

SIGMUND FREUD

1856 - 1939

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Sigmund Freud was born May 6, 1856, in a small town -- Freiberg -- in Moravia. His father was a wool merchant with a keen mind and a good sense of humor. His mother was a lively woman, her husband's second wife and 20 years younger. She was 21 years old when she gave birth to her first son, her darling, Sigmund. Sigmund had two older half-brothers and six younger siblings. When he was four or five -- he wasn't sure -- the family moved to Vienna, where he lived most of his life.

A brilliant child, always at the head of his class, he went to medical school, one of the few viable options for a bright Jewish boy in Vienna those days. There, he became involved in research under the direction of a physiology professor named Ernst Brücke. Brücke believed in what was then a popular, if radical, notion, which we now call reductionism: "No other forces than the common physical-chemical ones are active within the organism." Freud would spend many years trying to "reduce" personality to neurology, a cause he later gave up on.

Freud was very good at his research, concentrating on neurophysiology, even inventing a special cell-staining technique. But only a limited number of positions were available, and there were others ahead of him. Brücke helped him to get a grant to study, first with the great psychiatrist Charcot in Paris, then with his rival Bernheim in Nancy. Both these gentlemen were investigating the use of hypnosis with hysterics.

After spending a short time as a resident in neurology and director of a children's ward in Berlin, he came back to Vienna, married his fiancée of many years Martha Bernays, and set up a practice in neuropsychiatry, with the help of Joseph Breuer.

Freud's books and lectures brought him both fame and ostracism from the mainstream of the medical community. He drew around him a number of very bright sympathizers who became the core of the psychoanalytic movement. Unfortunately, Freud had a penchant for rejecting people who did not totally agree with him. Some separated from him on friendly terms; others did not, and went on to found competing schools of thought.

Freud emigrated to England just before World War II when Vienna became an increasingly dangerous place for Jews, especially ones as famous as Freud. Not long afterward, he died of the cancer of the mouth and jaw that he had suffered from for the last 20 years of his life.

The id, the ego, and the superego

Freudian psychological reality begins with the world, full of objects. Among them is a very special object, the organism. The organism is special in that it acts to survive and reproduce, and it is guided toward those ends by its needs -- hunger, thirst, the avoidance of pain, and sex.

A part -- a very important part -- of the organism is the nervous system, which has as one of its characteristics a sensitivity to the organism's needs. At birth, that nervous system is little more than that of any other animal, an "it" or **id**. The nervous system, as id, translates the organism's needs into motivational forces called, in German, **Triebe**, which has been translated as **instincts** or **drives**. Freud also called them **wishes**. This translation from need to wish is called the **primary process**.

The id works in keeping with the **pleasure principle**, which can be understood as a demand to take care of needs immediately. Just picture the hungry infant, screaming itself blue. It doesn't "know" what it wants in any adult sense; it just knows that it wants it and it wants it now. The infant, in the Freudian view, is pure, or nearly pure id. And the id is nothing if not the psychic representative of biology.

Unfortunately, although a wish for food, such as the image of a juicy steak, might be enough to satisfy the id, it isn't enough to satisfy the organism. The need only gets stronger, and the wishes just keep coming. You may have noticed that, when you haven't satisfied some need, such as the need for food, it begins to demand more and more of your attention, until there comes a point where you can't think of anything else. This is the wish or drive breaking into consciousness.

Luckily for the organism, there is that small portion of the mind we discussed before, the conscious, that is hooked up to the world through the senses. Around this little bit of consciousness, during the first year of a child's life, some of the "it" becomes "I," some of the id becomes **ego**. The ego relates the organism to reality by means of its consciousness, and it searches for objects to satisfy the wishes that id creates to represent the organism's needs. This problem-solving activity is called the **secondary process**.

The ego, unlike the id, functions according to the **reality principle**, which says "take care of a need as soon as an appropriate object is found." It represents reality and, to a considerable extent, reason.

However, as the ego struggles to keep the id (and, ultimately, the organism) happy, it meets with obstacles in the world. It occasionally meets with objects that actually assist it in attaining its goals. And it keeps a record of these obstacles and aides. In particular, it keeps track of the rewards and punishments meted out by two of the most influential objects in the world of the child -- mom and dad. This record of things to avoid and strategies to take becomes the **superego**. It is not completed until about seven years of age. In some people, it never is completed.

There are two aspects to the superego: One is the **conscience**, which is an internalization of punishments and warnings. The other is called the **ego ideal**. It derives from rewards and positive models presented to the child. The conscience and ego ideal communicate their requirements to the ego with feelings like pride, shame, and guilt.

It is as if we acquired, in childhood, a new set of needs and accompanying wishes, this time of social rather than biological origins. Unfortunately, these new wishes can easily conflict with the ones from the id. You see, the superego represents society, and society often wants nothing better than to have you never satisfy your needs at all!

Life instincts and the death instinct

Freud saw all human behavior as motivated by the drives or instincts, which in turn are the neurological representations of physical needs. At first, he referred to them as the **life instincts**. These instincts perpetuate (a) the life of the individual, by motivating him or her to seek food and water, and (b) the life of the species, by motivating him or her to have sex. The motivational energy of these life instincts, the "oomph" that powers our psyches, he called **libido**, from the Latin word for "I desire."

Freud's clinical experience led him to view sex as much more important in the dynamics of the psyche than other needs. We are, after all, social creatures, and sex is the most social of needs. Plus, we have to remember that Freud included much more than intercourse in the term sex! Anyway, libido has come to mean, not any old drive, but the sex drive.

Later in his life, Freud began to believe that the life instincts didn't tell the whole story. Libido is a lively thing; the pleasure principle keeps us in perpetual motion. And yet the goal of all this motion is to be still, to be satisfied, to be at peace, to have no more needs. The goal of life, you might say, is death! Freud began to believe that "under" and "beside" the life instincts there was a **death instinct**. He began to believe that every person has an unconscious wish to die.

This seems like a strange idea at first, and it was rejected by many of his students, but I think it has some basis in experience: Life can be a painful and exhausting process. There is easily, for the great majority of people in the world, more pain than pleasure in life -- something we are extremely reluctant to admit! Death promises release from the struggle.

Freud referred to a **nirvana principle**. Nirvana is a Buddhist idea, often translated as heaven, but actually meaning "blowing out," as in the blowing out of a candle. It refers to non-existence, nothingness, the void, which is the goal of all life in Buddhist philosophy.

The day-to-day evidence of the death instinct and its nirvana principle is in our desire for peace, for escape from stimulation, our attraction to alcohol and narcotics, our penchant for escapist activity, such as losing ourselves in books or movies, our craving for rest and sleep. Sometimes it presents itself openly as suicide and suicidal wishes. And, Freud

theorized, sometimes we direct it out away from ourselves, in the form of aggression, cruelty, murder, and destructiveness.

The ego -- the "I" -- sits at the center of some pretty powerful forces: reality; society, as represented by the superego; biology, as represented by the id. When these make conflicting demands upon the poor ego, it is understandable if it -- if you -- feel threatened, feel overwhelmed, feel as if it were about to collapse under the weight of it all. This feeling is called **anxiety**, and it serves as a signal to the ego that its survival, and with it the survival of the whole organism, is in jeopardy.

Freud mentions three different kind of anxieties: The first is **realistic anxiety**, which you and I would call fear. Actually Freud did, too, in German. But his translators thought "fear" too mundane! Nevertheless, if I throw you into a pit of poisonous snakes, you might experience realistic anxiety.

The second is **moral anxiety**. This is what we feel when the threat comes not from the outer, physical world, but from the internalized social world of the superego. It is, in fact, just another word for feelings like shame and guilt and the fear of punishment.

The last is **neurotic anxiety**. This is the fear of being overwhelmed by impulses from the id. If you have ever felt like you were about to "lose it," lose control, your temper, your rationality, or even your mind, you have felt neurotic anxiety. Neurotic is actually the Latin word for nervous, so this is nervous anxiety. It is this kind of anxiety that intrigued Freud most, and we usually just call it anxiety, plain and simple

Denial involves blocking external events from awareness. If some situation is just too much to handle, the person just refuses to experience it. As you might imagine, this is a primitive and dangerous defense -- no one disregards reality and gets away with it for long! It can operate by itself or, more commonly, in combination with other, more subtle mechanisms that support it.

Repression, which Anna Freud also called "motivated forgetting," is just that: not being able to recall a threatening situation, person, or event. This, too, is dangerous, and is a part of most other defenses.

As an adolescent, I developed a rather strong fear of spiders, especially long-legged ones. I didn't know where it came from, but it was starting to get rather embarrassing by the time I entered college. At college, a counselor helped me to get over it (with a technique called systematic desensitization), but I still had no idea where it came from. Years later, I had a dream, a particularly clear one, that involved getting locked up by my cousin in a shed behind my grandparents' house when I was very young. The shed was small, dark, and had a dirt floor covered with -- you guessed it! -- long-legged spiders.

The Freudian understanding of this phobia is pretty simple: I repressed a traumatic event -- the shed incident -- but seeing spiders aroused the anxiety of the event without arousing the memory.

The stages

As I said earlier, for Freud, the sex drive is the most important motivating force. In fact, Freud felt it was the primary motivating force not only for adults but for children and even infants. When he introduced his ideas about infantile sexuality to the Viennese public of his day, they were hardly prepared to talk about sexuality in adults, much less in infants!

It is true that the capacity for orgasm is there neurologically from birth. But Freud was not just talking about orgasm. Sexuality meant not only intercourse, but all pleasurable sensation from the skin. It is clear even to the most prudish among us that babies, children, and, of course, adults, enjoy tactile experiences such as caresses, kisses, and so on.

Freud noted that, at different times in our lives, different parts of our skin give us greatest pleasure. Later theorists would call these areas **erogenous zones**. It appeared to Freud that the infant found its greatest pleasure in sucking, especially at the breast. In fact, babies have a penchant for bringing nearly everything in their environment into contact with their mouths. A bit later in life, the child focuses on the anal pleasures of holding it in and letting go. By three or four, the child may have discovered the pleasure of touching or rubbing against his or her genitalia. Only later, in our sexual maturity, do we find our greatest pleasure in sexual intercourse. In these observations, Freud had the makings of a psychosexual stage theory.

The **oral stage** lasts from birth to about 18 months. The focus of pleasure is, of course, the mouth. Sucking and biting are favorite activities.

The **anal stage** lasts from about 18 months to three or four years old. The focus of pleasure is the anus. Holding it in and letting it go are greatly enjoyed.

The **phallic stage** lasts from three or four to five, six, or seven years old. The focus of pleasure is the genitalia. Masturbation is common.

The **latent stage** lasts from five, six, or seven to puberty, that is, somewhere around 12 years old. During this stage, Freud believed that the sexual impulse was suppressed in the service of learning. I must note that, while most children seem to be fairly calm, sexually, during their grammar school years, perhaps up to a quarter of them are quite busy masturbating and playing "doctor." In Freud's repressive era, these children were, at least, quieter than their modern counterparts.

The **genital stage** begins at puberty, and represents the resurgence of the sex drive in adolescence, and the more specific focusing of pleasure in sexual intercourse. Freud felt that masturbation, oral sex, homosexuality, and many other things we find acceptable in adulthood today, were immature.

This is a true stage theory, meaning that Freudians believe that we all go through these stages, in this order, and pretty close to these ages.

The Oedipal crisis

Each stage has certain difficult tasks associated with it where problems are more likely to arise. For the oral stage, this is weaning. For the anal stage, it's potty training. For the phallic stage, it is the Oedipal crisis, named after the ancient Greek story of king Oedipus, who inadvertently killed his father and married his mother.

Here's how the Oedipal crisis works: The first love-object for all of us is our mother. We want her attention, we want her affection, we want her caresses, we want her, in a broadly sexual way. The young boy, however, has a rival for his mother's charms: his father! His father is bigger, stronger, smarter, and he gets to sleep with mother, while junior pines away in his lonely little bed. Dad is the enemy.

About the time the little boy recognizes this archetypal situation, he has become aware of some of the more subtle differences between boys and girls, the ones other than hair length and clothing styles. From his naive perspective, the difference is that he has a penis, and girls do not. At this point in life, it seems to the child that having something is infinitely better than not having something, and so he is pleased with this state of affairs.

But the question arises: where is the girl's penis? Perhaps she has lost it somehow. Perhaps it was cut off. Perhaps this could happen to him! This is the beginning of **castration anxiety**, a slight misnomer for the fear of losing one's penis.

To return to the story, the boy, recognizing his father's superiority and fearing for his penis, engages some of his ego defenses: He displaces his sexual impulses from his mother to girls and, later, women; And he identifies with the aggressor, dad, and attempts to become more and more like him, that is to say, a man. After a few years of latency, he enters adolescence and the world of mature heterosexuality.

The girl also begins her life in love with her mother, so we have the problem of getting her to switch her affections to her father before the Oedipal process can take place. Freud accomplishes this with the idea of **penis envy**: The young girl, too, has noticed the difference between boys and girls and feels that she, somehow, doesn't measure up. She would like to have one, too, and all the power associated with it. At very least, she would like a penis substitute, such as a baby. As every child knows, you need a father as well as a mother to have a baby, so the young girl sets her sights on dad.

Dad, of course, is already taken. The young girl displaces from him to boys and men, and identifies with mom, the woman who got the man she really wanted. Note that one thing is missing here: The girl does not suffer from the powerful motivation of castration anxiety, since she cannot lose what she doesn't have. Freud felt that the lack of this great fear accounts for fact (as he saw it) that women were both less firmly heterosexual than men and somewhat less morally-inclined.

Before you get too upset by this less-than-flattering account of women's sexuality, rest assured that many people have responded to it. I will discuss it in the discussion section.

Character

Your experiences as you grow up contribute to your personality, or character, as an adult. Freud felt that traumatic experiences had an especially strong effect. Of course, each specific trauma would have its own unique impact on a person, which can only be explored and understood on an individual basis. But traumas associated with stage development, since we all have to go through them, should have more consistency.

If you have difficulties in any of the tasks associated with the stages -- weaning, potty training, or finding your sexual identity -- you will tend to retain certain infantile or childish habits. This is called **fixation**. Fixation gives each problem at each stage a long-term effect in terms of our personality or character.

If you, in the first eight months of your life, are often frustrated in your need to suckle, perhaps because mother is uncomfortable or even rough with you, or tries to wean you too early, then you may develop an **oral-passive character**. An oral-passive personality tends to be rather dependent on others. They often retain an interest in "oral gratifications" such as eating, drinking, and smoking. It is as if they were seeking the pleasures they missed in infancy.

When we are between five and eight months old, we begin teething. One satisfying thing to do when you are teething is to bite on something, like mommy's nipple. If this causes a great deal of upset and precipitates an early weaning, you may develop an **oral-aggressive personality**. These people retain a life-long desire to bite on things, such as pencils, gum, and other people. They have a tendency to be verbally aggressive, argumentative, sarcastic, and so on.

In the anal stage, we are fascinated with our "bodily functions." At first, we can go whenever and wherever we like. Then, out of the blue and for no reason you can understand, the powers that be want you to do it only at certain times and in certain places. And parents seem to actually value the end product of all this effort!

Some parents put themselves at the child's mercy in the process of toilet training. They beg, they cajole, they show great joy when you do it right, they act as though their hearts were broken when you don't. The child is the king of the house, and knows it. This child will grow up to be an **anal expulsive** (a.k.a. anal aggressive) **personality**. These people tend to be sloppy, disorganized, generous to a fault. They may be cruel, destructive, and given to vandalism and graffiti. The Oscar Madison character in *The Odd Couple* is a nice example.

Other parents are strict. They may be competing with their neighbors and relatives as to who can potty train their child first (early potty training being associated in many people's minds with great intelligence). They may use punishment or humiliation. This

child will likely become constipated as he or she tries desperately to hold it in at all times, and will grow up to be an **anal retentive personality**. He or she will tend to be especially clean, perfectionistic, dictatorial, very stubborn, and stingy. In other words, the anal retentive is tight in all ways. The Felix Unger character in *The Odd Couple* is a perfect example.

There are also two **phallic personalities**, although no-one has given them names. If the boy is harshly rejected by his mother, and rather threatened by his very masculine father, he is likely to have a poor sense of self-worth when it comes to his sexuality. He may deal with this by either withdrawing from heterosexual interaction, perhaps becoming a book-worm, or by putting on a rather macho act and playing the ladies' man. A girl rejected by her father and threatened by her very feminine mother is also likely to feel poorly about herself, and may become a wall-flower or a hyper-feminine "belle."

But if a boy is not rejected by his mother, but rather favored over his weak, milquetoast father, he may develop quite an opinion of himself (which may suffer greatly when he gets into the real world, where nobody loves him like his mother did), and may appear rather effeminate. After all, he has no cause to identify with his father. Likewise, if a girl is daddy's little princess and best buddy, and mommy has been relegated to a sort of servant role, then she may become quite vain and self-centered, or possibly rather masculine.

These various phallic characters demonstrate an important point in Freudian characterology: Extremes lead to extremes. If you are frustrated in some way or overindulged in some way, you have problems. And, although each problem tends to lead to certain characteristics, these characteristics can also easily be reversed. So an anal retentive person may suddenly become exceedingly generous, or may have some part of their life where they are terribly messy. This is frustrating to scientists, but it may reflect the reality of personality!