



Basic Concepts of Psychoanalysis

The term "psychoanalysis" is often used broadly to refer to schools of thought which are based upon Freudian ideas, though the term can be used more strictly to refer only to the theories of Freud himself. Here we will look at some of the basic concepts in the work of Freud himself. Freud worked mainly with people who had unusual mental lives but his aim was to produce a general account of the human mind. One of his central concerns then was with what influences the development of the personality.

The Instincts

One of the major influences is the urges we are born with, our instincts which are mainly sexual or aggressive in nature. For Freud, the body has energies or drives which make demands on the mind and these demands can be grouped into two basic instincts, a life instinct or **Eros** and a destructive instinct, later called **Thanatos** (= "death"). Eros includes the drives for self-preservation and the drive towards procreation (i.e. the preservation of the species). This latter Freud called **libido**. The Death instinct is a force aimed at destruction, ultimately towards the end of all striving. Throughout life the basic instincts may work together or in opposition, but in the end Death wins out.

Freud saw that a biological instinct can create a need and that this need can vary through experience. He challenged the Darwinian concept of instincts as automatic and unlearned responses into the concept of a drive which interacts with the individual's environment and personal history. Consequently, part of Freud's concern was to examine how present needs relate to our personal past.

Consciousness and the Unconscious

Freud made a distinction between three levels of awareness, **conscious**, **pre-conscious**, and **unconscious**.

Conscious awareness contains all that we are aware of at any one time. This may come from one of two sources; from the external world, we may be aware of colours, noises, smells etc., and from the 'internal' world we may be aware of particular thoughts or ideas.

Conscious awareness is only a fraction of our mental activity, the tip of an iceberg. Way below the surface in the unconscious is material which may never get to the surface directly but which may influence our lives through our behaviour or indirectly in some changed form. The unconscious contains all sorts of significant and disturbing material which we need to keep out of awareness because they are too threatening to acknowledge fully. So, the unconscious is not like a dustbin containing unimportant or irrelevant thoughts. Rather, it is precisely because they are so powerful that they are kept buried. Nevertheless, they exert a significant influence.

Between the two, just out of conscious awareness but not deeply hidden in the unconscious are lots of things in the pre-conscious. These ideas, feelings, beliefs etc., can easily come into consciousness and they present little or no challenge to the conscious part of the mind. The preconscious might be seen as a screen between conscious and unconscious which, as with dreams, modifies the contents of the unconscious to make it more accessible and acceptable to consciousness.

The Structure of the Personality

Freud saw the adult personality structured into three parts, the **id**, the **ego** and the **super-ego** all developing at different stages in our lives. (See handout on Psychosexual Development). These are systems, not parts of the brain nor in any way physical. The id and super-ego are unconscious and it is only the ego which has a direct contact with conscious reality.

The Id

The id is the impulsive part of our personality which responds directly and immediately to the instincts. The personality of the newborn child is all id and only later does it develop ego and super-ego. According to Freud, our basic bodily instincts are transformed into psychological or psychical energy and it is this energy which powers our mental activities allowing us to perform psychological work. The id, filled with psychical energy, strives to satisfy our needs which are causing a build-up of tension called 'excitation'. The id demands immediate satisfaction and when this happens we experience pleasure, when it is denied we experience 'unpleasure' or

pain. The id is not affected by reality, logic or the everyday world. On the contrary, it operates on the **Pleasure Principle** which is the idea that every wishful impulse should be satisfied immediately, regardless of the consequences. Obviously, not all tension can be resolved by an unlearned response such as blinking. For example, an immediate response to hunger might be to cry out but crying won't satisfy the need. The child needs to develop further psychological apparatus in order to satisfy its needs. **Primary processes** may help the child to devise an image of an object that would satisfy its needs, such as food, but the image is not as satisfying as real food. The child starts to realise that it must act in order to gain satisfaction, a realisation prompted by the development of the ego.

The Ego

Initially the ego is "that part of the id which has been modified by the direct influence of the external world" (Freud 1923). The ego develops in order to mediate between the unrealistic id and the external real world. Ideally the ego works by reason whereas the id is chaotic and totally unreasonable. The ego operates according to the **Reality Principle**, working out realistic ways of satisfying the id's demands, often compromising or postponing satisfaction.

Secondary processes such as planning, problem-solving, attention, remembering and forgetting are tools developed in order to live up to the Reality Principle. Like the id, the ego seeks pleasure and avoids unpleasure but unlike the id the ego is concerned with devising a realistic strategy to obtain pleasure. Freud made the analogy of the id being the horse while the ego is the rider. Often the ego is weak relative to the head-strong id and the best the ego can do is stay on, pointing the id in the right direction and claiming some credit at the end as if the action were its own. The ego has no concept of right or wrong; something is good simply if it achieves its end of satisfying without causing harm to itself or to the id. Together they are not immoral but **amoral**.

The Super-Ego

Part of the child's widening reality is the attitude of other people towards the child. Gradually the child is able to anticipate the attitudes of others and internalises a set of moral values. Rather than obeying an external authority on right and wrong, the child's super-ego develops as an internal, self-observing judge. The super-ego is like an internalised parental influence which restrains the demands of the id through a moral pressure on the ego. It is the super-ego which gives us a **conscience**, making us feel

guilty even if there is no-one else to witness. It is based on the admiration the young child felt for the perfection it saw in its parents and which it tries to copy. In a different way to the id, the super-ego is just as unrealistic, putting impossibly strict restrictions on us.

In addition to punishing us through a conscience, the super-ego can reward us through the **ego-ideal** when we behave 'properly' by making us feel proud. The super-ego develops as we resolve the **Oedipus complex** and an unsatisfactory resolution to this complex will result in either an excessively strict or excessively lax super-ego. It follows that some people have a crushing sense of guilt at minor indiscretions whilst others have little sense of right or wrong and consequently little regard for others.

Conflict, Anxiety and Defence Mechanisms

We have seen that the unconscious parts of the mind (id and super-ego) are in conflict with the conscious part of the mind (ego) and are constantly taking up energy trying to dominate the personality, posing considerable threat to the person. Whenever a person feels in danger, they experience **anxiety**. Anxiety is only ever felt in the ego, in consciousness. It is easy to see that as there are three sources of threat to the ego, there are three kinds of anxiety.

- I) *realistic anxiety*, when the external world is threatening
- II) *moral anxiety*, when the ego feels punished or embarrassed by the super-ego
- III) *neurotic anxiety* or neurosis, when the strength of the id's urges threatens to be overwhelming.

Anxiety is a natural, inevitable response to either real or perceived danger. In order to deal with these threats, the ego develops **defence mechanisms** which help by forming an unconscious compromise. They involve self-deception to some extent and a distortion of reality. Examples include denial, repression, projection and displacement. Defence mechanisms are essential in allowing the ego to continue functioning but, as they take energy, the more we are defensive, the weaker the ego is going to be. This results in the **neurotic paradox** which is where a weak ego feels a threat more intensely and so has to put more energy into defence mechanisms. This in turn further weakens the ego which then feels the threat even more and, paradoxically, needs to spend even more energy on defence, and so on. Defence mechanisms may be essential and useful in the short term, but as they distort reality rather than change it their excessive use can be disabling and unhealthy in the longer term.

Psychological Determinism

Freud suggested that there appears to be a continuity in a person's psychological life and that, whilst much behaviour is determined by external factors or rational thought, nevertheless much that we do and think is caused by previous experience which is now alive and thriving in the unconscious, operating with its own logic of which we are unaware. Many seemingly irrational or haphazard events are to be explained due to the operation of unconscious will, events such as slips of the tongue, mistakes in everyday life, omissions, dreams or apparent coincidences. Known as **parapraxes**, these behaviours are seen as motivated by unconscious desires and so the analysis of them can be a way of understanding the unconscious. Indeed, Freud saw dream analysis as the 'royal road to the unconscious'. Whilst the occurrence of the parapraxes may be in part prompted by external factors (such as a heavy meal causing dreaming), the actual content of the parapraxis is determined entirely by issues in the person's emotional life which they may be unwilling or unable to accept consciously. This means that a single event may have many causes and is said to be **overdetermined**.

KEY WORDS

psychoanalysis

Eros

Thanatos

conscious

preconscious

unconscious

Pleasure Principle

neurosis

defence mechanism

neurotic paradox

parapraxis

overdetermination

internalisation

conscience

ego-ideal

Oedipus complex

dynamic

id

primary processes

ego super-ego

Reality Principle

secondary processes

amoral