

***The Psychopathology of Everyday Life:* Freud's Riddles and the Narrative Need for Meaning**

"I am actually not at all a man of science, not an observer, not an experimenter, not a thinker. I am by temperament nothing but a conquistador — an adventurer, if you want it translated — with all the curiosity, daring, and tenacity characteristic of a man of this sort."—Letter to Wilhelm Fliess, 1 February 1900

"I am plagued with two ambitions: to see how the theory of mental functioning takes shape if quantitative considerations, a sort of economics of nerve-force, are introduced into it; and secondly, to extract from psychopathology what may be of benefit to normal psychology."—Letter to Wilhelm Fliess, May 25 1885

At the heart of Freud's text, *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, is a fundamental need to discover significance, to solve verbal and mnemonic puzzles, to find meaning where meaning seems to resist our discovery. Yet psychoanalysis arises out of a materialist vision of the human species, one that therefore resists any transcendent point of reference. We are "machines" more than free subjects, and this would seem to make meaning problematic except as some sort of evolved mechanism and as a system that needs adjustment. Not surprisingly, Freud began with such a mechanistic understanding of the human psyche, though over the course of his career, he moved to a more complex understanding of the human psyche.

Nonetheless, Freud never really gave up the belief that natural science is the arbiter of truth, knowledge, and meaning. At the heart of Freud (and Marx, Nietzsche, even Darwin) is the assumption of false consciousness; humans hide their true motives and desires from themselves and each other, and this falsity must be forced to reveal its fundamental guile. At one level, this is interrogation rather than intersubjectivity, yet in either case it is agonistic in nature, involving disagreement over and revision of meaning.

Freud's material bias is important for understanding a text that at many points can feel like the "superstitious" practices that he claims to reject. His method of finding a casual meaning for forgotten words, substitutions, word slips, or other mistaken notions and impressions is highly interpretive, and it often feels like Kabbalah or patristic exegesis—winding its way through word association and levels of allegory to locate a "solution" for what seems mysterious or even random. Because symbols are enigmas, i.e. puzzles, they call for being deciphered. And because they are the products of false consciousness, they resist disclosure.

They are also inevitably linguistic in nature. The therapeutic discovery takes place in intersubjective encounter. It must be capable of being voiced, of being verbalized—by either the patient or the therapist. With this in mind, we can ask, does Freud in *Everyday Life* over-determine his evidence, making it offer more than it should, or does he under-determine it, forcing only one specific meaning from among a much larger and freer range of possibilities? Likewise, we can also ask, given the therapeutic nature of Freud's solutions, does it matter whether the "solutions" in questions are fictive or not? Would the same results be obtained regardless?

Exploratory Questions

- Is psychoanalysis fundamentally intersubjective and linguistic in nature? Why or why not?
- Why do we wish to solve puzzles or riddles?
- Why do we make or find meaning where there seems to be no meaning?

- How necessary is it to have a life-narrative in order to make sense of the motive or cause of human actions, even seemingly mistaken ones such as Freud describes.
- Why do we forget or confuse things? Are they really matters of repression or pain avoidance?
- Should we, like Freud, bracket out any appeal to the metaphysical or supernatural?

Discussion Questions

Discussion questions are based on the A. A. Brill translation included in *The Basic Writings of Sigmund Freud* which is based on the 1911 edition with some later examples included by Brill. This can be compared with the Standard Edition version translated by Alan Tyson if desired (Norton 1960). The Standard Version included notes that trace the various changes and additions over the course of subsequent editions to the original 1901 German version.

1. How much of Freud's descriptions of the mechanisms of forgotten names, foreign words, etc. do you find convincing? Are there other reasons for why we forget and substitute such words? What are some more current theories as to why we do so?
2. Why does Freud want more than a simple "circulatory or functional disturbance" explanation? (18, also cf. 37ff.)
3. Is Freud correct to say that our words and choices are "an incessant stream of 'self-reference'"? (20)
4. Look at the some of the longer accounts by Brill (cf. 24ff., 34-35, 50-51, 125ff.). How do they function as narratives of actions with agents, motives, and contexts?
5. What do you make of the nature of chains of association? What kinds of meaning can they reveal?
6. How important is the method of interpretation? (cf. 53, bottom para.)
7. How does Freud's account of his own "forgetting" include resentment and displeasure? (chapter VII)
8. Can one "layer" memories? What would that "look" like? (70-71)
9. What does Freud find significant about the duties of affairs of love and army service? Are they cases of counter-will? (75-76)
10. Read over the tuning-fork example (83ff.) and the straight, wooden stethoscope example (100ff.). Can you think of other ways to interpret their meaning? Are yours more convincing? Why and/or why not?
11. How does Freud interpret the meaning of Mrs X's abortion? (94-96)
12. Why does Freud argue that lost objects are often sacrifices? (106ff.)
13. What does Freud judge as the reach of determinism? (118)
14. Does Freud believe in human free will? (129-131)
15. Read closely pages 132-136. Why does he hold that superstitious or transcendental claims are dim awareness of the unconscious?
16. If you were to give a name to the drive for de-mystification, what would it be and why?
17. How does Freud delineate types of disturbed thought? (141)
18. Should we give any credence to Freud's notions of chains of repressed emotions and memories?