

Psychoanalysis can be seen to propose a 'theory of interpretation'.

Briefly describe its methods and procedures, its 'objects' and its goals.

From one of his texts, pick an example where Freud is interpreting something (a dream, a patient's symptom, a work of art, a child's game etc.).

Look closely at the interpretative moves of his argument, paying attention to the underlying assumptions, the limits and the implications of his approach.

Psychoanalysis as a 'theory of interpretation'

Psycho-analysis is the name (1) of a procedure for the investigation of mental processes which are almost inaccessible in any other way, (2) of a method (based upon that investigation) for the treatment of neurotic disorders and (3) of a collection of psychological information obtained along those lines, which is gradually being accumulated into a new scientific discipline.¹

Psychoanalysis is a specific technique of investigating human psyche, also a therapeutic method for neurotic disorders built on clinical observation and research. Although its status as a 'scientific' therapy is controversial, such practice and reflections form a systematic structure of psychoanalytic theory based on the dynamic of mental processes (dual topography²), concepts of sexuality (libido economy), concept of self, death instinct, repression, resistance, and transference etc.

As a therapeutic technique, psychoanalysis stipulates the existence of the unconscious as a psychic component and insists on interpretation of its material as a necessary therapeutic procedure. On the other hand, psychoanalytic theory is applied to the study of cultural, social and religious phenomena. In this direction, psychoanalysis inquires into a re-evaluation of the mechanisms and analysis of the meanings of culture, it accesses the consciousness of the public beyond its therapeutic limits and challenges existing norms and beliefs.

methods & procedures, 'objects' & goals

In medical research at Freud's time (late 18th to early 19th century), the illness 'hysteria' was an interesting study phenomenon in Europe. Freud explained hysteria as undesirable reminiscence of traumatic experience, consequence of seemingly trivial but shocking event the patient had encountered in the past. The memory cannot be integrated into the his/ her ordinary understanding of the world and hence swept to and locked up at a dark corner in the psyche named 'the unconscious'; the troubled emotions only manifest themselves in behaviours which, in an ambiguous way, offer a response to the trauma. These behaviours are symptoms that contain meanings. According to Freud, the symptoms are encoded and by some means censored by the unconscious, through processes like displacement, condensation and sublimation. As a result, the censored content emerges in distorted form like nightmares and phobias, and creates haunting emotional and psychological stress for the patients. The goal of psychoanalysis in therapeutic practice is to understand the cause of illness, to re-live the trauma and overcome the problem. Different from orthodox medical and scientific practice, psychoanalytic methods for diagnosis are listening and talking --- anamnesis --therapists listen and talk to their patients to retrieve information, obvious and obscure, about their biographic personal events, as well as details of their physical symptoms (behaviour) to help trace back the origin of their illness. Hypnosis, free association, interpretation of dreams, interpretation of slips, mistakes and paraphrases, are also tools for the psychical investigation. Very much like what detectives do, therapists collect mnemonic clues from the patients' stories. The healing process is complete when the patients can be made aware of the meanings of their symptoms. For instance, through transference -- where a patient transfers his/ her psychical conflicts (the traumatic reminiscence that led to his symptoms) onto the relationship between the therapist and the patient (the analysand) -- comes catharsis. Upon discharge of the repressed feelings, the unconscious materials no longer need to express themselves as symptoms, and the neurotic disorder or hysteria disappear.

As said earlier, psychoanalytic hypothesis is also applied on cultural analysis; in fact, Freud devoted his life to develop his theoretical ideas and arrived at a point where psychoanalysis has become a meta-psychology, adopted to explain all kind of subjects. Freudian psychoanalytic themes³ form a framework for cultural analysis, the themes

include 1) the unconscious, repression and defenses 2) resistance 3) trauma, fixation, regression, sublimation 4) projection, ambivalence, identification 5) Oedipus Complex, and 6) transference and the compulsion to repeat. Using psychoanalytic theory to interpret cultural texts means uncovering the concealed meanings in a text, revealing the unconscious intentionality of the author, and see what the text tells us about its author's personality, sexuality and egoistic secrets etc. In the case where the author no longer lives, for example, Michelangelo and Leonardo da Vinci, psychoanalysts do close reading of the text/ work, research on the author's biography and assemble other critiques on the text -- read between the lines, pay attention to every word and punctuation and every minute detail -- in order to construct a psychoanalytic picture of the text, the author, and his/ her unconscious activity.

Psychoanalysis is a big dictionary of the psyche, it contains the tools to decipher and interpret the symptoms and texts into comprehensible and conscious language. As the objects of psychical investigation are mnemonic symbols, impossible to be determined by conventional science, psychoanalysis offers an effective cure in terms of clinical practice, as well as a new perspective of reading in terms of cultural analysis.

Freud's interpretative approach of the 'Fort-Da' Game

Described in 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle' (1920) as the 'Fort-Da' game is a game of 'disappearance and return' which connects Freud's then embryonic theory of the death drive with the psychical interpretation of representation.

Freud described his observation of a game his grandson invented at the age of one and a half, when he could merely speak. The little boy used to throw small objects away from him, as he did it, exclaimed 'o-o-o-o', with 'an expression of interest and satisfaction'. Freud and the boy's mother understood the little boy to be saying 'Fort' which stands for 'Gone' in German. Later on, Freud's interest in the 'gone' game was reinforced when he saw the boy getting hold of a wooden reel attached to a piece of string, threw it over the edge of his cot, again saying 'his expressive 'o-o-o-o', and when the reel went out of his sight, he would pull it back to himself and said with joy, 'Da' ('There'). Freud believed

'Fort' plus 'Da' was his grandson's complete game, he announced, 'the interpretation of the game then became obvious. It was related to the child's great cultural achievement – the instinctual renunciation (that is, the renunciation of instinctual satisfaction) which he had made in allowing his mother to go away without protesting. He compensated himself for this, as it were, by himself staging the disappearance and return of the objects within his reach.'⁴

According to Freud, the game served two major purposes. Its representation of the objects' disappearance and return was a 'great cultural achievement' that allowed the little boy to manage his anxiety about the memory as well as the actual experience of the absence of his external 'objects', his mother, to whom he was very attached. By controlling the actual presence and absence of an object, he was able to recreate a virtual presence of his mother and offer himself consolation. Freud remarked on the boy's exceptional obedience, and related the boy's good nature to his self-invented game. Implicitly, Freud suggested that the game acted in accordance with the Pleasure Principle, it represented the boy's attribute to render himself happy, although the happy moment 'Da' came only after the unhappy 'Fort'. As for the second purpose, Freud proposed that the game was the little boy's revenge to his mother for leaving him alone. By become the master of the objects he was playing with, he was empowered with control to 'send away' his mother.

In the first part of the interpretation, Freud focused on the representation of absence, and theorised that the game was the child's invention of symbolism, i.e. the use of one object (e.g. wooden reel) to represent another absent object (mother). In human mental development, symbolism coincides with the emergence of language. The child enters the realm of culturally symbolic sounds and words and is given the means to represent objects, people, feelings, ideas and events, as well as 'give presence' to such things. Using language, the child learns to negotiate the idea of absence and the idea of otherness -- in a symbolic way, the child can 'make' what is gone, there. Nonetheless, Freud's grandson was not only representing his mother as a symbolic object, he was also representing his relationship with mother and other objects. The game was a means for him to come to terms with the reality that his mother and his objects could be gone; in play-representation and in memory, the boy figured out a conceptual response to the reality, that the mother could be gone yet still there.

Underlying Assumptions, Limits & Implications

Freud carried his interpretation further and focused on the complex relationship of the boy's repetition of the distressing experience as a game and the Pleasure Principle.

Pleasure Principle refers to the psychic drive that makes one seek pleasure and avoid pain. In Freudian theory, this principle rules the Id, but is not an absolute dominance in the mental processes. Although there is a strong tendency towards the Pleasure Principle, the final outcome cannot always be in harmony with the tendency towards pleasure as it is opposed or repressed by certain other forces and circumstances like Reality Principle and conflicts in the Ego. Reality Principle is the drive that also works to obtain pleasure, yet it does not avoid pain since the Ego has been educated to be 'reasonable' by taking account of reality. As a person grows up and has the knowledge of social etiquettes and norms, he/ she begins to learn the need to endure pain and to defer gratification (from Pleasure Principle) at times because of the exigencies and obstacles of reality. With such awareness, the psychic drive obeys the Reality Principle and arrives at obtaining postponed and diminished pleasure.

In dealing with patients suffering trauma from the devastations of World War I, Freud treated many shell-shocked soldiers who returned from the front. One of their common symptoms was the compulsion to repeat. The patients re-lived in dreams and in waking phantasies the horror of the war in vivid details; they were restlessly and repeatedly forced to live through the unbearable, without a chance of repression. By no means could this masochistic repetition-compulsion be seen the fulfillment of a repressed sexual wish, hence Freud felt the need to revise his theories and explore some principles that were far removed from sexuality (which had always been a constant dominance in his theories). Consequently, 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle' was written, in which he revised the study of the human psyche and put forward two equally important instinctual drives which he claimed, through the interpretation of his grandson's game, were dominant in the early childhood development of the psyche: 1) Eros --- the sexual instincts, the life instinct and the self-preservative instincts; and 2) Thanatos --- the death instinct, a natural desire to 're-establish a state of things that was disturbed by the emergence of life'⁵.

Freud interpreted the 'Fort-Da' game as the child's effort to master unpleasurable experience (e.g. the departure of the mother); such unpleasurable experience could be read as a kind of trauma, and an important fact about the nature of trauma as mentioned above is the 'repetition-compulsion'. In a different scenario, Freud's grandson was repeating the game over and over, taking pain and pleasure simultaneously from the repetition. It was a difficult point for Freud to make sense of because both the Pleasure Principle and the Reality Principle were ultimately committed to gratification and should logically work towards the forgetting of painful events, even though the Reality Principle entails delay or a degree of pain, it would ensure the happening of gratification. Freud decided the repetition-compulsion was not so much the libido's efforts to expend its cathexis of sexual energy, it was instead an effort to come to terms with the fact of 'death' and there came his theory of the death instinct.

The force that powers the machinery of the mind is no longer the sexual procreative force Eros alone; Eros, has a dark twin -- Thanatos. Inside our psyche lives a compulsion towards life, also a compulsion towards death; whereas Eros compels us forward, to make new life, Thanatos pulls us back, compels us to repeat old pain. Freud wrote, 'It seems, then, that an instinct is an urge inherent in organic life to restore an earlier state of things which the living entity has been obliged to abandon under the pressure of external disturbing forces; that is, it is a kind of organic elasticity, or, to put it another way, the expression of the inertia inherent in organic life.'⁶ Eventually the process leads us to 'an old state of things, an initial state from which the living entity has at one time or other departed and to which it is striving to return to by the *circuitous paths* along which its development leads'⁷ -- that is 'death'. 'Fort-Da' is therefore a name for the process of pushing and pulling, of desire and loss ending in death; the 'Fort-Da' game, so to speak, is a game of Eros and Thanatos, of Life and Death.

Thanatos as a primitive, elementary and instinctual drive, over-rides the Pleasure Principle. It forms a compulsion to repeat and recall from the past experiences which include no possibility of pleasure, and which can never bring satisfaction to instinctual impulses. Whereas one part of the human psyche is seeking gratification, another part is geared to seek a return to the quiet of non-existence. This concept allowed Freud to make sense of the human tendency towards destruction, including self-destruction. He

used another example to illustrating his point: 'Finally, a reminder may be added that the artistic play and artistic imitation carried out by adults, which, unlike children's, are aimed at an audience, do not spare the spectators (for instance, in tragedy) the most painful experiences and can yet be felt by them as highly enjoyable. This is convincing proof that, even under the dominance of the pleasure principle, there are ways and means enough of making what is in itself unpleasurable into a subject to be recollected and worked over in the mind.'⁸ Taking away the artistic consideration, the viewing experience built on tragedy paradoxically offers their viewers satisfaction, it proves that -- 'the pleasure principle: unpleasure for one system and simultaneously satisfaction for the other.'⁹

Freud was not reluctant to admit the flawed nature of his prior defensive attitude towards the idea of an instinct of destruction. Apart from highlighting his open-mindedness, his self-revision serves rhetorically to anticipate and overcome in advance the readers' resistance to the concept that Freud is putting forward -- in this case, the death drive. This type of self-revision is quite common in Freud's writings and is an archetypal act of his deconstructive thought, which consists in demonstrating how each term of an apparent opposition contains the difference of the other term within it. Freud's style of argumentation is very similar to the psychoanalytic framework he is elaborating where the concept of resistance has already been built into. He was clear about the limits of psychoanalysis but never ceased to push further his psychoanalytic theories.

From a Derridean point of view, Freud was using the 'Fort-Da' game to introduce the notion of the return of the repressed unconscious wish (repetition-compulsion; the neurotic effects of an earlier psychic trauma upon later behaviour), however by doing so, Freud exposed his own ambiguity in the subject and within himself. Just like how the game works and repeats itself -- in the text, Freud repeatedly sends away and calls back his central argument on the Pleasure Principle as he tries to gather evidence to support it. The imposing structure of the game exposes itself as always going 'somewhere else': the objects that are thrown away are a representation of the rigidly structured scientific writing which is always incomplete (Freud's writing can never be totally scientific due to the nature of the subject). Freud, when alive, did not completely prove the existence of his theory of pleasure to his satisfaction, but he never discarded it entirely, reworking it constantly throughout his life. Incompleteness also covers the absence of description of

the child and his parents. Right from the beginning, Freud conceals from the reader his genealogical relationship to the child as a convention of scientific writing, he puts off his authorship by devolving it impersonally on an unidentified child at play. Writing his grandson in this fashion, Freud speculates not only on the psychic economy of pleasure, but the economy of his own family and his writing.

Freud is somehow assuming that the Pleasure Principle (and its twins, the Reality Principle) is that which constitutes the realm of mastery and establishes the boundaries of consciousness -- of what is known and certain. Problematically, should the Pleasure Principle be the primary principle of the unconscious, almost indistinguishable from the primary process -- it would, to some degree, no longer constitute the 'Beyond'. As the apparatus of the unconscious has become that which is known, that which would supposedly itself have a horizon and a beyond: it is indeed a system, it is one of sense, and, therefore, not based on a process of mobile cathexes.¹⁰

Conclusion

Freud's elaborate interpretation of a simple child's game has shed light on a 'new "structural" theory of the mind'¹¹. He has given a theoretical as well as philosophical account of the set of two instincts and principles, based on the fundamental framework of psychoanalysis. He basically theorises that all subjects, in their quest for happiness, must maintain within the libidinal economy a balance between the life instinct and death instinct (Eros and Thanatos).

Happiness is an abstract concept, quite appropriately explored by Freud using psychoanalytic theory. Similarly, psychoanalysis itself is at bottom a science that investigates the source of human psychological suffering and the solutions to these pains. The difficulty of psychoanalytical theory locates at its combination of purely speculative aspects such as the description of the psychic apparatus with aspects derived from clinical and cultural observation. Freud was always attempting to make equilibrium in his writing, though not always successful because of the nature of his study. He realised what needed in his diverse interpretation was to meet the demons in their own territory, in the depths of the mind and defeat them there -- because that was

the place where the fictional became real. The dream is felt as real, as non-fiction to the dreamer; the symptoms real to the hysteric or neurotic – thus, the solution must also be a fiction that is real.

¹ Sigmund Freud, 'Two Encyclopedia Articles' (1923), in *Standard Edition*, XVIII (London: Hogarth Press, 1955), pp.233-259

² Freudian dual topography is: 1) Conscious-Preconscious-Unconscious;

2) Id-Ego-Superego

³ AROPA, 'Psychoanalytic Themes' in *Psychoanalysis -- Techniques and Practice* <<http://freudfile.org/psychoanalysis/themes.html>> [accessed 17 Dec 2004]

⁴ Sigmund Freud, 'Beyond The Pleasure Principle' (1920) in *The Freud Reader*, ed. Peter Gay (London: Vintage, 1995), pp.599-600

⁵ Sigmund Freud, *The Ego and The Id*, trans. Joan Riviere, . ed. James Strachey, (London : Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1962), p. 709

⁶ Freud, 'Beyond...', *Op. Cit.*, p.612

⁷ Freud, 'Beyond...', *Op. Cit.*, p.613 (note my italics)

⁸ Freud, 'Beyond...', *Op. Cit.*, p.601

⁹ Freud, 'Beyond...', *Op. Cit.*, p.603

¹⁰ Eric Anders, 'To speculate on "Freud" and Beyond...' 4.3 in *Disturbing Psychoanalytic Origins: A Derridean Reading of Freudian Theory*, 2000 <http://www.eric.anders.net/dissertation/to_speculate.html>[accessed 23 Dec 2004]

¹¹ Peter Gay, 'Preface to "Beyond The Pleasure Principle"' (1920) in *The Freud Reader*, ed. Peter Gay (London: Vintage, 1995), p.594

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