

Jonathan Lear

# Freud

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# Introduction

The peculiar conversation

## 1 BRINGING FREUD BACK FROM THE DEAD

For as long as there has been literate civilization, human beings have puzzled over human being. 'I am not to blame!' says King Agamemnon in the *Iliad*. 'Zeus and Fate and the Fury stalking through the night, they are the ones who drove the savage madness in my heart.' This is Agamemnon's account of his catastrophic decision to seize Achilles' prize, the slave-girl Briseis; and though it may now look quaint, it is a mistake to dismiss it. At the moment he acted, Agamemnon – 'blazing with anger' – had no doubt he was justified. He needed to protect his honor and avoid disgrace. But, looking back in the light of the military devastation his decision caused, it seems to him to have been a 'savage madness': his reason was distorted, the act was not entirely his, another agency was involved, another mind; one whose purposes he cannot fully understand, but which nevertheless acts through him.<sup>1</sup> These are the forces Sigmund Freud tries to explain – without invoking Zeus. Freud wanted to understand human beings – their culture, art, science and religion – as part of nature but, unlike so many psychologists today, he did not want to ignore the mysteries of the human condition.<sup>2</sup>

It is, I think, urgent that we come to understand this form of explanation, which he called psychoanalysis. And, for worse and for better, it is an opportune moment to do so. For in addition to our long-standing puzzlement over the human condition, we are also ever-tempted by complacency when it comes to

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self-understanding. And we live in an age when that complacency has, at least for the time being, been shaken. We can see that complacency in a package of beliefs that were in full flower at the end of the millennium:

- That we can find out all we need to know about human behavior and motivation by conducting polls, examining democratic votes, choices made in the market-place, and changing fashions. In short, human motivation is essentially transparent.
- That all human disagreements are in principle resolvable through rational conversation and mutual understanding. Each of us is acting on the basis of what we think is reasonable. If we keep trying to understand the other's point of view, we shall eventually resolve our disagreement or at least reach a point where we can 'agree to disagree.'
- That we have reached 'the end of history': the epochal struggles of historical change are over; what is left is basically a homogenizing process of 'globalization.'
- That all serious psychological problems will soon be treatable either by drugs or neurosurgery. Anti-depressants provided the paradigm. What hitherto looked like intractable suffering can be treated by a drug which affects neurotransmitters in the brain. Since every psychological problem must make some difference in the brain, eventually we will discover what that is and learn how to change it. Thus,
- The only form of psychotherapy that is needed is rational conversation. A person may suffer from a 'cognitive error': he may believe, for example, that he is an unsuccessful person, and will thereby continue to fail. But then all one really needs to do is point out his mistake. He will come to see himself as successful and will thereby start to succeed. Or we can simply teach people new behaviors so that they can cope better. Behavioral therapy or cognitive therapy is all we need. And thus,

- ‘Freud is dead’: His account of a ‘talking cure’ – psychoanalysis – has about as much validity as invoking Zeus.<sup>3</sup>

It is possible to hold any of these beliefs without holding the others, but one can see how they all hang together to form a certain outlook about what humans are like. And what makes this outlook powerful is that there is truth in each of the beliefs: we can find out much about humans via empirical polls, it is always useful to seek mutual understanding, there is a process of globalization occurring, neuroscience will make remarkable advances in treating psychological suffering, rational conversation can be a big help, and Freud was wrong about many of his beliefs and deserves to be criticized. What, then, is the problem? It lies in the implicit assumption that this picture gives us the *whole* truth about human beings. Herein lies the complacency. We are encouraged to think that this outlook gives us an account of human motivation *without remainder*. We can thus dismiss any darker accounts of human motivation which do not already fit this picture.

This is the complacency which was shaken when the World Trade Center was destroyed. For what are we to make of suicidal fundamentalists who kill themselves along with thousands of innocent adults and children? In addition to the shock and emotional trauma, there has also been a rip in the fabric of our understanding. We no longer feel confident that we fully grasp the phenomena that confront us. Of course, if one is determined to hold onto what I shall call the *complacent picture* of human motivation there is nothing in this tide of human events that will force one out of it. One might continue to insist that if only we knew more about the cultural conditions in which militant fundamentalism took root, if only we knew more about the history of degradation of certain peoples, we would eventually come to understand all there is to know about their motivations. We would come to understand their reasons (even if we thought that they were bad reasons). This is a widespread view in the West today.

Ironically, it is a view that the terrorists share. If one reads those who want to blow us up, it is striking how much they try to present themselves as reasonable. 'What America is tasting now is only a copy of what we have tasted,' Osama bin Laden said shortly after 9/11. 'Our Islamic nation has been tasting the same for more than 80 years of humiliation and disgrace.' In other words, according to Mr bin Laden, we deserve to be attacked, we deserve to be humiliated; it is just revenge for wrongs we have previously inflicted. No doubt there is much to be learned about the history of humiliation, empirical studies conducted on how to reach out to a humiliated people, and so on. But might there not be a further, darker option? The assumption of the public debate – shared across the political spectrum by terrorists as well as our own liberal and conservative leaders – is that no one seeks to be humiliated. It is this assumption that Freud calls into question.

The terrorist thinks it is *because* his people have been humiliated that he is justified in his acts. But might the situation be just the reverse? That is, because he takes a certain pleasure in destructive hatred, he has become attached to his sense of humiliation. Thus while it may be true that the terrorist kills out of a sense of revenge, it is *also* true that he holds onto his sense of humiliation in order that he should be able to go on killing. But how are we to understand someone who is *motivated* to keep feeling humiliated? On the surface, the terrorist sincerely believes that he hates his humiliation, and would do anything to get rid of it. He would be deeply offended – furious, *humiliated* – at any suggestion that, really, he has a hidden longing to stay connected to his sense of degradation. Humiliation is nothing he *wants* – and thus doing anything to promote it is against his own sense of his best interests. Thus it is irrational for him to pursue it. And this goes to the heart of Freud's insight: that humans tend toward certain forms of *motivated irrationality* of which they have little or no awareness. How this is possible is the subject of this book.

Obviously, the point of the previous example is not to insist,

parochially, that only other people can be irrational. Nor is it to insist, equally parochially, that shocking events we do not well understand must be the work of unreason. No doubt it is possible for some bewildering and painful events to have plenty of reasons to explain them.<sup>4</sup> And no doubt we should learn as much as we can about the historical and cultural conditions that foster terrorism. If there are reasons, we should know what they are. Nevertheless, in the bewildering and the painful, it is sometimes possible for us to get a glimpse of genuine unreason at work. Having seen it, we may learn how to confront it more effectively. And once we have glimpsed it, we may also be able to see its workings closer to home; even at home.

Even at the outset we can see how strange it is to claim that people can be motivated to be irrational. Our best philosophers, from Socrates to the present day, have shown that when we try to explain a person's action by giving their reasons we will inevitably tend to rationalize the act.<sup>5</sup> That is, a reason will give us an account of what an agent *wanted* (or deemed appropriate, worth pursuing) and *believed* about the situation such that it appeared reasonable to engage in this act in order to achieve that goal. A presumption of rationality is thus built into the very activity of interpreting people as acting on the basis of their beliefs and desires. We can, of course, criticize people for having false or misguided beliefs, inappropriate or bad desires, but as soon as there is an action, there is an inevitable presumption of rationality in which beliefs, desires and action cohere.

And if we look to the great interpretive humanistic disciplines – history, cultural anthropology, motivational psychology, even economics – we see that an assumption of rationality is built into the activity of interpretation. For if we want to capture agents acting – even a people, culture or nation – on the basis of how the world looked to them, we must inevitably construct a view that is more or less reasonable in its own terms (however mistaken we may take it to be).

By contrast, psychoanalysis seeks to provide an interpretation of people, show them as acting in certain motivated ways and achieving certain gratifications – without thereby rationalizing the acts. How can any form of interpretation do this? This question requires a sustained answer. But, in brief, Freud made two crucial moves which opened up the possibility of an interpretive science of motivated irrationality. First, he introduced peculiar forms of motivation – wish and fantasy – which are desire-like in that they propel people toward certain acts and afford certain gratifications, but which do not engage with beliefs in a rationalizing kind of way. Second, he introduced *repression*: the idea that the mind is active in keeping its own activity outside of conscious awareness. The point is not merely that ideas can operate in the mind outside of conscious awareness; it is that the mind is motivated to keep ideas out of awareness because they are forbidden, rejected.

These ideas are strange, to be sure; and it is fashionable today to dismiss them. After all, if today we can look inside the brain, see how individual neurons light up, why do we need such extravagant theories? Hasn't Freud been discredited anyway? And who cares about 'the mind' when we can study the brain? It is worth pointing out that the very best neuroscientists do not believe this. The Nobel Laureate, Eric Kandel has said that 'psychoanalysis still represents the most coherent and intellectually satisfying view of the mind.' And he suggests that the truly great scientific breakthroughs of the twenty-first century will not be in the biology of the brain, so much as in 'the biology of the mind.'<sup>6</sup> Not only will future brain-research reinvigorate psychoanalytic ideas by revealing their organic basis, but certain psychoanalytic ideas – like repression – will help creative scientists design their research projects. It is one thing to look at the brain and see where neurons 'light up,' it is quite another to have a sophisticated sense of what one is looking for, and looking at.

Freud would be delighted with this prediction. Indeed, he predicted it himself: 'We must recollect that all of our provisional ideas

in psychology will presumably one day be based on an organic substructure.' That is why he tried to provide a synthesis of psychological and biological ideas, though he realized that, because biological understanding of neural processes was severely limited, he was often reduced to speculation.<sup>7</sup> He expected neuroscience to yield 'the most surprising information and we cannot guess what answers it will return in a few dozen years of questions we have put to it.'<sup>8</sup> And he had no doubt that science would lead to the revision of many of his hypotheses, especially the more speculative ones. It is precisely because he trusted science to correct him that he felt free to pose bold hypotheses. Like any good scientist, Freud expected to be superseded by science.

Were he living today, Freud would likely be a neuroscientist, and not a therapist of any kind. Born in 1856, he spent his early 20s working in research labs at the University of Vienna; first in anatomy, then in neurophysiology. Working in the lab of the renowned physiologist Ernst Brücke, Freud wrote, 'I found rest and full satisfaction at last.'<sup>9</sup> But by the age of 26, he was engaged to Martha Bernays – and concerned about earning money. The anti-Semitism of the time made the prospect of promotion to a top academic post unlikely, and he began training for private practice. The university awarded him a travel grant in 1885, and he went to Paris to study brain-physiology and psychology with Jean Charcot at the Salpêtrière clinic. He spent some time doing microscopic studies of children's brains, but Charcot fascinated him with his use of hypnosis in the treatment of hysterics. Apparently, Charcot could induce hysterical symptoms and cure them via hypnotic suggestion. Anyone who has ever seen a hypnotist perform will know how uncanny it is to watch other people being hypnotized. And it is tempting to speculate that this experience put the thought in Freud's mind that physical effects might have a psychological cause. He, of course, believed the psychological cause had an organic substrate of some sort, but in terms of understanding the process, it was the hypnotic suggestion that was important. For although

Charcot's words started the air vibrating, and made a physical impact on the neurological systems of his patients, it was the suggested idea of paralysis that seemed to immobilize his hypnotized patients. That was the most salient way to characterize what was happening. Perhaps equally important, Charcot rescued hypnotism from the carnival, the nightclub and the quack; he insisted on its significance for medical research and treatment. He certainly provided a striking example of someone who believed that mysteries were in our midst, there for the solving.

Freud returned to Vienna in the spring of 1886, he resigned his low-level position at the General Hospital and began seeing patients in private practice for nervous disorders. If he had remained in the research lab, he would not have been able to show us the same things. For the extended conversation in the privacy of the doctor's office opened up avenues of intimacy that could never be replicated in ordinary empirical research. And it was in this context that Freud was able to grasp the workings of unconscious mental activity that we might not otherwise be able to see.

## 2 THE DEMOCRATIC IMPULSE

There is a long-standing tradition that great discoveries may emerge from simple origins. 'We must not recoil with childish aversion from the study of humbler creatures,' Aristotle tells us, 'for every realm of nature is marvelous.'

And when strangers came to visit Heraclitus and found him in the kitchen, he bid them not to be afraid to come in since divinities were present *even in the kitchen!* So we should study every kind of creature without disdain; for each will reveal to us something natural and beautiful.<sup>10</sup>

Two and a-half millennia later, Sigmund Freud invited us, not into the kitchen, but into his consulting room. But it was a similarly humble place. Freud was willing to listen to anyone who came into his office – and these were, by and large, bourgeois women and

men of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Vienna.<sup>11</sup> He listened to ordinary people and, on the basis of what he heard, he transformed our conception of the human. He not only discovered systematic aspects of how the mind works unconsciously, he came to see that each of us in our ordinary lives unwittingly participates in dramatic struggles – the stuff that had hitherto been reserved for the heroes of myth and literature.

Surely one of Freud's most admirable working principles, implicit in his practice, is this: nothing is beneath our notice. Psychoanalysis is constituted by a refusal to say ahead of time that anything we do is insignificant, unworthy of contemplation. Equally important, when Freud is at his best, theory emerges naturally from the clinical details. Much of the criticism of psychoanalysis as extravagant – as well as much of the emptiness of academic debates – occurs because theoretical terms are invoked in isolation, cut off from clinical reality. It is worth reminding ourselves that the central concepts of psychoanalysis emerge as a response to human suffering. Freud listened to ordinary people who came to him in pain, and his ideas emerged from what he heard. Some of his ideas are speculative extravagances and deserve to be discarded, but the central concepts of psychoanalysis are closely tied to clinical reality. One aim of this book is to bring the reader back to clinical moments and show how theoretical ideas develop out of them.

When Heraclitus invited the strangers in, they were not only strangers to Heraclitus, they were strangers to the kitchen. This was an odd place to search for truth. Until quite recently in the history of civilization, the kitchen was a place for women and servants. It was a place where private gossip was exchanged as meals were prepared – a warm, sheltered locus of human intimacy. (There is no record of what thoughts Socrates' wife Xanthippe shared as her husband was out debating in the marketplace.) And when Heraclitus says that *even here* divinities are present, he is usually interpreted as meaning that divinities are present in the kitchen as everywhere

else. Thus the strangeness is superficial. But suppose the divinities present were special to the kitchen. Maybe they don't get along with the other divinities. Might they like to cause a ruckus? In which case, certain insights might emerge only in the kitchen.

As Freud invites us into the consulting room, we are the strangers. And we are being invited into a strange space. Yet it does bear an uncanny resemblance to Heraclitus' kitchen. A preponderance of Freud's patients were women, and if one considers some of the classic case studies – Anna O, Elizabeth von R, Dora – one can see that they used Freud's 'kitchen' as a place to share intimacies, gossip, explain their situations . . . and complain. Of course, they took themselves to be going to a medical doctor, and in the first instance they complained of particular ailments – a pain in the thigh, difficulty walking, fainting spells, facial tics, vaginal discharge, recurrent disturbing thoughts. Freud's response was to listen to them. But as one listens to all the specific complaints one begins to hear an underlying master-complaint that unifies them all: 'in my own attempt to figure out how to live, *something is going wrong.*'

Freud was not well placed to hear this master-complaint. He was a doctor and he conceived of himself as engaged in scientific research – though his image of science was, by today's standards, naive. Just as a doctor probes for the hidden causes of physical diseases, so Freud took himself to be probing the unconscious for hidden meanings making the patient ill. With the benefit of hindsight, we can now see that a certain clinical brutality flows from this self-understanding. (See, for instance, Freud's case study of Dora, discussed in Chapter 4.) It also blinds him to the profound philosophical and ethical significance of his discoveries. Another aim of this book is to bring this significance to light.<sup>12</sup>

### 3 REFLECTION AND THE IDEA OF FREEDOM

Philosophers have been slow to see why Freud matters. The problem is not with unconscious motivation per se. Philosophers from

Socrates and Plato to Kant, Kierkegaard and Nietzsche have believed that humans are not transparent to themselves; that much goes on in us unconsciously. And many philosophers today are inclined to agree. The difficulty is in seeing how this affects our most fundamental concerns – for our freedom, our happiness and our commitment to what really matters.

To take a contemporary example, the distinguished moral philosopher Christine Korsgaard accepts that the mind is not transparent to itself but, she continues, ‘the human mind is self-conscious in the sense that it is essentially reflective.’

And this sets us a problem no other animal has. . . . For our capacity to turn our attention on to our own mental activities is also a capacity to distance ourselves from them, and to call them into question. I perceive, and I find myself with a powerful impulse to believe. But I back up and bring that impulse into view and then I have a certain distance. Now the impulse doesn’t dominate me and now I have a problem. Shall I believe? Is this perception really a *reason* to believe? I desire and I find myself with a powerful impulse to act. But I back up and bring the impulse into view and then I have a certain distance. Now the impulse doesn’t dominate me and now I have a problem. Shall I act? Is this desire really a *reason* to act? The reflective mind cannot settle for perception and desire, not just as such. It needs a *reason*.<sup>13</sup>

Following Kant, she links this capacity for self-conscious reflection with our freedom. ‘It is because of the reflective character of the mind that we must act, as Kant put it, under the idea of freedom.’ For if we are, as it were, ‘bidden from the outside’ of our own judgment – by a desire – ‘then the point is that the reflective mind must endorse the desire before it can act on it, it must say to itself that the desire is a reason.’<sup>14</sup>

Korsgaard addresses the challenge that this idea of freedom might be a delusion. But the challenge she cites is that of scientific determinism. By now this is an old chestnut: it does not really

threaten us. And she misses the genuine threat that psychoanalysis poses. Consider the Rat Man, the protagonist of one of Freud's case studies.<sup>15</sup> To give him the respect he deserves, I shall call him Mr R. We shall consider details of the case in the next chapter, but looking at it from a broad perspective, Mr R's problem is that he inhabits a guilty world. He tends to interpret passing events as though they are bad or, at the very least, ominous – and that they are somehow his fault. Obviously, much needs to be said about how a person gets into such a position and what holds him there. But, for now, the point is that self-conscious reflection is part and parcel of this world. Mr R's problem is not just that he feels guilty but that when he reflects on his feeling it seems to him like the right response. He looks to the world and sees ever more reasons for feeling like he does. Indeed, his self-conscious reflection is implicated in finding reasons why he should feel guilty. For Mr R, self-conscious reflection on his desires and impulses is a manifestation of his unfreedom: as he reflects on his reasons for feeling guilty, he digs himself ever deeper into a crabbed and constraining world. Self-conscious reflection is being deployed as a defense, one which helps sustain the guilty world. Although Mr R is an extreme case, in my psychoanalytic experience, this general situation is the rule rather than an exception. And it shows that the process of 'stepping back' from one's psychological experience is often an illusion. This is not an abstract, intellectual threat – what if causal determinism is true? – it is the way many of us live our lives.

I can imagine Mr R taking a course in philosophy and concluding, 'Yes, the best arguments prove that when I reflect on my impulses I manifest my freedom – thus I am responsible! I'm right to feel guilty!' Here is an actual vignette from the case: Mr R had convinced himself that he was somehow responsible for a torture that would be carried out on his loved ones not only in this life, 'but also to eternity – to the next world'. Freud points out to Mr R that although as a child he was religious, he had become an atheist. How could he still believe in otherworldly punishments? Freud is

inviting Mr R to reflect on his impulse to feel guilty. He is asking him to reflect on how his inclination to believe he is responsible fits with his other beliefs. Freud reports that Mr R,

reconciled the contradiction between his beliefs and his obsessions by saying to himself: 'What do you know about the next world? Nothing can be known about it. You're not risking anything – so do it.' This form of argument seemed unobjectionable to a man who was in other respects particularly clear-headed, and in this way he exploited the uncertainty of reason in the face of these questions to the benefit of the religious attitude which he had outgrown.<sup>16</sup>

This really is an illusion of freedom. Mr R can say to himself that he is subjecting reason to a critique, pointing out its limits. He explicitly takes himself to have shown that he does have legitimate space for his belief. What he cannot see is that his 'philosophical' reflection is a manifestation of his unfreedom.

Freud says that Mr R, like many obsessional neurotics, had a need for uncertainty and doubt.

The creation of uncertainty is one of the methods employed by the neurosis for drawing the patient away from reality and isolating him from the world – which is among the objects of every psychoneurotic disorder. . . . The predilection felt by obsessional neurotics for uncertainty and doubt leads them to turn their thoughts by preference to those subjects upon which all mankind are uncertain and upon which our knowledge and judgments must necessarily remain open to doubt.<sup>17</sup>

In short, philosophical reflection can be used as a defense, blocking the self-understanding it purports to deliver. Officially, Mr R is reflecting on life after death because he wants to know whether he has reason to feel guilty. The fact that our knowledge about the afterlife is uncertain is supposedly the outcome of the inquiry. Unofficially the situation is the reverse: because Mr R is motivated to keep on feeling guilty, he chooses a realm – the next world –

about which knowledge is necessarily uncertain. Philosophical reflection is his disease.

Freud makes an extraordinary claim about self-conscious reflection when it occurs in an obsessional neurotic like Mr R: ‘The thought-process itself becomes sexualized, for the sexual pleasure which is normally attached to the content of thought becomes shifted on to the activity of thinking itself.’<sup>18</sup> Freud’s conception of sexuality is very different from the popular conception – as we shall see in Chapter 2. But, for now, we can see Freud’s point: in an obsessional like Mr R, the activity of thinking takes on its own peculiar pleasure, and it takes on a life of its own. In this way, it subverts the thinking process. If Mr R were genuinely to consider his guilt, his thinking would need to stay on target, aim towards some kind of resolution. Instead, the thinking itself becomes so charged that it becomes ever more loosely moored to its content. Officially he is reflecting on his guilt, but as he goes back and forth – ‘Should I feel guilty? But it wasn’t my fault! Maybe it was? What a bad person I am!’ – we lose a sense that the thinking really is *about* his guilt. It is more like a back-and-forth activity in which ‘guilty’ thoughts are traded, but the endless activity is barely about anything at all. The ‘thinking’ goes on without end because that has become its aim.

#### **4 THE FUNDAMENTAL QUESTION (AND HOW NOT TO ASK IT)**

The question which ought to concern us, Socrates tells us, is *how should one live?*<sup>19</sup> But what does this question mean? What is the question?

One can imagine the Style Section of a newspaper having a motto blazoned in the top right hand corner, ‘How One Should Live.’ And one can imagine, without caricature, people who spend their lives following the fashions of the day. They may have excellent taste. They may take pride in their ability to embody and embellish the fashions of the times. And they may even self-consciously reflect that this is a good way for them to live. A moral philosopher might well judge such people harshly: that by following trends they are

really living a superficial and slavish life; that the life is narrow and selfish; that they are giving a poor answer to the question of how to live. By contrast, a philosopher influenced by Freud ought to say: *they have given no answer at all*. For the question has not (yet) been raised, and where there is no question there can be no answer. Certainly, uttering the words ‘How should one live?’ – even sincerely, earnestly, in a heartfelt questioning way – is not itself sufficient to raise the question.

The problem is not that a life devoted to fashion cannot be an answer to the fundamental question of how to live (because, say, it is too trivial). I believe Proust did raise the question for himself, and a life devoted to fashion was part of his answer. The problem, from a Freudian point of view, is that the *fundamental* question is astonishingly elusive, astonishingly difficult to raise – in part because it is terrifying. We are now ready to glimpse another Freudian thought: in an uncanny way, the Style Section does stand in relation to the fundamental question: it takes its place. We spend our lives following fashions (intellectual and political fashions, fashions of good and bad causes, as well as fashions in the style section). We are anxious about getting into the right college, being accepted into the right firm, getting the promotion, being published in the right journal, and so on – and all this serves as its own form of distraction. In an ironic way, the life devoted to style does express the fundamental question – by constantly ensuring that it never arises.

In his own way, Socrates was aware of the problem. He was suspicious that any form of philosophy could be carried out in written form; and he suggested that, contrary to appearances, writing was a form of forgetting rather than remembering.<sup>20</sup> The reason is that simply using the right words is not enough to bring philosophy to life. How many introductions to philosophy tell us the fundamental question is: how should one live? What a bore! Is that why they’re there: to bore us into thinking we’re doing philosophy? That is why Socrates thought the written word could actually be a form of forgetting: precisely because it gives us the

right words – and we can even go through the motions in a sincere way – it lulls us into thinking we are doing philosophy, and thus that nothing is missing. This is forgetting: ‘doing philosophy’ is taking the place of doing philosophy.<sup>21</sup>

What to do? Socrates gives us an indication of how he personally dealt with the problem. He assigns a vibrant primacy to the injunction at Delphi: know thyself! ‘I can’t as yet know myself as the inscription at Delphi enjoins; and so long as that ignorance remains it seems to me ridiculous to inquire into extraneous matters.’ The inscription is, for him, not just a piece of good advice; it is an injunction coming from an absolute source, addressed directly to him. His life itself is at stake; and in relation to this injunction, other inquiries pale into insignificance. But he recognizes a crucial problem: ‘I direct my inquiries to myself, to discover whether I really am a more complex creature and more puffed up than the monster Typhon, or a simpler, gentler being whom heaven has blessed with a quiet, un-Typhonic nature.’<sup>22</sup> Typhon was a mythical hundred-headed monster, so if Socrates doesn’t even know whether or not he is like that, he’s got a problem. Suppose he is a Typhon, and the Socrates we know from the Platonic dialogues is only one of his heads – the talking head. The situation is tragicomic. Imagine the other heads grumbling in the darkness as they listen to him going on: ‘let’s eat it,’ they say, just before swallowing the talking head. In such a case, ‘Socratic’ conversation about how to live would be idiot wind.

So Socrates recognizes that to be able to raise the question of how to live, he has to experience that question as addressed to him; to do that he must be able to take himself into account, though he recognizes that there may be dark aspects of himself that thus far elude his conscious awareness; but he gives us little clue as to how he might actually go about finding out what the rest of him is like.<sup>23</sup> This is Socrates’ legacy, and it is precisely this challenge that Freud takes up: to figure out a form of conversation in which one can succeed in genuinely taking oneself into account.<sup>24</sup> Anna O, the first patient of psychoanalysis, dubbed it a ‘talking cure.’ But even in

those early days – using a primitive therapeutic technique he was soon to discard, the so-called cathartic method – Freud recognized that words alone were not enough. In those earliest days, Freud thought the task was to recover a hidden memory, but as he put it, ‘recollection without affect almost invariably produces no result.’<sup>25</sup> His point was not merely that one’s words had to be emotional; they had to connect to one’s emotions and thoughts in the right sort of way. As we all know, a hissy fit need not be an expression of deep emotional truth. Emotions such as anger or jealousy – or even making a heartfelt confession – can be used in the service of self-deception. But what, then, is the right sort of way? It seems to me that the entire history of psychoanalysis – from this founding moment to the present – can be seen as an ongoing attempt to answer that question.<sup>26</sup>

## 5 NEUROSIS AND SEXUALITY

And the question becomes a special challenge. It is philosophers who have the task of exploring what matters to us most – What is freedom? What is it genuinely for us to be happy? What is worth valuing and why? – but it is psychoanalysis that teaches us how we regularly get in the way of our own freedom, systematically make ourselves unhappy and use values for covert and malign purposes. Philosophy cannot live up to its task unless it takes these psychoanalytic challenges seriously.

By now it is a commonplace of the culture that Freud thought that the human psyche or soul had three parts: id, ego and super-ego.<sup>27</sup> We shall in Chapter 6 look carefully at what this claim means and how it is justified. But even now we can see a broad-scale problem coming into view. Freud came to think that by the time we left childhood a significant amount of our unhappiness and a significant amount of unfreedom was in some sense self-inflicted. Through a peculiar combination of nature and nurture, the psyche is divided into distinct functioning parts which are largely at odds with each other. This is the account Freud gave of

that peculiarly human form of misery which he called neurosis. In so doing, he is following directly in Plato's footsteps. In the *Republic*, Socrates argues that the just life is the best life precisely because it is the only life in which the parts of the psyche are working together harmoniously. All the unjust lives are lives in which the parts of the psyche are at war with each other – and thus they are lives of unhappiness. This is what Freud would come to see as neurosis.<sup>28</sup> And it leads to a special challenge.

If the psyche really is divided into parts in conflict with each other, how could any kind of conversation make a difference? So, for instance, suppose a person has a punishing superego. (So, to give a fanciful example: I might think to myself, or even mutter out loud, 'Jonathan, you idiot!') In this locution, I am addressing myself as though I were someone else. Freud says that in such a circumstance, it is as though I am taking myself as an object. The idea is that there might be an organized part of my own psyche, split off from my core sense of self that criticizes my own attempts at creative activity. I might not even 'hear the voice' of my superego. I might just feel depressed or inhibited or suffer writer's block or feel an impulsive need to eat whenever I get near a computer or feel the constant call of distracting email or spend my life writing critical reviews of other people's books instead of writing one of my own. . . . the variations are endless.) What kind of a conversation could change that? For what we are now demanding is not merely a conversation in which a hidden thought or forbidden emotion comes to conscious awareness; we are demanding a conversation which changes the structure of the soul. This is a conversation which will unite (or re-unite) disparate and conflicting parts of the psyche. But how could any conversation do that? As we shall see when we investigate transference in Chapter Four, although a person may, of course, change her beliefs and emotions on the basis of conversations, the psyche nevertheless tends to continue to function in certain fixed and rigid ways. People will each have their own ways of changing a bit in response to conversation, they will hold

their overall orientation to the world constant. And neurotic orientations have remarkable durability. How, then, can a psychoanalytic conversation subvert and alter that fixed structure?

Note that what we are talking about is *recollection* in a much deeper sense than the standard cliché of recovering repressed memories. What is at issue is a re-collection of the parts of the psyche into a harmoniously vibrant psyche. Obviously, an introduction is the place to state the challenge, not answer it.<sup>29</sup> But it is worth pointing out right now that Freud's account of sexuality – to be discussed in Chapter 2 – plays a crucial role in providing an answer. Freud does place sexuality at the core of our being. And this has led to strong objection: that he is thereby over-emphasizing our animal nature, providing an absurdly reductive account of what we are like, diminishing our higher nature. This offense is misplaced. For our sexuality is astonishingly complex and distinctively human. The point is not reductively to emphasize our animal nature, but to highlight our distinctively erotic nature. As Freud says, 'anyone who looks down with contempt upon psychoanalysis from a superior vantage-point should remember how closely the enlarged sexuality of psychoanalysis coincides with the Eros of the divine Plato.'<sup>30</sup> And, he later continued, '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 Eros of Plato's *Symposium*.'<sup>31</sup> For Socrates, one's erotic nature begins in the body and is directed towards bodies. One starts out loving, being sexually attracted to, beautiful bodies. But it is precisely because our sexuality is erotic that we are thereby propelled beyond our current reach. It is through our erotic natures that we develop and grow. There are significant differences between Socrates and Freud, but it is fair to say that he made use of our human eros to shape a peculiar form of conversation through which we would reach out beyond ourselves and change even the fixed structures of our psyches. He called that conversation psychoanalysis.

## 6 A PHILOSOPHICAL INTRODUCTION

Freud was not a philosopher, and this is a philosophical introduction. Freud was a well-educated European of the late nineteenth century. As such, he received a classical education – he could translate Sophocles – but he trained as a medical doctor and stayed in private practice all his life. At university he did study Aristotle with Franz Brentano, but he was much more interested in ancient literature and history than he was in philosophy. Throughout his career he remarks with admiration on the works of great philosophers like Plato, Anaxagoras, Empedocles and of his near-contemporaries Schopenhauer and Nietzsche. But he was contemptuous of philosophy professors; irritated by their facile proofs that the ‘unconscious mental’ was a contradiction in terms. He also thought that philosophy was too concerned with building overarching systems and that it overvalued logic.<sup>32</sup> Some of his criticisms are valid, some are irritated grumbling: to my mind, none of it matters much. What does matter is that if we want to take our deep concerns with happiness, freedom and value seriously, we should not ignore Freud.

It is time to get clear on what I mean by a philosophical introduction. There are already many books that will introduce you to Freud the man, introduce you to the central ideas of psychoanalysis, locate Freud in the history of ideas, offer trenchant criticisms of his views. A philosophical introduction is different. A biographer will want to know what Freud’s life was like and, perhaps, how his ideas arose out of that life. An historian of ideas will want to know the historical context in which these ideas arose, and what influence they had on subsequent thought. A psychoanalytic introduction will aim to explain what the central concepts are, and how they work within psychoanalytic theory and practice. A philosophical introduction, by contrast, will want to show why these ideas matter for addressing philosophical problems that still concern us. Given this aim, there are bound to be aspects of such a book that, from any other perspective, appear strange. The book will pay scant

attention to the details of Dr Freud's life. Obviously, one has to be historically sensitive simply to read a book from another time and culture. But the emphasis will always be on why Freud's ideas continue to have significance, not on how they arose. And Freud may not be the best arbiter of this. Nor is he the final arbiter of what counts as psychoanalysis. There may then be interpretations in this book to which Freud, the man, would make strenuous objection. His views are always significant, but psychoanalysis stays alive via a vibrant engagement with them.

That being said, I shall everywhere try to make the best possible case for Freud's ideas and arguments. This is not because I have a desire to defend Freud, but because if we are going to see how these ideas might continue to matter, we need to see them in their best possible form. Obviously, there are important criticisms to be made of Freud and, more generally, of psychoanalysis. But we have to beware of a certain kind of argument from decadence. So, to give a notorious example, psychoanalysts are sometimes criticized for pulling rank on their patients. If their patients object to their interpretation, so the objection goes, then they are 'resisting'. No doubt this happens and, humanly speaking, it is awful when it does. But, philosophically speaking, the question is not whether some analysts are bullies. Rather, the question is, 'When psychoanalysis is practiced well, is there even so a tendency towards bullying?' Similarly with Freud: there is no doubt that he did not treat the patient he called Dora as well as he should have. Still, one fitting tribute to Dora is to learn from her case as much as we can about the possibilities for human freedom. The aim, then, is not to achieve a balanced historical view of who did what to whom, or who thought what when. Nor is it to make all the criticisms that might legitimately be made. It is to show why these ideas continue to matter insofar as a philosophical understanding of the human soul still matters. And so, when I do offer a criticism, it is because I think that the best possible construal of Freud's position is still open to criticism and that this criticism is of philosophical significance.

Finally, this is a philosophical introduction. I do not pretend to be able to uncover the hidden philosophical meaning of psychoanalysis; I do mean to engage in a conversation with Freud. My hope is that the book will stimulate others to pursue these thoughts, for I am convinced they are crucial to our self-understanding.