

ON FREUD'S BLIND SPOTS CONCERNING SOME
OBVIOUS FACTS

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Men of genius, endowed with exceptional insight concerning some aspects of the reality which they are trying to explore, frequently develop equally striking blind spots concerning some other highly significant aspects of the very same reality. Freud was by no means free, as his admirers are inclined to believe, from this shortcoming, and indeed, many of the most perplexing defects and limitations of psychoanalysis are manifestations of such blind spots. It is the purpose of this paper to deal not with the positive contributions of Freud, his discoveries, but with that to which he was blinded. And we maintain that these facts which Freud did *not* see are as important for a realistic understanding of man and society as the facts to which he paid so much attention—possibly even more important.

The framework of all of Freud's theories is constituted by a basic misconception about the nature and function of consciousness. Identifying consciousness with a vague concept of perception, Freud was simply not aware of the nature nor of the immense variety of the contents, levels, dimensions, and modes of our immediate psychological experience. Thus he ignored the basic psychological facts on which an empirical psychology must be founded. As his conceptions about the nature of consciousness were confused and inadequate, so also were his conceptions about the nature of the unconscious and his all-important conceptions about the relation between the conscious and the unconscious.

It is noteworthy that almost at the same time as Freud undertook his psychoanalytical revolution in claiming that the psychological reality which dominates our whole mental life consists in processes which operate below the level of consciousness, the phenomenological revolution was developing in just the opposite direction. It insisted that the basic psychological reality consists in immediately experienced subjectivity, i.e., in consciousness, in a new and redefined meaning of the term. While Freud and his followers were pointing to the unawareness of our unconscious processes, the phenomenological approach held that we were not sufficiently aware of the world of our immediate psychological experience. This new phenomenological ap-

proach has influenced European psychology and social sciences more quietly, but at least as profoundly as the psychoanalytic revolution.

The following examples will illustrate that we can be conscious of something in one way and at the same time be not conscious of it in another way. They will clarify Freud's error in calling only certain modes of consciousness conscious and declaring other modes of consciousness unconscious.

1. There are many different *modes* in which we can be conscious of the same psychological content: we can experience it immediately, in which case there is no duality of an experiencing subject and an experienced object, although retrospectively we may still know that the experience was there; we can imagine it; we can remember it; we can perceive it; we can conceptually know about it; etc.

2. If we have certain feelings about certain things, then, of course, we are conscious of these feelings, although in a way which is very different from the way we are conscious of, let us say, the contents of our sensory perceptions; and since our feelings are often peculiarly vague and elusive, we may have considerable difficulty in describing them correctly, i.e., in knowing them.

3. We are, of course, conscious of the innumerable symbolical meanings which permeate our perceptual experience of the external world, and we react to them. But we are mostly conscious of them in a peculiarly implicit way; we do not explicitly know what they actually are. What we call insight consists considerably in the ability to make these implicit meanings explicit. Similarly, we often understand the meaning of someone's ironical remarks and fully enjoy it, without being able to explain this meaning or why we enjoy it.

Had Freud not failed to take adequate cognizance of the variety and richness of consciousness, he might have explained much that he wanted to explore, without inventing unconscious processes. Freud's mythology of the unconscious is largely the result of his confusion and misconception regarding the nature of consciousness.

From this confusion follows also a contradiction in Freud's conception of the relationship between the unconscious and the conscious. On the one hand, his unconscious appears as all-powerful, dominating the whole mental life; on the other hand, he assumes that making the unconscious conscious has a basic psychotherapeutic effect. Thus the powerless consciousness acquires the power of controlling the all-

powerful unconscious. One might ask, in which of the various modes of consciousness is the (repressed) unconscious to be made conscious in order to achieve the psychotherapeutic effect? Do we have to remember it (as a childhood experience)? Or do we have to re-experience it directly? Or do we have to obtain a rational knowledge about its existence in order to be able to control it? Or, perhaps, do we have to express it to others, thus overcoming our isolation? The answers to these questions would be of great importance, but we cannot find them in Freud's writings because of the inadequacy of his understanding of consciousness.

Freud's basic misconception regarding consciousness was the background for various specific blind spots of his which will be presented herewith.

THE RELATION BETWEEN COGNITION AND EMOTION

Freud was blind to the interaction of cognition and emotion. As Marx over-reacted against the idealistic bias of Hegelian philosophy of history with his equally one-sided materialistic theory of society, so Freud over-reacted against the dominant rationalism of the sensationism, associationism, and intellectualism of the psychology of the preceding era, with his emphasis on the irrational, emotional, instinctual, and unconscious components of mental life and overt behavior. The positive contribution of Freud in this field is so great that it can hardly be overestimated. However, he blinded himself to an equally fundamental and in a way obvious state of affairs, namely, the all-pervading *interdependence* between the irrational-emotional processes and the rational-purposive cognitive processes.

While the cognitive processes (in the broadest meaning of the term, including perceiving, remembering, thinking, etc.) are often permeated, influenced, distorted, or even dominated by emotional factors (again broadly defined to include impulses, instincts, feelings, the unconscious, the id, the libido, etc.), it is equally true that often, on the contrary, the emotional factors are influenced or even dominated by cognitive processes or contents, whether these be objectively true, illusory, or false. To put it another way: It is true that we often form allegedly rational purposes, and act accordingly, without being aware that we are actually being directed and controlled by irrational, instinctive, emotional, unconscious, or impulsive forces. But it is equally true and important that often both our inner and external behavior is an emotional reaction to the contents (images) presented to us by our

cognitive functions. Let us remember that the most effective propaganda controls our behavior indirectly, by manipulating our cognitive images, to which we then react emotionally. By the unconscious, Freud often seems to have simply meant the emotional when we lack awareness of its actual operation. Closely related is the exaggerated role attributed by psychoanalysts to rationalizations, implying that the emotional-unconscious is always the actually motivating reality and that the cognitive-interpretative elements are only superficial and ineffective epiphenomena. The fact, however, seems to be that we sometimes see a thing as we feel about it, and sometimes feel about a thing as we see it.

THE PSYCHOLOGICAL PROBLEM OF REALITY

An obvious fact, the importance of which can hardly be overestimated, is that we act within the framework of what, in the given context, we *consider* to be the relevant reality. We have chosen deliberately the neutral term, *consider*, because considering can materialize in different modes of consciousness, such as assuming, believing, perceiving, thinking, etc. It is important in *which* mode of consciousness we consider something to be real. Thus, assuming something to be real has a different psychodynamic significance from perceiving it to be so. Sometimes we assume something to be reality, but act in accordance with our perceived reality, even though the latter may be in contradiction with the simultaneously persisting assuming.

But whatever the specific concept of reality, there can be no doubt that it is psychologically of paramount importance, and that it is not an unconscious but a conscious process. Freud's reality principle (4) which, by the way, he introduced only after his basic conceptions were developed, does not deal adequately with this central psychological problem. It cannot do so precisely because of his basically false assumption that the unconscious, and not the conscious, constitutes the fundamental, all-important psychological factor in which he was almost exclusively interested.

This particular blind spot did not affect, at least in principle, Freud's approach to self-perception with which, as a matter of fact, he was mainly concerned, but it did affect his approach to the perception of external reality, mainly social perception. It is this field which we shall now discuss.

The unconscious, in the Freudian meaning, is at best only one among a number of factors which influence what we consider to be

reality, and which are responsible for the peculiar illusions and misinterpretations in social perception. We shall note four other factors which shape and distort important aspects of what we consider to be social reality.

First, there is the bio-psychological organization of our *sensorium* which accounts for certain highly important illusions of social perception—and indirectly of self-perception also. The fact, for instance, that the eyes are the dominant sense organs of reality is of tremendous importance in defining what we consider to be the relevant reality: We often “believe” what we “see,” and act accordingly, even though we may know that it is not true. The psychology of politics, of ideology, of race relations, and illusions of moral judgment (for instance, condemning the use of physical force more than other forms of social coercion) are incomprehensible without taking into account the role of visibility in social perception. Again, visibility is a fact on the conscious level, not the unconscious (7; 8, pp. 16-17).

Second, another highly important factor in what we consider to be the relevant reality, is the level and the type of our *intelligence*. Whether, for instance, we accept what we are told, or believe what we see, or prefer to trust our own critical judgment, depends largely not on unconscious mechanisms, but on our intelligence. Cleverness or stupidity are important aspects of psychology and psychopathology of everyday life, as important and interesting as the mechanisms of projection, displacement, or fixation of libido.

Third, there are specifically *cultural* factors, in the form of the cultural definition of reality (*Kulturbrille*), or in the form of what is conveyed by education, propaganda, gossip, rumor, or other ways. Again, these social factors obviously operate within our consciousness.

Fourth, there is the *social situation* in which we are placed. It defines (to use the language of sociology of knowledge) the perspective in which we perceive the social reality. The errors originating in this social perspective seem far more important for understanding behavior than all the psychoanalytic mechanisms (8, pp. 46-51).

But we act and react not only in the context of our *subjective* reality, but also, whether we are aware of this or not, in the context of *objective* reality. What we consider reality is almost always a combination of correct cognition, distortion, and outright illusion. But the *consequences* of our actions depend on the nature of the *objective* situation in which these take place. The same behavior or intent leads to different consequences in different situations. A great part of the per-

plexing drama of life is the result of the various unanticipated consequences of our actions, some of which affect us and others so directly that they must be considered a part of the psychological problem of reality.

An important point in this connection is that, more often than not, we are simply unable to test what in the given context is the objective reality. Only with reference to a limited circle of facts do we possess first-hand experience, or can we experiment in order to check our data. In most cases we must rely on second-hand information, or take what is given for granted. This certainly introduces an element of irrationality in broad areas of human endeavors and actions. Again, this is not the kind of irrationality which Freud had in mind. Freud always assumed that human irrationality has its roots mainly in the area of the unconscious, and that the many irrationalities on the conscious level are only manifestations of the underlying unconscious mechanisms. Actually, there are plenty of irrationalities in our perceptions and judgments which have little, if anything, to do with the unconscious as conceived by Freud, but are the result of certain peculiarities and defects of our intellectual operations and of quite specific social influences.

To summarize, Freud did not appreciate that subjective reality may be considered in different modes of consciousness; that it is influenced by sense data, the level and type of intelligence, cultural mediation, the perspectives of social situations, as well as the objective reality. To ignore these factors in defining reality is to create serious lacunae in an understanding of the psychodynamics of personality. To assume that all distortions of social perception are due to the operation of unconscious mechanisms, or to interpret all illusions concerning motivation as rationalizations, means to misunderstand the role of genuine false perception and genuine error of judgment in human affairs.

SELF-DECEPTION AND SELF-MISUNDERSTANDING VERSUS DECEPTION AND MISUNDERSTANDING OF OTHERS

Fascinated as Freud was with the mysterious facts of misunderstanding and deceiving ourselves and of concealing from ourselves the nature of our own motives, desires, and sentiments, he largely ignored the seemingly obvious facts of misunderstanding and deceiving others. That the latter are more obvious and less mysterious than the former, does not mean that psychologically and sociologically they are less important. Actually they affect human affairs more profoundly.

Furthermore, we maintain that it is not true that we misunderstand and deceive ourselves more radically than we do others. The former process, indeed, seems quite trifling when compared to the latter.¹ Neither can we agree with the probable insistence of many psychoanalysts that we misunderstand others only because we misunderstand ourselves; for equally often the reverse is true.

Which aspects of personality we perceive more correctly in ourselves, and which, in others, is certainly an extremely interesting problem, but, if we are not mistaken, one largely unexplored (8, pp. 51-53).

Freud's concentration upon self-misunderstanding, self-deception, and self-concealment, blinded him to the more important facts of our misunderstanding and deceiving others, and of being in turn misunderstood and deceived by them. This is one of several reasons why Freud failed to grasp realistically the nature and problems of human relations, of which what we call personality is but one aspect. We can actually understand the psychology and psychopathology of personality only in the framework of a realistic psychology of human relations.

It is interesting to mention in this connection that, according to Jones (10, II, p. 412), Freud was in fact a poor judge of people (*Menschenkenner*). Paradoxical as this sounds about one who is admired as one of the greatest psychologists of all time, from our point of view it is quite understandable. For, to be a good judge of people presupposes more than anything else to know and to understand what is going on in the *consciousness* of others; what they consider to be reality; what they conceal from us; how they see the world and how they feel about it; how their seeing and feeling influence each other; how the situation in which they are placed affects their behavior; and how our own assumptions, preconceptions and sentiments distort our judgment about them.

THE NATURE OF AGGRESSION

Many actions which we regard in other people as aggressive are from their point of view and in terms of their motivations, not aggressive, but defensive. Often, although by no means always, it is we

¹Somerset Maugham has penetratingly observed in his autobiography, one of the reasons why we are more tolerant of ourselves than of others is simply that we know better all inner and external circumstances which impelled us to behave as we did in a given situation (12, p. 52).

who are trying self-righteously to justify our own relative point of view by insisting that "they" are the aggressors. This is particularly so when we are interested in maintaining the status quo, and therefore denounce anyone who revolts against it as an outlaw and aggressor (9).

It is pertinent and illuminating to ask: When an individual destroys what he considers to be an evil, is he motivated by destructive or by constructive tendencies? For instance, is a wartime leader who is doing everything in his power to destroy our enemies constructive, while our enemies, in trying to destroy us, are destructive? The problem is much too complicated and permeated by ideological and similar presuppositions to be approached with such naive oversimplifications as those underlying the dichotomy of love and hate, of constructive-creative and destructive-aggressive instincts. It would seem that people usually fight not because they are inherently pugnacious or sadistic but because they feel that they can attain certain objectives only by fighting. Recently Scott (13) has shown this to be true for animals as well.

The point we wish to emphasize is that whereas Freud exaggerated the role and importance of aggressive and similar tendencies as disturbing factors in human affairs, he had a blind spot for the disturbing role and importance of the obvious fact that individuals are to a large extent *indifferent* to one another. How many people actually care much about the predicament of others, even of those close to them, be this indifference due to lack of imagination and comprehension, or to callousness? To be overconcerned about aggressiveness, destructiveness, and the alleged death instinct of man, while ignoring the role of indifference and its devastating social as well as psychological consequences, is still another example of our thesis that lack of psychological understanding does not come so much from unawareness of the unconscious, as from unawareness of the obvious.

THE EFFORT AFTER MEANING

Having discovered that many psychological phenomena and processes which appear to be devoid of any expressive-symptomatic meaning reveal a hidden meaning, i.e., turn out to be an expression, symbol, or symptom of some underlying unconscious need, drive, or sentiment, Freud transformed this partial truth into the general dogma that all seemingly meaningless forms of mental life are actually meaningful, that this meaning is always expressive-symptomatic, and that the scientific principle of determinism requires this to be so (10, I, p. 366).

Now we should point out that the principle of determinism, even if we accept its general validity, postulates only that all mental processes are *somehow* determined; it does not postulate that they are always determined in a meaningful way. In addition, expressive-symptomatic meanings are only one of several categories of meanings which permeate our mental life; there are also purposive meanings and designative meanings, for example. Freud was not aware that he himself was the victim of what might be termed a complex of meaningfulness, Bartlett's "effort after meaning" (2), an effort rooted in the need to feel at home in our confused and confusing world. Freud argued that being without meaning is a sham, and having meaning is actually the deep reality. If a dream appears to be meaningless, and by re-interpreting its manifest content we discover an expressive-symptomatic meaning in it, this "proves" that our re-interpretation was correct. A considerable part of Freud's popular appeal is due to the fact that his theories and interpretations do satisfy this deep-rooted desire for meaning. Yet Freud was, of course, not aware of the distorting effect of this general tendency which may often have led him to "find" something which actually was not there.

In opposition to the Freudian assumption, it seems to be fairly plausible that psychological phenomena are *sometimes* meaningful, in the terms of depth psychology, and sometimes actually devoid of any deeper expressive-symptomatic meaning. Associations of ideas, for instance, are sometimes actually permeated and steered by hidden expressive tendencies, but sometimes they are nothing but mechanical associations, as assumed by the older psychology.

THE ROLE OF ENABLING CONDITIONS

There is, in the opinion of the writer, a distinct psychological dimension of great importance for a realistic psychology and psychopathology of personality. This is constituted by the whole complex, interconnected field of factors determining what the individual is *able* to do. These are practically ignored by Freudian psychoanalysis, although Adler did take them into account (1), and they play an important role in Lewin's topological psychology (11). The writer has presented elsewhere a thorough analysis and theory of being-able and not-being-able (5, 6), of which the following is a brief summary.

Let us take the simple example of a man in Chicago telephoning a man in New York. He must be *physically* able to get to the telephone. He must also be *mentally* capable of speaking the other man's lan-

guage—which might be French, for instance. He must also have money to put through his call, which represents the *social* aspects of being able. A fourth condition, of course, is the existence of the *technological* arrangements of the telephone connection itself. The final factor in the performance comprises the individual's *conceptions* regarding the intended action: The man in our case may imagine that he is too sick to get to the telephone, or he may mistakenly assume to have forgotten his money, or he may underestimate his ability to speak French, or have misinterpreted a newscast about telephone line disruptions.

Obvious as these factors may be, they are very difficult to analyze and disentangle in their intricate interdependence. But there is no doubt that many forms of individual as well as collective psychopathology have their roots in disturbances of these conditions of being-able. In overlooking this relationship, Freud failed to understand an important aspect of our age, namely, the helplessness of the individual in our complex society in which the interconnections between physical, mental, social, and technological conditions of being-able to do what is necessary often obstruct the possibilities and disturb the consequences of our actions.

SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY OF PERSONALITY VERSUS PSYCHOLOGY OF “DEPTH”

In conclusion we should suggest replacing Freud's intrapsychic personality model of the id, the ego, and the superego with a more sociopsychological model. Freud's model is a combination of overlooking the social aspects of personality, mentioned above, and failing to realize that *what seems to be* often constitutes a more solid psychological reality than *what actually is*. The sociopsychological model would include what we actually are, what we think we are, what other people think we are, and what we assume other people think we are, together with the dynamic interrelation among these four aspects. This model is closely related to the distinction between the real, the pseudo, and the sham characteristics of personality (8, pp. 53-56).

We should like to suggest the following test comparing this sociopsychological model with Freud's intrapsychic model. Let two psychologists or psychiatrists write life histories of the same individual. Let one of them use the approach of the psychology of “depth” with its main emphasis on the unconscious, the libido and its fixations, the Oedipus complex, the mechanisms of displacement, projection, con-

denation, and the like. Anna Freud (3) corroborates that traditional psychoanalysis deals almost exclusively with this kind of material. Let the other life history be written with emphasis on such "superficial" facts as what other people think of the individual, what he assumes other people think of him, the dynamic impact of these opinions upon the way in which the individual is impelled to think and feel about himself, and the way in which this in turn influences his becoming what he actually is. Then submit these two life histories of the given individual to a group of psychiatrists of all theoretical positions, psychologists, sociologists, anthropologists, social workers, and perhaps even some insightful novelists for comparison as to degree of understanding of the individual personality they convey. Might this not lead to the paradoxical result that the "depth" approach was in many, if not in all respects actually naive and unrealistic, whereas the "superficial" approach, proceeding along the lines of the fourfold sociopsychological model suggested above, was realistic and actually more profound? If so, and even if only partly so, the much-celebrated Freudian psychology of depth, its great scientific influence and its enormous popular appeal, would have to be considered as one of the important causes as well as one of the important symptoms of the characteristic psychological blindness and moral confusion of our age.

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