Psychoanalysis and Human Rationality

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It is clear that Freud's theories have had a profound and revolutionary impact on ideas about human nature and human rationality. However, the precise nature of that impact is less clear. It is often said that psychoanalysis reveals the irrational forces at the root of even the most apparently rational forms of thought and activity; and that, in so doing, it undermines ideas about human rationality which have dominated western thought. That is undoubtedly true. However, it is only one aspect of the truth. For the implications of psychoanalysis are more complex and far-reaching than this currently fashionable view suggests.

The Enlightenment View of Reason

Modern western philosophy is founded on the idea that human beings are conscious and rational subjects, capable of governing their thoughts and actions by the principles of reason. According to the view that became dominant with the Enlightenment, human nature is divided into a rational part, the faculty of reason, and a non-rational part comprised of emotions, appetites and desires. These two parts are distinct and opposed. Reason is disinterested, universal, objective and autonomous in its operation. The emotions and appetites, by contrast, are partial, particular, subjective. They are a force hostile to reason in human life. According to the mainstream Enlightenment view, however, reason can and should guide and determine human action and thought, and we are rational to the extent that it does so.

Psychoanalytic theory calls this whole picture into question. Freud portrays the human being as a creature dominated by unconscious instincts, by infantile desires and primitive drives. He shows how consciousness and rationality are only one, relatively minor, facet of our psychology. He demonstrates how even the most apparently 'rational' and conscious activities and experiences are influenced by unconscious wishes and fantasies, which operate in ways which pay no heed to the principles of reason and logic. The 'reasons' that we believe we have for our thoughts and actions are revealed as mere 'rationalizations', which cloak and deny their real, unconscious motives.

Psychoanalytic theory thus undermines the Enlightenment idea of the rational human subject. In this respect, it is now often claimed, Freud should be seen as part of a broader movement of modern thought, which includes Marx and Nietzsche, and which culminates in contemporary 'postmodernism'. Thus—through a Nietzschean reading of Freud—we are led to a thorough-going scepticism which rejects the idea of the human reality as an Enlightenment myth. Summing up these views, McCarthy writes, 'it is no longer possible, the critics argue, to overlook the influence of the unconscious on the conscious, the role of the preconceptual and nonconceptual in the conceptual; the presence of the irrational—the economy of desire, the will to power—at the very core of the rational.'

There is some truth in this account. Psychoanalysis does, indeed, reveal the ubiquitous influence of unconscious and irrational forces in human life; it does undermine the Enlightenment idea of the purely conscious and rational subject. This is the negative and critical side to its impact on traditional, Enlightenment thought. The postmodernist account tends to stress this aspect in an exclusive and one-sided way. However, it is only one part of the picture, and the less important part at that. For psychoanalysis also questions traditional, Enlightenment ideas of human irrationality. Only if this too is recognized is it possible to reach a satisfactory understanding of Freud's theory. This is what I shall argue.

Dreams and Neurotic Symptoms

Freud's work focused primarily on phenomena like neurotic symptoms, dreams, fantasies and errors—on phenomena which appear to be senseless, arbitrary, inexplicable, non-rational or irrational. His great achievement was to show that they are not so. Such phenomena can be interpreted and understood as intentional phenomena: they have a meaning, they happen for a reason, they can be explained in psychological terms.

This is perhaps most familiar in the case of dreams. According to the traditional view, dreams are the very paradigm of irrationality, of illusory and senseless experience. This is indeed how they usually appear to the dreamer. Dreams play a central role in the initial, sceptical arguments in Descartes' Meditation, and in the whole subsequent tradition of western philosophy, on just this basis. However, as Freud discovered, and in many cases demonstrated, dreams can be interpreted; they have a meaning. Dreams, says Freud, 'are not meaningless, they are absurd...On the contrary, they are psychical phenomena of complete validity...they can be inserted into the chain of our mental acts.'

According to Freud, dreams have the form of 'wish-fulfilments'. Interpreting a dream and coming to see how it 'fits into the chain of our mental acts' involves discovering the wish that is expressed in it. In the case of young children's dreams, and occasionally with those of adults, this is evident. One of the many examples Freud cites involves a 22 month old child called Hermann. He was asked to hand over a basket of cherries to someone as a birthday present. He was very unwilling to do this, even though he was promised some of the cherries for himself as a reward. The next morning he reported having dreamed, 'Hermann eats all the cherries!'. Summarizing his conclusions, Freud writes,

Children's dreams are not senseless. They are intelligible, completely valid mental acts...A child's dream is a reaction to an experience of the previous day, which has left behind it a regret, a longing, a wish that has not been dealt with. The dream produces a direct, undisguised fulfillment of that wish.

The meaning of young children's dreams is often quite evident. Adult dreams, by contrast, usually appear arbitrary, senseless, irrational, and alien to the dreamer. Nevertheless, Freud maintains, they have the same wish-fulfilling form as the dreams of children. This is not an argument of surface appearance because they have been subjected to 'disturbances'. The wish they express are repressed and unconscious ones, which reach consciousness in the dream only via the mechanisms of condensation, displacement, visual representation and symbolization. In such 'distorted' dreams, the 'manifest content'—the dream as it appears to the dreamer—must be distinguished from the 'latent content', the unconscious wishes and thoughts which are expressed in it. The manifest content both expresses the latent content, and yet also distorts and conceals it. The manifest dream is thus the product of a compromise between the unconscious wishes expressed in it and the forces of repression and censorship operating in the dreamer's psyche.

This, briefly, is Freud's account of dreams. Clearly it involves a rejection of the Enlightenment view of them. Dreams are not, as Descartes believed, a purely delusive and irrational form of experience. Freud's great achievement was to show that dreams are a manifestation of a previously unknown, unconscious, psychological realm. Understood in this way, dreams no longer appear to be senseless and arbitrary. They occur and take the form they do for a reason; they have a meaning, they can be interpreted and understood in psychological terms.

Freud gives a similar account of many other apparently senseless and non-rational phenomena in human life. His earliest work focused on the treatment of patients diagnosed as 'hysterical'. This diagnostic category is no longer used, but the condition is still common. These patients suffer from physical symptoms like pains and paralyses, which have no
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Responsibility for Collective Action

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