one is bravely attacking a powerful authority when one is in fact participating in a gang-up. But even these charms fade after a while. (The real object of attack—for which Freud is only a stalking-horse—is the very idea that humans have unconscious motivation. A battle may be fought over Freud, but the war is over our culture’s image of the human soul. Are we to see humans as having depth—as complex psychological organisms who generate layers of meaning which lie beneath the surface of their own understanding? Or are we to take ourselves as transparent to ourselves?)

Certainly, the predominant trend in the culture is to treat human existence as straightforward. In the plethora of self-help books, of alternative therapies, diets, and exercise programs, it is assumed that we already know what human happiness is. These programs promise us a shortcut for getting there. And yet we can all imagine someone whose muscle tone is great, who is successful at his job, who “feels good about himself,” yet remains a shell of a human being. Breathless articles in the science section of the *New York Times* suggest that the main obstacle to human flourishing is technological. And even this obstacle—in the recent discovery of a gene, or the location of a neuron in the brain, or the synthesis of a new psychopharmacological agent—may soon be put out of the way. *Candide* is the ideal reader of the “Science Times.” Of course, the *Times* did not invent this image of the best of all possible worlds: it is merely the bellwether for a culture which wishes to ignore the complexity, depth, and darkness of human life.



IT IS DIFFICULT TO MAKE this point without sounding like a Luddite; so let me say explicitly that psychopharmacology and neuropsychiatry have made, and will continue to make, valuable contributions in reducing human suffering. But it is a phantasy to suppose that a chemical or neurological intervention can solve the problems posed in and by human life. That is why it is a mistake to think of psychoanalysis and Prozac as two different means to the same end. The point of psychoanalysis is to help us develop a clearer, yet more flexible and creative, sense of what our ends might be. "How shall we live?" is, for Socrates, the fundamental question of human existence—and the attempt to answer that question is, for him, what makes human life worthwhile. And it is Plato and Shakespeare, Proust, Nietzsche, and, most recently, Freud who complicated the issue by insisting that there are deep currents of meaning, often crosscurrents, running through the human soul which can at best be glimpsed through a glass darkly. This, if anything, is the Western tradition: not a specific set of values, but a belief that the human soul is too deep for there to be any easy answer to the question of how to live.

If one can dismiss Freud as a charlatan, one can not only enjoy the sacrifice of a scapegoat; one can also evade troubling questions about the enigmatic nature of human motivation. Never mind that we are daily surrounded by events—from the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin to the war in Bosnia; from the murder of Nicole Simpson to the public fascination with it; from the government's burning of the Branch Davidian compound to the retaliation bombing in Oklahoma City—that cannot be understood in the terms which are standardly used to explain them. Philosophy, Aristotle said, begins in wonder. Psychoanalysis begins in wonder that the unintelligibility of the events which surround one do not cause more wonder.



THERE ARE TWO very different images of what humans must be like if democracy is to be a viable form of government. The prevalent one today treats humans as preference-expressing political atoms, and pays little at-

tention to subatomic structure. Professional pollsters, political scientists, and pundits portray society as an agglomeration of these atoms. The only irrationality they recognize is the failure of these preference-expressing monads to conform to the rules of rational-choice theory. If one thinks that this is the only image of humanity which will sustain democracy, one will tend to view psychoanalysis as suspiciously antidemocratic.

Is there another, more satisfying, image of what humans are like which nevertheless makes it plausible that they should organize themselves and live in democratic societies? If we go back to the birth of democracy, in fifth-century Athens, we see that the flourishing of that democracy coincides precisely with the flowering of one of the world's great literatures: Greek tragedy. This coincidence is not mere coincidence. The tragic theater gave citizens the opportunity to retreat momentarily from the responsibility of making rational decisions for themselves and their society. At the same time, tragedy confronted them emotionally with the fact that they had to make their decisions in a world which was not entirely rational, in which rationality was sometimes violently disrupted, in which rationality itself could be used for irrational ends.

What, after all, is Oedipus' complex? That he killed his father and married his mother misses the point. Patricide and maternal incest are *consequences* of Oedipus' failure, not its source. Oedipus' fundamental mistake lies in his assumption that meaning is transparent to human reason. In horrified response to the Delphic oracle, Oedipus flees the people he (mistakenly) takes to be his parents. En route, he kills his actual father and propels himself into the arms of his mother. It is the classic scene of fulfilling one's fate in the very act of trying to escape it. But this scenario is possible only because Oedipus assumes he understands his situation, that the meaning of the oracle is immediately available to his conscious understanding. That is why he thinks he can respond to the oracle with a straightforward application of practical reason. Oedipus' mistake, in essence, is to ignore unconscious meaning.

For Sophocles, this was a sacrilegious crime, for he took this obscure meaning to flow from a divine source. But it is clear that, in Sophocles' vision, Oedipus attacks the very idea of unconscious meaning. In his angry confrontation with the prophet Tiresias, Oedipus boasts that it was

his conscious reasoning, not any power of interpreting obscure meaning, which saved the city from the horrible Sphinx.

Why, come, tell me, how can you be a true prophet? Why when the versifying hound was here did you not speak some word that could release the citizens? Indeed, her riddle was not one for the first comer to explain! It required prophetic skill, and you were exposed as having no knowledge from the birds or from the gods. No, it was I that came, Oedipus who knew nothing, and put a stop to her; I hit the mark by native wit, not by what I learned from birds.¹

What was Sophocles' message to the Athenian citizens who flocked to the theater? You ignore the realm of unconscious meaning at your peril. Do so, and Oedipus' fate will be yours. From this perspective, democratic citizens need to maintain a certain humility in the face of meanings which remain opaque to human reason. We need to be wary that what we take to be an exercise of reason will both hide and express an irrationality of which we remain unaware.

In all the recent attacks on Freud, can't one hear echoes of Oedipus' attack on Tiresias? Isn't the attack on Freud itself a repetition and reenactment of Oedipus' complex, less an attack on the father than an attack on the very idea of repressed, unconscious meaning? One indication that this is so—a symptom, if you will—is that none of the attacks on Freud addresses the problems of human existence to which psychoanalysis is a response. From a psychoanalytic perspective, human irrationality is not merely a failure to make a coherent set of choices. Sometimes it is an unintelligible intrusion which overwhelms reason and blows it apart. Sometimes it is method in madness. But how could there be *method* in madness? Even if Freud did botch this case or ambitiously pursue that end, we still need to account for the pervasive manifestations of human irrationality. This is the issue, and it is one which the attacks on Freud ignore.



THE REAL QUESTION IS whether, and how, responsible autonomy is possible. In the development of the human self-image from Sophocles to Freud, there has been a shift in the locus of hidden meaning from a di-

vine to the all-too-human realm. At first, it might look as though the recognition of a dark strain running through the human soul might threaten the viability of democratic culture. Certainly, the twentieth-century critiques of Enlightenment optimism, with the corresponding emphasis on human irrationality, also question or even pour scorn on the democratic ideal. It is in this context that Freud comes across as a much more ambiguous figure than he is normally taken to be. In one way, he is the advocate of the unconscious; in another, he is himself filled with Enlightenment optimism that the problems posed by the unconscious can be solved; in yet another, he is wary of the dark side of the human soul and pessimistic about doing much to alleviate psychological pain. He is Tiresias and Oedipus and Sophocles rolled into one.

If, for the moment, we concentrate on the optimism, we see a vision emerge of how one might both take human irrationality seriously and participate in a democratic ideal. If the source of irrationality lies within, rather than outside, the human realm, the possibility opens up of a responsible engagement with it. Psychoanalysis is, in its essence, the attempt to work out just such an engagement. It is a technique which allows dark meanings and irrational motivations to rise to the surface of conscious awareness. They can then be taken into account, they can be influenced by other considerations, and they become less liable to disrupt human life in violent and incomprehensible ways. Critics of psychoanalysis complain that it is a luxury of the few. But from the current perspective, no thinker has made creativity and imagination more democratically available than Freud. This is one of the truly important consequences of locating the unconscious inside the psyche. Creativity is no longer the exclusive preserve of the divinely inspired or the few great poets. From a psychoanalytic point of view, everyone is poetic; everyone dreams in metaphor and generates symbolic meaning in the process of living. Even in their prose, people have unwittingly been speaking poetry all along.



AND THE QUESTION NOW IS: To what poetic use are we going to put Freud? Freud *is* dead. He died in 1939, after an extraordinarily productive and creative life. Beneath the continued attacks upon him, ironically, lies

an unwillingness to let him go. It is Freud who taught that only after we accept the actual death of an important person in our lives can we begin to mourn. Only then can he or she take on full symbolic life for us. Obsessing about Freud *the man* is a way of keeping Freud *the meaning* at bay. Freud's meaning, I think, lies in the recognition that humans make more meaning than they grasp, that this meaning can be painful and disruptive, but that humans need not be passive in the face of it. Freud began a process of dealing with unconscious meaning, and it is important not to get stuck on him, like some rigid symptom, either to idolize or to denigrate him. The many attacks on him, even upon psychoanalysis, refuse to recognize that Freud gave birth to a psychoanalytic movement which in myriad ways has moved beyond him. If Freud is alive anywhere, it is in a tradition which in its development of more sensitive techniques, and more sophisticated ways of thinking about unconscious motivation, has rendered some of the particular things Freud thought or did irrelevant. Just as democracy requires the recognition that the king is dead, both as an individual and as an institution, so the democratic recognition that each person is the maker of unconscious, symbolic meaning requires the acceptance of Freud's death. What matters, as Freud himself well understood, is what we are able to do with the meanings we make.