

Family and Social Dynamics

Freudian Interpretation, Explanation, and Prediction of Behavior

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The contributions of Sigmund Freud to the field of psychology were as influential and controversial as any to date. Despite the criticisms of and flaws in Freud's theories as they pertain to the psychological development of the individual, his theory of *psychoanalysis* as an interpretative device aimed at explaining, understanding and predicting human behavior is, if nothing else, of great philosophical importance. The purpose of this paper will be to view Freud, not through a scientifically empirical lens, but rather through a philosophically interpretive lens. Therefore, the ensuing discussion will focus on the development and explanation of Freud's theories as these pertain to the psychological development of family and social origins, as well as the dynamic and interactive role that a family and a society has upon influencing an individual and their subsequent behavioral habituations.¹

The *Id*, the *Ego* and the *Super-Ego*

In order to achieve a proper grasp on the Freudian view of the origins of family and society, a discussion in reference to the development of the individual's psyche is required. Naturally, the fundamental unit of any socio-cultural environment is the individual member of a community. The important psychological factor on which to focus, when discussing Freudian psychology, is his tripartition of the human psyche. The three psychical forces are the *Id*, the *Ego* and the *Super-Ego*. Each of these forces plays an instrumental role in the derivation of an individual's psychology and the ensuing relations to both family and society.

The *Ego* is the psychic force by which an individual may come into contact with an understanding of the other two more influential psychical forces. As the *Ego* is present at birth, Freud posits, "originally the ego includes everything, later it separates off an external world from itself".² With this process the *Ego* distinguishes an internal self from an external reality, which enables or entails the individual's realization of their subjectivity in contrast to an object that resides outside of the mind. This dichotomy in awareness presents the individual with the realization that in conjunction with an internal experiencer there also exists an external empirical experience of reality. The *Ego* becomes the portion of the individual's psyche that attempts to mediate the phenomena of the internal experiencer's conceptions and the object being experienced through perception. Therefore, the *Ego* adopts the role of negotiator within the individual in order to provide a balance between the thoughts, feelings and emotions that may arise as a direct result of an interaction with an external world.

The second level of the individual psyche that Freud posits to have significant influence upon the individual is the *Id*, the discovery of which may be traced back to Freud's developmental stage of the individual which he designated the Oral Stage. This is the first stage of Freud's five stages of an individual's psychological development. The subsequent stages are the Anal, the Phallic, the Latent and the Genital. Each stage plays an instrumental role in shaping the psyche and behavior of the individual. However, it is in the Oral Stage that the *Ego* encounters the *Id* and thus an understanding of their

relationship may be explained. The *Id* acts as the part of the individual psyche that provides for the energetic drives which present themselves as instinctual desires.

Therefore, the *Id* allows for the explanation of the psychical energies that pertain to the primary drives of human survival such as the satisfaction of hunger, the need for shelter coupled alongside warmth and the desire for love. Freud interpreted primary instinctual drives as being strong visceral predispositions of an individual in order to derive a pleasurable experience or feeling. Consequently, Freud rationalized feeling as “a source of energy if it is itself the expression of a strong need”.³ The object of a sensual energy is what Freud refers to as the *Pleasure principle*. This principle is what directs the *Id*. In essence, the principle states that an individual’s every action is produced in accordance with the attempted generation of pleasure through the acting out of a desire. Hence, the Oral Stage is where we first encounter both the *Pleasure principle* and the *Id*. Further, an infant comes to understand that his/her actions based upon desires in life garner the attention and response of others namely the parental figures. Thusly, the Oral Stage with its focus being on the infant’s fixation with their mouth—a focal point for the satisfying of the desire for hunger—brings the *Ego* to an awareness of the *Id*.

The interaction between the *Ego* and the *Id* as it occurs in the Oral Stage of an individual’s development produces a conflict between satisfying an individual’s desire for pleasure with the constraints that reality places upon the satisfaction of pleasure. Accordingly, Freud posits the existence of a counterbalancing principle in contrast to the *Pleasure principle*. This opposing principle he terms the *Reality principle*, awareness of which is derived from the interaction between the *Ego* and the *Id*. This interaction creates a psychic experience within the young child where an understanding is imposed onto the child that an authority frustrates the satisfaction of pleasure. The most basic rendering of this interaction between the *Ego* and the *Id* can be found in Freud’s second stage of an individual’s psychological development, The Anal Stage.

At the Anal Stage the young child, first comes to recognize the power of an authority. At this phase of the young child’s social interaction the role of an authority is played by the parental figure. The interaction occurs when the parental figure attempts to force structure and order upon the young child through the insistence of proper hygiene and sanitation. The insistence on proper hygiene and sanitation conflicts with the young child’s pleasure derived from simply defecating and urinating when and where they please in order to satisfy an instinctual urge. In this instance, experiencing the alleviation of discomfort through either a bowel or a bladder movement produces pleasure for the young child. Thus, the Anal Stage enforces “signs of cleanliness and order”.⁴ Psychic conflict arises when a parental authority frustrates a young child’s internal desire for pleasure, thus resulting in the formation of the *Super-Ego*.

Through the *Ego*’s awareness of the *Id* the individual, beginning in their childhood, is able to understand the inherent contradiction between the *Pleasure principle* and the *Reality principle*. Furthermore, the otherwise uninhibited drives deriving from the *Id* may be transmuted with the aim-inhibited drives as negotiated by the *Ego*. These two psychical elements constitute a universally libertarian psychic energy and a mediating conservative psychic force. The over-arching psychic force that presides over the *Ego* and the *Id* is the *Super-Ego*. The *Super-Ego* originates from an individual’s interaction with their socio-cultural environment. The awareness of an authoritarian presence imposed by social order is experienced by the individual’s interaction with their surrounding community. This interaction results in an awareness of a socially derived and enforced authority. The *Super-Ego* comes into being when an individual’s awareness of authority becomes psychically internalized. The process of internalization arises from the individual’s introjection of the fear that a social authority may invoke. The fear experienced by the individual is that of not being accepted should he/she act in opposition to the socio-cultural norms of his/her community. Freudian psychology claims that, “in the formation of the super-ego and the emergence of a conscience innate constitutional factors and influences from the real environment act in combination”.⁵ Thus, an individual’s conscience comes into existence through the internalization of the social authority that he/she encounters. In particular, internalization occurs with the interaction between an individual and a social or cultural custom, tradition or taboo. Accordingly, the rational function of the *Super-Ego* is internally deriving the authoritarian presence that becomes the site of an individual’s conscience.

Social and Family Dynamics: Derivation and Psychic Impact

Turning to the conception of the family, and the social environment where family and cultural traditions interact Freud draws us via his psychoanalytic interpretation of the origins of the family, back to the origins of primitive man. Freud's view is that individuals formed small social groupings or tribes in order to satisfy two primary principles of human psychology, which are interpreted as "the compulsion to work, which was created by external necessity, and the power of love, which made man unwilling to be deprived of his sexual object".⁶ Consequently, the impulse for man to commune with another was driven by the desire for sexual satisfaction and the need for social inclusion and assistance in order to lessen the burdens of a primitive life. Hence, Freud believed that primitive man fell under the influence of *Eros* and *Ananke*. The former term denotes the 'power of love', which he believes may ultimately be traced back to sexual desire, while the latter denotes 'necessity'.⁷ Therefore, primitive man's communal groupings secured his object of sexual desire, a female. The female remained in the communal group as a consequent of her desire, her offspring resulting from her *Eros*, as well as, herself be protected through gaining security from the stronger male. Additionally, primitive individuals came together by necessity in order to exercise control and manipulation of their physical environment. There can be little doubt that the life of a primitive man was both physically demanding and environmentally challenging, while a communal gathering of individuals ensured both a helping hand and sustained security. Further, with the innovation of primitive technologies such as modest hunting and farming tools, primitive communities were able to work in union with other primitive communities in order to develop social bonds in addition to obtaining the necessities of survival via the hunting or gathering of food and the building of shelter.

While the primary motivating factors for primitive man to band together with his companions was a desire both to satisfy a sexual drive and provide the necessities for survival, the sexual drive proves to be a psychically problematic drive for Freud. The social bonds derived from the family were primarily, he argued, rooted in the sexual urge. However, the desire for sexual satisfaction became problematic in relation to the other requirement of a strong social grouping, namely that of friendship. As Freud explained the principle of *Eros* manifests itself in two separate ways. The first is "genital love" which results in the creation of new families.⁸ In contrast to "genital love" was "aim inhibited love", which functioned to form friendships that entailed a socio-cultural perception of unity, which conflicted with genital love that often results in the demand for sexual exclusivity between partners.⁹ For Freud then the interests of genital love will eventually come into conflict with the interests of civilization. In response, civilization will enact regulations and restraints upon the former manifestation of *Eros*.

The response by society was the regulation and restraint of the power and influence of *Eros* through the creation and enforcement of traditions, taboos, laws and customs. These restrictive forces impose obstacles that stifle and frustrate genital love. Thus, an individual experiences an internal conflict deriving from this socio-cultural constraint and sanctioned by the aforementioned. Within a rationally developed society and culture, the authority or authorities assume the collective role of defining taboos based upon a rational understanding of that which is detrimental to society. Therefore, *rational taboos* reflect a society's collectively established desire to prohibit and restrict those behaviors that are deemed to be detrimentally undermining of social and cultural flourishing. For instance, the practice of sexual promiscuity among individuals is restrictive and damaging to the socially cohesive bonds of both marriage and family. The taboo against it is rational in that it tries to ensure the stability of a particular society and culture. This it does through the insistence that sexual promiscuity among individuals is wrong for such a practice would tend to lead to the disintegration of certain foundational elements of society, in that it jeopardizes the long-term survival of the family. However, not all taboos are equal in the eyes of a Freudian psychoanalyst and there are also certain instances where a taboo may be unnecessary to social stability but may be manipulated for other reasons.

The manipulation of a taboo by society may conflict the individual by frustrating a certain desire from him/her. A society may impose a taboo against that which it feels to be unacceptable. In such an instance, the taboo is socially deployed in order for the society to exert control over its individual members. In essence, through the denial of a desire by labeling it as socially unacceptable, the social authority may suppress the individual by getting him to repress that desire, thus resulting in the experiences of tension and anxiety, which may ultimately be psychically damaging. The individual may feel the instinctual need to act on his/her desires yet society has placed restraints upon these desires to such a degree that acting upon them will lead to the individual experiencing alienation both from his instinctual desires and from his society.

Nowhere is the psychical tension and subsequent anxiety more evident for Freud than on society's insistence on the suppression of the libido. According to Freud, "present-day civilization makes it plain that it will only permit sexual relationships on the basis of solidarity [through] the insistence on legitimacy and monogamy".¹⁰ By insisting on the repression of sexual promiscuity society tries to ensure against unwanted children and venereal diseases both of which may lead to social disruption, while simultaneously legitimizing monogyny and sexual exclusivity.

The utilization of taboos in order to provide a regulatory restraint upon society's members can ultimately prove to be constraining and damaging to an individual's psyche. Freud believed that when an individual is denied the object of their instinctual desire, as they originate in the *Id*, then the *Ego's* anticipated response might be that of powerful aggression. Freud claimed that an individual's inclination towards aggression and destruction are both rooted in the psychical response of being denied the satisfaction of instinctual desires. Therefore, the manipulative authority of society demands that it must "use methods intended to incite people into identification and aim-inhibited relationships of love, hence the restriction upon sexual life".¹¹ However, such a restriction upon an individual's sexual desire also threatens to suppress the function of *Eros* in promoting social unity, and may further damage the individual by precipitating aggression towards their environment and psyche. It was in response to society's attempt to deny an individual's libidinal desires that Freud came to posit the existence of a death instinct, *Thanatos*, working in opposition to *Eros*.¹²

The dialectical positing of the existence of a life promoting instinct through *Eros* concomitant with the self-destructive and antagonistic instinct of *Thanatos*, led Freud to view social interaction and civilization as fragile. Freud's insistence on the socially enforcing, yet contradictory, energies of *Eros* and *Thanatos* provided him with a framework for an interpretation of social interaction where individuals may experience a desire for life, while at the same moment the restraints that a civilized society places upon the individual's actions, may bring out aggression and destruction.¹³ Therefore, according to Freud, modern civilization through its family and social dynamic structure bridges the gap between creation and destruction where individuals find themselves in varying degrees of tension and anxiety due in part to the conflict that arises when desires come into conflict with a socially constructed perspective of what are acceptable and unacceptable behaviors.

References

¹ Freud, Sigmund, "Civilization and Its Discontents," in *The Freud Reader*, edited by Peter Gay (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc. , 1989), 722-72..

² *Ibid.*, 724

³ *Ibid.*, 727

⁴ *Ibid.*, 739

⁵ *Ibid.*, 761

⁶ *Ibid.*, 743

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*, 744

⁹ *Ibid.*, 745

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 746

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 750

¹² *Ibid.*, 754

¹³ *Ibid.*, 750