

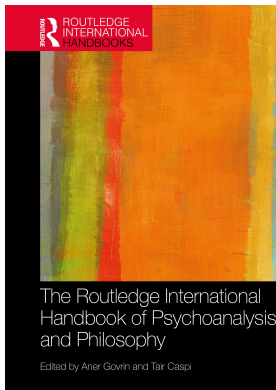
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1

FREUD'S THEORY OF FREEDOM

Between Kant's Faith and Schopenhauer's Pessimism

Matthew C. Altman

Sigmund Freud has a complicated relationship with the history of philosophy, and with German Idealism in particular. He believes that philosophers have traditionally ignored or denied the existence of the unconscious (PT, 7:266; CP, 13:178; EI, 19:13; AS, 20:31), but he also compares the unconscious to Kant's thing in itself (UCS, 14:171).¹ He rejects metaphysics in favor of clinical observation and theoretical extrapolations from empirical psychology (PEL, 6:259), but Kant himself explains why metaphysics is impossible as a science (Kant 1998, A246–247/B303; Kant 2002, 4:315).² He claims that his later work regarding religion and the origins of civilization depends ultimately on patient observation rather than philosophical speculation (AS, 20:59), but he also acknowledges similarities between the death drive and Schopenhauer's claim that all life aims at death (AIL, 22:107). Freud is no idealist, but references to the German Idealists appear several times throughout his corpus, like symptoms of a half-acknowledged influence.

The affinities among Kant, Schopenhauer, and Freud are perhaps most apparent in their approaches to self-knowledge and the activity of judgment in making sense of ourselves. For all three of them, we can know ourselves in inner sense only as appearances, although Schopenhauer and Freud, unlike Kant, believe that unconscious forces can be discovered under specific conditions. Freud's most significant break with Kant and Schopenhauer is regarding his theory of freedom. While Kant has practical faith in the possibility of autonomous self-determination and Schopenhauer's lack of belief in autonomy leads to a renunciation of the will, Freud devises an ideal of self-determination within a materialist framework. For Freud, psychoanalysis can help us to overcome unconscious compulsions that disrupt our conscious lives. We become freer when we develop relatively healthy relationships with our drives, desires, and memories. To do this, we must integrate the content of our inner lives, which, although we cannot control its underlying forces, can be actively shaped by us in terms of its meaning. Drawing on Kant's insight into the discursivity of thinking, Freud develops a conception of human freedom that is more compelling than determinism and more appropriate to our materialistic worldview than either Kantian autonomy or Schopenhauerian renunciation.

Kant: The Limits of Cognition

According to Kant's transcendental idealism, we can know the world only as an appearance and never as a thing in itself (Kant 1998, A369). As finite beings, we perceive things in space and time, according to the pure forms of sensible intuition. We also make judgments about objects of

sensible intuition by using the pure concepts (or categories) of the understanding. The pure concepts, such as the concept of causality, are discursive rules that we use to think about objects, and they provide synthetic unity to the manifold of sensible intuition (Kant 1998, B128). Objective perception is called cognition (*Erkenntnis*), and it is a result of the activity of thinking applied to what is given to us passively through the senses (Kant 1998, B146, A320/B376–377). In other words, we synthesize various perceptions as objective unities that affect one another – for example, the sun warms the stone. Therefore, “the understanding is itself the source of the laws of nature,” with nature understood as “the sum total of all appearances” (Kant 1998, A127, B163).

The fact that experience in general is subject to our epistemic conditions entails that knowledge of ourselves is also limited. When we introspect on the contents of our minds, our desires, volitions, and feelings occur in time. I may be hungry at one moment and angry at another, and then I try to eat so that I am not so cranky. I perceive these various mental events in time (I feel hunger and then I feel angry), and I think of them as causally related (my feeling of hunger makes me cranky). Thus, I know myself only through what Kant calls inner sense (*innere Sinn*; Kant 1998, A22–23/B37, B156). The objects of inner sense occur in time and time is a form of sensible intuition, so what we know about our own mental lives are mere appearances.

Although we can guess at what we are like apart from these epistemic conditions, our perceptions of what motivates us are necessarily limited. I may think that my eating is an uncomplicated response to being hungry, but it may (also) be motivated by complex feelings and associations that even I am unaware of, such as feelings of stress, anxiety, or an eating disorder. Kant says that even actions that seem morally praiseworthy (i.e., done for the sake of duty) may in fact be motivated by self-interest (i.e., merely in accordance with duty), but we can never know whether that is the case:

It is indeed sometimes the case that with the keenest self-examination we find nothing besides the moral ground of duty that could have been powerful enough to move us to this or that good action and to so great a sacrifice; but from this it cannot be inferred with certainty that no covert impulse of self-love, under the mere pretense of that idea, was not actually the real determining cause of the will; for we like to flatter ourselves by falsely attributing to ourselves a nobler motive, whereas in fact we can never, even by the most strenuous self-examination, get entirely behind our covert incentives, since, when moral worth is at issue, what counts is not actions which one sees, but those inner principles of actions that one does not see.

(Kant 1996b, 4:407)

We are used to the idea that our actions could be more selfish than we think they are. I may believe that I am acting beneficently, but someone could point out a pattern in my behavior that reveals my true intentions. Kant goes beyond this. Not only are our motives obscure, but this act of self-deception is not something that we could ever discover and correct. What seem like my actual motives, behind the self-deception, are also merely apparent motives. My real motives, whatever they are, are in principle introspectively unavailable. As Kant puts it, I cannot know the subjective principles of volition (or maxims) that govern particular actions (Kant 1996b, 4:400n), nor can I know the character (or supreme maxim) that informs my choice of particular maxims, whether it is good or evil (Kant 1996d, 6:30–32, 36–37). I am necessarily opaque to myself regarding even the most basic question of why I do what I do or whether I am a good or bad person.

Kant’s analysis of the limits to self-knowledge is in contrast to Descartes’s picture of the mind, according to which I am completely transparent to myself. For Descartes, there is nothing that

I know better than my own mind, both my existence as a thinking thing and the ideas that I can use to establish the veracity of the senses and the existence of an external world. For Kant, however, knowledge of the mind is of a piece with knowledge of the external world: both the mind and the world are perceived through the senses (inner and outer sense, respectively), both appear in time and are thought by means of the categories, and both are apprehended as mere appearances. I have access to my ideas and feelings in a way that you do not, but I can be just as wrong about who I am and my reasons for acting as I can be about other natural events.

Kant's alternative to Cartesian self-transparency does, however, allow for the possibility that there are reasons for my choices, not only causes. As a synthetic *a priori* concept, the category of causality governs the world of appearances. Every event has a cause, so even human actions are absolutely predictable in principle. Whatever I am apart from these epistemic conditions is unknown and unknowable. The limited scope of determinism means that free self-determination is possible, including acting purely for the sake of duty, when we consider things as they are apart from our epistemic conditions: as Kant famously writes, "I had to deny *knowledge* in order to make room for *faith*" (Kant 1998, Bxxx). The blow to our epistemic ambitions that rules out speculative metaphysics validates a sphere in which it is possible that we both choose among different options regardless of prior circumstances (negative freedom; Kant 1998, A555/B583; Kant 1996b, 4:446; Kant 1996a 5:33; Kant 1996c, 6:213–214) and act on a principle that we give to ourselves through pure practical reason (positive freedom; Kant 1996b, 4:446–447; Kant 1996a, 5:33; Kant 1996c, 6:213–214).

Although theoretical reason can establish the possibility of freedom, that we are in fact free is established on practical grounds. In the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant appeals to the "idea of freedom": because we cannot avoid deliberating about our actions and acting under the assumption that our choices are free, we are constrained by the categorical imperative just as we would be if we knew that we were free (Kant 1996b, 4:448). And in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant says that, when we reason about what to do, we have an immediate consciousness of moral constraint (the "ought") that confronts us as a "fact of reason." From the fact that we hold ourselves to account, it follows that we must really be free, because we can only be constrained to do the right thing if we are capable of choosing to do the right thing (Kant 1996a, 5:32). I have no knowledge of freedom (or whether I am free), but I am committed to freedom as a rationally justified object of practical faith.

Schopenhauer: Intellectually Intuiting the Will

Schopenhauer accepts Kant's distinction between appearances and the thing in itself, but he believes that it has very different implications for self-knowledge and human motivation. According to Schopenhauer, individual things are distinct because we perceive them in space and time – my body, for example, occupies this space at this time, as opposed to others. The *principium individuationis* (principle of individuation) thus gives us a false perception of what is in fact an undifferentiated unity that underlies all things (Schopenhauer 2010, 1:137–138, 152–153, 358, 392–393). The world is an illusion, which Schopenhauer, drawing on Indian philosophy, calls the "veil" or "web of *māyā*" (2010, 1:28, 38–39, 310, 378–379).

Although I am usually compelled by this view of the world, Schopenhauer says that I can become directly aware of the thing in itself through an acquaintance with my body. Despite Descartes's claim to the contrary, I am not *in* my body; I *am* my body. Yet the body can be experienced by me in two different ways. First, I perceive the body in space and time, like any other object. But I also perceive objects through the body. The body is both something that I know and that by virtue of which I am a knower. In addition, the body is not just another object in

the world that affects and is affected by other things. When I do something, I act as a body; the body is what makes me capable of being an agent. Schopenhauer says that this “double cognition [*Erkenntnis*]” of myself is the key to understanding the thing in itself (2010, 1:128).

When I will something – not merely deliberating or wishing that something would happen – my willing is immediately expressed as an action. The willing does not occur at one point as the cause, and then the action follows as an effect. Rather,

an act of the will and an act of the body . . . are one and the same thing, only given in two entirely different ways: in one case immediately and in the other case to the understanding in intuition [*Anschauung*]. An action of the body is nothing but an objectified act of will, i.e. an act of will that has entered intuition.

(Schopenhauer 2010, 1:124–125)

We represent the will to ourselves as distinct things (separate objects in space and time), but the will as a thing in itself is an undifferentiated force that drives all change in the world of appearances, including human actions.

The “double cognition” of the body provides direct insight into the thing in itself. Schopenhauer criticizes Kant for only giving us “mediated, reflected cognition,” while he appeals to “immediate and intuitive cognition” (Schopenhauer 2010, 1:481; see also 1:134; Schopenhauer 2018, 2:187–188). Through this subjective consciousness of the will, I can use “cognition of the Ideas to see through [*durchschauen*] the *principium individuationis*” and discover “the other side of the essence in itself of things” (Schopenhauer 2010, 1:327, 532). Although everyone is capable of intuiting the will as the thing in itself, it is an insight that not everyone achieves. The will hides itself from us, since we experience it mostly through the senses. The will to life (*Wille zum Leben*) distracts us with a constant stream of desires that need to be satisfied, including the instincts of self- and species-preservation: “Most people are pursued through life by wants that do not allow them space for reflection” (Schopenhauer 2010, 1:354; see also 1:301–303, 356–360; Schopenhauer 2018, 2:364–375). Our compassion for others reflects our awareness of our ultimate unity: you are only apparently distinct from me, and we are both only apparently distinct from other animals, trees, and rocks (Schopenhauer 2009, 200–201, 218, 255; Schopenhauer 2010, 1:402, 405; Schopenhauer 2018, 2:601–602).

Self-knowledge that breaks through the veil of *māyā* can be the first step in overcoming those desires and rejecting the world of appearances. Schopenhauer likens it – sometimes identifies it – as the achievement of enlightenment when the world becomes nothing and desires are overcome (2010, 1:417–418). Someone who accomplishes this is indifferent to the world. The ultimate ethical achievement is the renunciation and denial of the will.

Schopenhauer’s rejection of Kant on self-transparency has dramatic implications for his supposedly Kantian practical philosophy. Kant is an epistemological pessimist in the sense that we are unknowable to ourselves, but a practical optimist regarding his faith in rational autonomy. Schopenhauer is optimistic about our ability to know our own motivations, but pessimistic about how the will is lived out – in a pointless striving coming ultimately to nothing. Since the thing in itself is the will and all apparent things are manifestations of the will, there is no personal moral responsibility. Like Kant, Schopenhauer claims that we use the *a priori* concept of causality when we make empirical judgments. So, human actions, like all other phenomenal events, are causally determined. While Kant believes that postulating an unknowable thing in itself “makes room for faith” in freedom, Schopenhauer claims that distinguishing the will from the world of appearances rules out the possibility of rational self-determination. Appearances are determined and, apart from the category of causality, the thing in itself is

merely undetermined. Although it expresses itself to the senses in different forms, the arbitrariness of the will is consistent across all existing things: magnetism and crystal formation, the growing of grass, instinctual behavior in animals, and our seemingly self-determined moral actions (Schopenhauer 2010, 1:164–177). Self-reflection cannot fundamentally change our motivations, but only the direction of the will. Thus, while Kant claims that a consideration of things as they are apart from our ways of knowing allows us to traffic in the space of reasons, Schopenhauer claims that it precludes an appeal to reasons, either with regard to phenomena or noumena. The choice is between meaningless desire-satisfaction and the renunciation of the will, the latter of which would achieve nothingness. Schopenhauer shows what happens when transcendental idealism and its epistemic limitations come into contact with evolutionary theory, Eastern philosophy, and a disenchantment with the Enlightenment project: objective claims describe an illusory world, rational self-determination is impossible, and there is no meaning or purpose to existence.

Kant and Schopenhauer: Their Legacy for Freud

Several themes from Kant and Schopenhauer are important for understanding the legacy of German Idealism for Freud's psychoanalytic theory. First, the world that we inhabit is not passively perceived, as the empiricists would have it, but is the result of the activity of judgment in interpreting what we are given through the senses. Kant and Schopenhauer focus on the *a priori* concepts that any discursive thinker must use in order to make sense of the world, but later philosophers extend this idea to claim that we invest the world with different meaning and significance by means of language (Nietzsche and Derrida), shared forms of social understanding (Beauvoir and Merleau-Ponty), and our particular histories (Hegel and Gadamer).

Second, just as objective cognition is limited to appearances, self-knowledge is also limited. What I perceive of my inner life is situated in time, so I know myself in inner sense merely as an appearance, not as I am apart from my subjective conditions of knowing. Kant and Schopenhauer disagree, however, about whether this limitation can be overcome. For Kant, the limitation is absolute. I cannot even know what I am as a noumenon. The consciousness that allows appearances to be synthesized as a manifold (the "I think") is merely a formal condition for the possibility of experience (Kant 1998, A106–107, B131–132). Although I can postulate a soul on practical grounds and I can practically justify my commitment to rational self-determination, I cannot know theoretically whether a thinking thing is behind the activity of thinking or what reasons are behind my actions. By contrast, Schopenhauer claims that we are capable of intellectually intuiting the will, so I know that I and everything else that exists is driven by a blind, animalistic force that manifests itself in appearance as the will to life.

Third, their theories of freedom begin by acknowledging that all our actions are determined by events beyond our control – or, more properly, that our actions are nothing but natural events that are caused by other natural events. Both Kant and Schopenhauer are committed to complete causal determinism in the world of appearances, since the category of causality is a synthetic *a priori* concept that we use to make objective claims based on our perceptions. However, they disagree about what kind of freedom is possible apart from appearances. Kant believes that we can overcome our inclinations and act on the basis of a pure rational principle. Reasons and causes are different kinds of things. Schopenhauer believes that, since everything is the will, we are only capable of renunciation as an ideal, removing ourselves from the endless cycle of becoming and achieving nothingness, as in Hinduism. This is a kind of negative freedom only – a choice not to act – rather than Kant's faith in positive freedom.

Freud: Two Approaches to the Unconscious

Setting aside the biographical and historical question of whether Freud was directly influenced by Kant and Schopenhauer – little evidence suggests that he was – echoes of their work appear throughout his corpus nonetheless. Although Freud thinks of himself as an empirical scientist, he refuses the basic empiricist premise that the world comes to us through the senses without distortion. He believes that self-knowledge is limited and that insight into what motivates us is elusive but achievable under specific circumstances. Although these ideas are not new to him, he goes beyond Kant and Schopenhauer in developing a kind of freedom within our limitations. Unlike Kant, who says that we must act as if we are undetermined, and Schopenhauer, who says that the only true freedom is not willing, Freud explains how greater self-awareness of what drives us can allow us to live freely in a different sense: not getting beyond our basic drives (the life drive and the death drive), but having a healthy relationship with our psychical forces such that we can live without especially disruptive unconscious repetitions.

Kant's ideal is autonomous self-determination, which is not only the (negative) freedom to step back from our inclinations and choose but also the (positive) freedom to act purely for the sake of duty apart from any pathological desire. Schopenhauer claims that we are inescapably heteronomous in the sense that we are manifestations of a primordial will that appears spatiotemporally as the will to life, primarily the desire for sex (Schopenhauer 2018, 2:529–530). That will in no way belongs to us or is controlled by us as individual subjects. His pessimism is the result of a loss of the rational ideal: if we cannot autonomously govern our own actions, the only alternative is to deny the will. Freud gives us a third alternative. We are not purely rational, but that does not mean that we should simply resign ourselves to nothingness. We reconcile ourselves with our heteronomous impulses when we allow them to express themselves in healthier ways. This is not Kantian autonomy, since the person is not distancing themselves from their impulses. Rather, the impulses become part of who they are: the goal of analysis is “to subdue portions of his id which are uncontrolled – that is to say to include them in the synthesis of his ego [*sie in die Synthese des Ichs einzubeziehen*]” (ATI, 23:235). The first step in achieving this “synthesis” is developing a deeper kind of self-awareness through psychoanalysis.

With his conception of the unconscious, Freud imagines a permeable barrier to self-knowledge. Although we are often opaque to ourselves, the workings of the unconscious are available if it is approached in the right way. Thus, despite frequent comparisons between Kant's thing in itself and the Freudian unconscious (e.g., Bergoffen 1981, 160; Cavell 1987, 27), Freud's closer intellectual predecessor is Schopenhauer. Freud's drives and Schopenhauer's will are both primitive forces that get expressed in convoluted, indirect ways. For both of them, the unconscious is hidden, but it is open to scrutiny – though never fully transparent to consciousness. According to Freud, Kant is one of the philosophers for whom the “unconscious has been something mystical, something intangible and undemonstrable, whose relation to the mind has remained obscure” (CP, 13:178). By contrast, for Freud the unconscious is currently unknown but not unknowable.

The relationship between Kant's noumenal self and Freud's unconscious is complicated by their different epistemological and metaphysical commitments. Like Kant, Freud compares outer sense to inner sense: our perception of the world is like our perception of the mind. For Freud, this means that the unconscious is behind consciousness and is the cause of apparent symptoms, just as objects cause subjective perceptions. Although Kant sometimes talks about the thing in itself as a cause of sensible intuitions, and thus claims that its existence can be inferred on their basis (1998, A19/B33, A494/B522–523, A538/B566, 2002, 4:314–315), we can say nothing conceptually coherent about noumena. By contrast, Freud's rejection of idealism and

embrace of empiricism and materialism means that the whole of the mind is just another object of scientific study.

For Kant, objective representations are perceptions that have been subjected to the forms of sensible intuition (space and time) and the categories. Kant thus makes a three-part distinction between perceptions (secondary qualities such as the color of a rainbow); objects that, according to transcendental idealism, are mere appearances (primary qualities such as the shape of the water droplets); and the thing in itself as the ground of appearances (Kant 1998, A45–46/B62–63). Within the mind as well, Kant distinguishes the desires and intentions I seem to have; the real psychological causes (desires, intentions, etc.) that, even though they may be “dark” or “obscure” (*dunkel*), are discoverable (Kant 2002, 4:307); and the mind as a thing in itself, which is unknowable in principle. By contrast, as an empiricist, Freud is only committed to a two-part distinction between perceptions and objects in outer sense, and between conscious inner perceptions and the “psychical reality” (or mental objects) behind conscious thinking:

The unconscious is the true psychical reality; *in its innermost nature it is as much unknown to us as the reality of the external world, and it is as incompletely presented by the data of consciousness as is the external world by the communications of our sense organs.*

(*ID*, 5:613)

Although we can be misled by the senses, a scientific investigation of the external world can reveal what it is like in itself, or the objective properties that, for the empiricist, constitute the world as it exists apart from our perceptions. Similarly, although we can be driven by unconscious forces, such as repressed traumas, the unconscious expresses itself through symptoms and dreams. The psychoanalyst can help the patient to discover the unconscious causes of these conscious experiences by means of empirically verifiable mental laws, such as the mechanism of repression and the mind's need to discharge its libidinal energy. Unconscious impulses are “inferred like some fact in the external world,” and those facts (not a thing in itself) are all that stand behind the content of inner sense (AS, 20:32). According to the empiricist, we can infer the existence of water droplets from the appearance of the rainbow; and, according to Freud, we can infer the existence of unconscious traumas and anxieties from the appearance of symptoms. Thus, Freud says, “internal objects are less unknowable than the external world” (UCS, 14:171; see also CD, 21:69). Not everything is conscious, but everything is potentially available to be incorporated into consciousness. Freud's therapeutic method begins with the assumption that our motivations are not transparent to us but that they may be exposed through the process of psychoanalysis.

Freud claims that he can appeal to psychological laws to infer the existence of unconscious forces from apparent symptoms. This second-person perspective on the analysand is another of Freud's innovations. Like Descartes, both Kant and Schopenhauer believe that introspection is the most reliable road to self-knowledge, even if that self-knowledge is limited or ultimately ineffective. Kant says that even introspection falls short of knowledge of our true motives and of our status as free subjects, and Schopenhauer says that true self-knowledge is possible only if we get beyond thinking to a direct encounter with the will, which is beyond the self. As inscrutable as I am to myself, I am even more inscrutable to others. Freud's therapeutic practice inverts this: my motivations may be more accessible to others than they are to me. There is an interpersonal path to the unconscious, which displays patterns of meaning-making that are common to all of us. This means that other people can provide some insight into the unconscious that, although it is inaccessible to me, is not necessarily or universally hidden from consciousness, as it is for Kant. This introduces complications that Kant and Schopenhauer do not have to consider – such

as the possibility of transference – but it also opens up the possibility of a therapeutic dialogue through which I can become aware of the meaning and significance of my own thinking and behavior, and then alter them. In this way, Freud’s therapeutic ideal is a limited kind of freedom, one pervaded by heteronomy but not overwhelmed by it.

The availability of unconscious motivations marks Freud’s turn away from Kant toward Schopenhauer. For Schopenhauer, although all of us are aware of the will through intellectual intuition, that the will as the thing in itself is understood only by a select few, namely artistic geniuses, ascetic saints, and some philosophers. For Freud, the unconscious is available to a select few well-trained observers, mainly psychotherapists, who can scientifically investigate the dynamics of an individual’s mental life, armed with the psychological laws that Freud himself has discovered. Although their methods are different – intuition is immediate and direct, while empirical inferences are indirect – their aims and their conceptions of the unconscious are similar: the animalistic drives that motivate our behavior can be recognized and addressed, albeit in different ways.

The Purpose and Methods of Psychoanalysis

One of the central problems of psychoanalysis, especially in Freud’s early work, is how to overcome repression. According to Freud, when a drive tries to express itself, the person may satisfy it in (more or less) healthy and socially acceptable ways, but some desires, feelings, and memories are “repudiated [*abgewiesenen*]” by the ego (IL, 16:350). When repressed, they must express their libidinal energy indirectly, and they repeat themselves as symptoms. When various symptom-formations become overly disruptive to one’s normal life, then the person experiences neurosis, anxiety, hysteria, and so on. The person needs treatment so that they can become aware of what they have repressed and can expend the psychic energy more directly, through socially appropriate channels. This process makes sense – through psychoanalysis, we can understand how the mind functions – but it is not a rational response. That is, repressing the trauma does not accomplish the aim of undisturbed psychological functioning because what is repressed returns in the form of symptoms. To achieve some semblance of wholeness, we must work through the repression and recognize the source of these disruptions. Therapy assists us in the process of coming to terms our repressed desires – literally, bringing them to language, which requires the participation of others in our self-knowledge – and incorporating them into consciousness.

In order to bring these repressed desires and feelings to light, Freud (along with Josef Breuer) initially believes that the analyst can gain direct access to the unconscious by talking with the analysand, discovering points of resistance, and bringing repressed material into focus through hypnosis. By delving into the unconscious directly, the analyst can reconstruct for the analysand what is indirectly expressed through symptoms:

As a rule it is necessary to hypnotize the patient and to arouse his memories under hypnosis of the time at which the symptom made its first appearance; when this has been done, it becomes possible to demonstrate the connection in the clearest and most convincing fashion.

(SH, 2:3)

Once the repressed memory is discovered, then it is causally linked to the neurotic symptoms and their meaning becomes intelligible. With this early approach to the unconscious, Freud, like Schopenhauer, attempts to bypass the mind’s discursive activity, which, for both of them, is prone to distorting reality: either by repeating a trauma in the form of seemingly unrelated

symptoms (Freud) or by making us seem like separate individuals who are rationally self-determining (Schopenhauer). Hypnosis, like intellectual intuition, provides direct access to the unconscious motives of our conscious activity that are usually unavailable to us.

In his early work, Freud underestimates the active force of resistance that constantly preserves and shores up the repression, even as analysands are confronted with experiences that they themselves recall under hypnosis (HPM, 14:16). The effort to avoid trauma, like the instinct to self-preservation for Schopenhauer, is not easily overcome. The analysand cannot consciously accept the cause of a neurosis simply by being presented with an explanation discovered through hypnosis. The explanation seems foreign to the patient precisely because it is repressed: "The patient hears our message, but there is no response. He may think to himself: 'This is very interesting, but I feel no trace of it.' We have increased his knowledge, but altered nothing else in him" (ATI, 23:233). Repression forces the neurotogenic experience from consciousness through an act of resistance. The resistance continues even when the patient is told something about themselves that they did not know beforehand. Whether this is really "knowledge," as Freud claims, is debatable. The analysand cannot incorporate the repressed desires, feelings, or memories into their conscious understanding, such that they become part of the narrative they tell themselves about who they are.

In his mature work, Freud gives up on the fantasy of revealing the unconscious through hypnosis and adopts his method of the "talking cure": "the history of psycho-analysis proper . . . only begins with the new technique that dispenses with hypnosis" (HPM, 14:16). Freud realizes that, to help the analysand to work through the repressed trauma, it is not enough for the facts to be brought to light. Instead, the analysand must recognize the trauma, identify with the feelings that accompany it, represent it to consciousness, and actively incorporate it into their self-conception.

As I said earlier, Freud's unconscious is not Kant's thing in itself. For Freud, the contents of the unconscious can be made conscious and its mechanisms can be discovered empirically. But his turn away from hypnosis also represents a return to Kant in a very important sense. Kant's most significant insight is that thinking is judging. Cognition is not something that happens passively but is an act of claim-making. We know things only as they appear, including what I know of myself in inner sense, because we represent things to ourselves according to our subjective conditions of knowing. The self that I discover when I bring my "dark" thoughts to light is situated in time and interpreted by means of the categories. The objects of self-consciousness are the result of bringing the different parts of myself into relation with one another.

Similarly, for Freud, reestablishing an analysand's mental health depends on bringing traumatic ideas into proper relation with the person's internal narrative, so he begins with symptoms that are present to consciousness. When repressed experiences or libidinal desires have been disassociated from conscious ideas, symptoms express them in ways that the conscious subject cannot. For example, Emma's leg pains express self-reproach for coveting her sister's husband; her body enacts her self-reproach because she has repressed her feelings of guilt (SP, 1:353–356). Rather than illuminating the unconscious by bypassing repression and consciousness (through hypnosis), Freud studies the symptoms through which unconscious desires and traumas indirectly appear:

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.

And thus, the task of making conscious the most hidden recesses of the mind is one which it is quite possible to accomplish.

(CH, 7:77–78)

The patient cannot accomplish “the task of making conscious” the repressed idea or emotion when they are presented with a story, even if it is true, that the analyst has discovered through hypnosis. Examining the patient’s past through hypnosis is replaced by “*uninhibited association*,” so that even the analysand can see how unconscious forces indirectly express themselves (SH, 2:11; see also CH, 7:12). The focus of treatment shifts from hypnosis to signs of the internal struggle that the patient can recognize, such as physical symptoms, verbal habits, or ideas to which they keep circling back during sessions with the therapist. The analyst serves as a kind of interpreter, noting the patient’s stops and starts and directing them toward exploring these gaps. The patient can examine the symptoms, discover a common theme, make inferences about what is being repressed, and, eventually, recognize the source of psychic conflict. Analysis is the process of giving meaning to what had seemed meaningless.

Freud’s Hermeneutic Turn

Freud’s change of method is more consequential than it seems. They are not merely different approaches to treatment but presuppose fundamentally different conceptions of the person who is being treated. The focus on what is consciously available to the patient echoes an essentially Kantian idea: that what is perceived by the subject is not simply given but is conditioned by intellectual activity. The analyst attends to the analysand’s observable behavior and communicable thoughts in order to deduce the activity that lies behind it. Freud attempts to change the way that patients relate to themselves. The goal of analysis shifts from the release of psychic energy (as a kind of mechanical process) to understanding one’s active resistances so that the division between conscious and repressed thoughts can be overcome:

the element of abreaction receded into the background and seemed to be replaced by the expenditure of work which the patient had to make in being obliged to overcome his criticism of his free associations, in accordance with the fundamental rule of psycho-analysis.

(RRW, 12:147)

The “expenditure of work” in this case is the attempt to bring the patient’s own thinking to bear on the unconscious trauma that resists acknowledgement. By being engaged more directly in the therapeutic process, the patient can, if the therapy succeeds, identify with the unconscious forces at work and bring them to consciousness – thus working through the trauma rather than repeating it in the form of symptoms.

In this sense, Freudian psychoanalysis is a hermeneutical practice: it is concerned with the construction of meaning by people who inhabit an interpersonal space of language. One sign of psychological disorder is the patient’s construction of a separate system of meanings that conflict with the beliefs of her community (Ricoeur 1970, 366–367). Through the therapeutic process of free association, the meanings of the symptoms become apparent. The analysand comes to understand how their response to and interpretation of experiences and desires, rather than the experiences and desires themselves, have given rise to the trauma and the resulting symptoms. The event has to be invested with traumatic significance after the fact, which accounts for the latency period; it is not a foreign body that merely pierces the person’s psychical skin (MM,

23:67–68). The therapeutic engagement with the patient's symptoms brings the neurosis and its causes into the sphere of language and interpretation, thus making it intelligible, rather than trying to get past that activity, by means of hypnosis, to some foreign body – the latter of which conceives of trauma as a thing in itself.

The method of hypnosis is meant to reveal the contents of someone's mind when introspection falls short. But Freud's later method emphasizes the dialogic engagement of the patient with themselves and of the therapist with the patient, such that meaning can be made of what has been hidden. Each individual has a conception of who they are and what they value. Through therapy, a person comes to terms with their unconscious experiences and desires so that they can either pursue what they value or can adjust what they value. For example, someone who has repressed their homosexual desires may, as a result of therapeutic self-examination, either accept that these are errant feelings of a straight person, with nothing to be ashamed of, or they may start down a long road of revising their conception of their own sexual identity. Freud emphasizes, to a greater extent than Kant or Schopenhauer, how deeply our relationships with others shape our psychological health. As a result, psychological health is inherently more fragile, but it is also amenable to positive intervention, such as therapy.

Hans-Georg Gadamer criticizes the Enlightenment desire to be radically purified of prejudice. Interpretation, including self-interpretation, is always partial (Gadamer 1989, 271–277). Since making, revising, and possibly remaking one's identity is an ongoing process, therapeutic intervention is not something that ends, even if a therapist is no longer involved. It is not that some discovery is made that completes the therapy, as in Freud's early work, when the results of hypnosis are presented to the patient. Analysis ends when the sessions stop, but the work of self-interpretation continues and is necessarily incomplete (ATI, 23:219–220).

Embodied Freedom

Freud was an avowed materialist and a believer in “complete psychical determinism” (PEL, 6:253). Our actions are the result of underlying psychic causes that, although they may be unknown to the analysand, can be discovered in the course of analysis, working backwards from their apparent effects. Slips of the tongue, dreams, and even free association are all “*determined by motives unknown to consciousness*” (PEL, 6:239). Even conscious action “receives its motivation from the other side, from the unconscious; and in this way determination in the psychical sphere is still carried out without any gap” (PEL, 6:254). There is no such thing as free, unmotivated will.

Despite Freud's explicit commitment to determinism, his psychoanalytic theory yields an account of human freedom – not, to be sure, as unmotivated or uncaused action, but a compatibilistic view that allows for more or less free activity even within a world of psychical laws and causally explicable behavior. Although we are subject to powerful, primitive drives and impulses, we can be free to the extent that are uncompelled by dynamically unconscious forces. That is, we become freer when we achieve a higher degree of psychological health.

Although the analysand is in a sense the victim of unconscious forces, in therapy they assume a kind of agency as something like a practical postulate. For Freud, there is no purely rational subject. Even normality is a fiction, something to strive after without ever definitively and permanently achieving it (ATI, 23:235). Therapy itself is infiltrated by unconscious fantasies and desires that often play themselves out in the form of transference onto the therapist and other forms of resistance. But the patient approaches the process as if they are capable of control – acting under the idea of freedom perhaps – so that they can do the interpretive work required of them. By taking themselves to be working through their own reactions and repressed ideas,

they come closer to the ideal of self-possession, rather than being unknowingly dominated by “reminiscences,” or symptoms of repressed memories and desires (SH, 2:7). They become freer, albeit as a conflict-ridden subject rather than a purely rational, noumenal being.

Freud’s theory of freedom is, arguably, his most important advance over both Kant and Schopenhauer. Kant conceives of freedom in incompatibilistic terms: although we are determined as appearances, as things in themselves we are absolutely free to act, apart from any inclination, out of respect for the moral law. Schopenhauer argues that there is no pure practical reason, only the drive to self-preservation (the will to life). Knowledge and the intellect are purely instrumental, some of the tools by which we try to accomplish our self-interested aims more effectively. The only kind of freedom of which we are capable is the renunciation of the will. In other words, because we are incapable of absolute self-determination, there is no positive freedom, only freedom *from* the primal force underlying all things. For both Kant and Schopenhauer, then, the ideal of agency is absolute freedom: either we must act with the practical assumption that we are capable of such freedom (Kant), or we must give up on the idea and not will (Schopenhauer).

Freedom for the Freudian subject is finite and qualified, a limited kind of agency that is an alternative to both Kant’s rational faith in autonomy and Schopenhauer’s pessimism. The contents of the Freudian unconscious are foreign to consciousness insofar as they have been repressed. When symptoms are interpreted through the process of analysis, unconscious desires and memories are subject to conceptual transformation. They cease to be what they were: an obscure conglomeration of ideas, associations, and emotional charges. Instead, they come to make sense to us as they are situated in time and among other experiences, and they take on a conventional meaning. The symptoms become intelligible even though the repressive act is not justified on the basis of reasons. That is, we understand ourselves without rationalizing our protective but ultimately self-defeating attempt to avoid trauma.

Freud has fully absorbed Kant’s lesson that nothing can be an experience for me unless I actively make sense of what I am given. My understanding of myself is built out of experiences, but experiences that I shape into a narrative of who I am. That narrative can be challenged – and one of the points of therapy is to challenge narratives that are not functioning well – but it has a certain weight or momentum that structures how I interpret new experiences.

Freud’s case study involving Emma illustrates what this looks like in practice. Emma was anxious about going into shops alone, which she attributed to a memory of being laughed at by two shop assistants when she was twelve. According to Freud, this encounter caused Emma to have a “sexual release” because it reminded her of an earlier assault by another shopkeeper. Only after reaching puberty did she understand the sexual nature of the assault, resist the feelings of shame and desire, and repress the memory of it, expressing the trauma with agoraphobic symptoms (SP, 1:353–356). The association between the two memories is not rational, but the connection is intelligible: the shopkeepers in both cases laughed or smiled at her. When these experiences come out in analysis, Emma goes from having a bundle of anxious and confused feelings to something more conventional: being scared by others’ sexual desire for her. The work of analysis in many ways attempts to support this interpretive work so that the subject comprehends how her behavior, dreams, and thoughts are the result of her particular psychological processes rather than simply being given to her by a mind-independent reality. And when the experience is known and interpreted, it ceases to be (as) disruptive of mental life.

Psychological disorders make a person unfree; they are imprisoned by their own compulsions. A key component of living freely is not being unknowingly dominated by reminiscences. Repression may result in disruptive symptoms, but drives can also be channeled into

psychologically and socially valuable ends, and they can be expressed in more or less healthy ways. Freud's account of the psyche thus produces a modest optimism about our capacity to live happily:

The programme of becoming happy, which the pleasure principle imposes on us, cannot be fulfilled; yet we must not – indeed, we cannot – give up our efforts to bring it nearer to fulfilment by some means or other. Very different paths may be taken in that direction, and we may give priority either to the positive aspect of the aim, that of gaining pleasure, or to its negative one, that of avoiding unpleasure. By none of these paths can we attain all that we desire. Happiness, in the reduced sense in which we recognize it as possible, is a problem of the economics of the individual's libido. There is no golden rule which applies to everyone; every man must find out for himself in what particular fashion he can be saved.

(*CD*, 21:83)

We become happier when we figure out how best to manage our different and sometimes competing desires. As part of that goal, we achieve some level of freedom when we are not unknowingly dominated by repressed traumas and desires. We take possession of ourselves when those things are incorporated into our conscious narratives, and when our “efforts to bring [the pleasure principle] nearer to fulfilment” are not impeded by symptoms of repression.

This process is necessarily incomplete because any structure we achieve, any story we tell, will eventually be undermined and challenged by something else within our mental lives (ATI, 23:223). Our minds are inherently self-disrupting. As Jonathan Lear puts it, “the psychological achievements of maturity do tend to be somewhat fragile. There is always and everywhere the possibility of being overwhelmed” (2000, 110). Freedom is defined in terms of psychological health, and psychological health is a relative concept, depending on the level of disruption caused by behavioral or psychosomatic symptoms of repression (IL, 16:358). Our capacity for self-determination depends upon a kind of therapeutic negotiation between conscious narratives and unconscious pressures that motivate and destabilize those narratives.

Because of tensions within the individual psyche, and tensions between our personal desires and social expectations, we are left with a “reduced sense” of happiness and self-determination. Although Freud claims that psychoanalysis can illuminate our deep motives, he avoids the conclusion that we can achieve complete self-transparency. What is preconscious may be fully discovered – memories that are temporarily forgotten or unnoticed – but whatever populates the unconscious can only be revealed in part and in glimpses. The realistic goal for psychoanalysis is not to make patients absolutely free from repression, but to ensure that their repressed memories and emotions do not interfere too much in their everyday lives. In Freud's words, “the business of the analysis is to secure the best possible psychological conditions for the functions of the ego” (ATI, 23:250). We can live well, or well enough, as fractured selves.

Philosophers have struggled with how to understand Kant's theory of freedom, to make sense of how we can be both determined when our actions are considered theoretically (as causally determined objects of cognition) and free when our actions are considered practically (as the result of self-determined reasons). Freud's theory of freedom is at once simpler and more complex. Without two separate standpoints on human action, he does not need to explain the relationship between noumenal freedom and phenomenal determinism. The Freudian subject is at the intersection of two forces: the activity of interpretation and the passivity of the mind in encountering our drives. How we respond to our desires and our past is shaped by the fundamental drives that constitute the human being – the life drive and the death drive – but the drives

themselves also affect us in idiosyncratic ways, depending on our particular act of interpretation – for example, when an event is responded to as a trauma and repressed. Emma’s experience only becomes traumatic when she unconsciously invests it with meaning. The force of the given confronts the activity of interpretation, resulting in a theory of freedom that is more distinctively human, with our capacity both to transform the world through thinking and to be driven by animalistic motives, than either Kant’s enlightenment ideal or Schopenhauer’s pessimism.

Conclusion

Freud says that psychoanalysis “seeks to prove to the ego that it is not even master in its own house” (IL, 16:285). The conscious mind and seemingly self-directed activity are constantly at risk of being disrupted by forces that are beyond our rational control. Ironically, Freud draws on elements of German Idealism to develop a theory of materialistic, embodied freedom. Like Kant and Schopenhauer, Freud claims that we are not transparent to ourselves. However, echoing the Kantian idea that our experience is, in part, constructed by us, Freud shifts the meaning of what it is to achieve (partial) autonomy. We make sense of ourselves by situating our thoughts and behaviors into a conscious narrative, and the extent of our freedom is defined by our psychological health. It is a matter of degree – how much unconscious forces disrupt pursuit of our conscious aims – rather than an absolute removal of ourselves from a deterministic world, either through pure practical reason (Kant) or by renouncing the drives that make us into who we are (Schopenhauer). In rejecting both the Kantian fantasy of autonomy and the Schopenhauerian anxiety about determinism, Freud gives an account of limited, dialogic freedom within the therapeutic setting that reconciles us with the real condition of the human psyche.³

Notes

- 1 Works by Freud are cited parenthetically in the body of the text using the abbreviations listed below, followed by the volume and page numbers from the *Standard Edition* (Freud 1953–1974):

AIL: “Anxiety and Instinctual Life” (1933), 22:81–111
 AS: *An Autobiographical Study* (1925), 20:1–74
 ATI: “Analysis Terminable and Interminable” (1937), 23:209–253
 CD: *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930), 21:57–145
 CH: “Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria” (1905), 7:1–122
 CP: *The Claims of Psycho-analysis to Scientific Interest* (1913), 13:163–190
 EI: *The Ego and the Id* (1923), 19:1–66
 HPM: “On the History of the Psycho-analytic Movement” (1914), 14:1–66
 ID: *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900), vols. 4–5
 IL: *Introductory Lectures on Psycho-analysis* (1916–1917), vols. 15–16
 MM: *Moses and Monotheism* (1939), 23:1–137
 PEL: *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* (1901), vol. 6
 PT: “On Psychotherapy” (1905), 7:255–268
 RRW: “Remembering, Repeating and Working-Through” (1914), 12:145–156
 SH: *Studies on Hysteria* (with Josef Breuer) (1895), vol. 2
 SP: *Project for a Scientific Psychology* (1950), 1:281–397
 UCS: “The Unconscious” (1915), 14:159–215

- 2 As is customary in Kant scholarship, each parenthetical reference to Kant’s writings gives the volume and page numbers of the Royal Prussian Academy edition (*Kants gesammelte Schriften*), which are included in the margins of the translations.
- 3 Some of the themes in this chapter are developed in more detail in Altman and Coe (2013). I am indebted to Cynthia Coe for helpful comments on an early draft.

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