A Fresh Look at Freud

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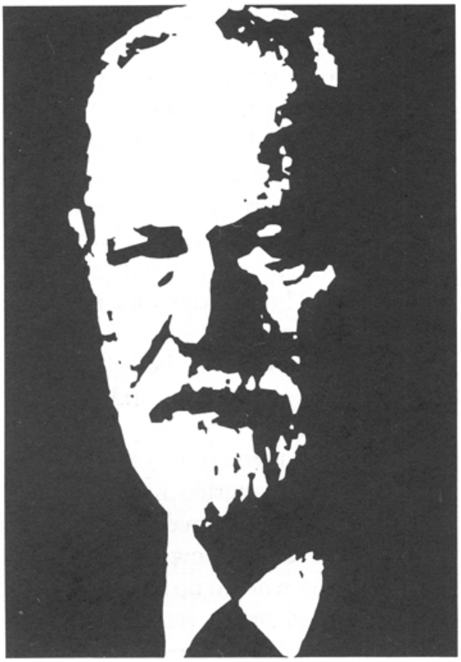

Nearly all psychotherapies — even those that rebelled against it — have their roots in psychoanalysis. The creation of the therapeutic space, in which therapist and client jointly examine the relationship going on between them, and the distortions that affect it, goes back to Freud's invention of analysis. Humanistic psychology was in some ways a rebellion against the perceived aridity, intellectuality and impersonality of analysis, but in recent years we have seen humanistic therapy turn back to many important analytical themes, such as transference, object relations and infantile conflicts.

But how did psychoanalysis begin? With Freud! It is necessary to go back to the 1890s to see the first formulations of many of the themes that have dominated twentieth century psychoanalysis and psychotherapy. At that time we see Freud experimenting with aspects of nineteenth century biology, neurology, and certain pre-Freudian theories of the unconscious and infantile sexuality.

But the core of psychoanalysis wasn't arrived at hypothetically by Freud. He was continually observing his own patients, trying out different ways of working with them. Analysis was also the result of a theorisation of a personal process, and that process involved his relationship with Wilhelm Fliess, with whom Freud had an intense and emotional relationship lasting over a decade.

Fliess was an ear, nose and throat doctor in Berlin, who in 1887 attended Freud's lectures in Vienna on neuro-

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pathology. When Fliess returned to Berlin, Freud wrote to him, and began a series of letters stretching for over a decade, that reveal to us the evolution of psychoanalysis. Freud and Fliess also had regular meetings, which Freud called 'congresses', where they would exchange ideas, and talk intensely about their shared desire to make major scientific discoveries. The relationship began to falter round about 1900 — perhaps significantly when *The Interpretation of Dreams* was published — and by 1904 was at an end.

Within and through this intense relationship, and alongside his work with patients, Freud discovered a whole number of elements in his own unconscious, which he then worked up into theoretical themes — repression, resistance, transference, incestuous desires, ambivalence, bisexuality, wish-fulfilment, idealisation. It has often been said that Freud extracted these ideas from his inner self, in his 'self-analysis' — but this is in fact a completely inadequate description of what happened.

Freud extracted them from his relationship with Fliess, and communicated them to Fliess. It was Fliess's presence that enabled Freud to recover such repressed themes — he recovered them from the relationship itself: 'Something from the deepest depths of my own neurosis set itself against any advance in the understanding of the neuroses, and you have somehow been involved in it.'[1] But Freud again and again overcame those blockages, began to understand his own neurosis, and the neuroses of his patients. But it was in the intense meeting with Fliess — the love/hate relationship — that this dialectic of stuckness and release (the creative struggle in fact) went on.

For example, it is now notorious how Freud idealised Fliess to an almost absurd degree, overlooking Fliess's bizarre ideas about the sexual significance of the nose, and his ideas about numerology. But that idealisation was crucial in Freud's development, since it allowed him to open up emotionally and intellectually to Fliess. It also liberated in Freud a repressed longing, a desire, that he could then recognise as a foundation stone of his own personality. And desire itself became a foundation stone of psychoanalysis: 'longing is the main character trait of hysteria.'[2] And of course idealisation itself came to be seen as a vital part of childhood and of analysis: 'One cannot become like one's parents unless one first experiences them (or aspects of them) as admirable, and additionally is able to have a sense of oneself as potentially like them.'[3]

We can say the same about the other themes that Freud articulated at that period. He perceived his own latent homosexual desire for Fliess (as a kind of father figure) and was able to theorise upon that, and derive a notion of the child's incestuous longing for the parent of the same sex: 'Since Fliess's case, with the overcoming of which you recently saw me occupied, the need has been extinguished. A part of homosexual cathexis has been withdrawn and made use of to enlarge my own ego.'[4]

The theme of ambivalence can be seen embryonically as Freud grapples with his love and hate for Fliess. In a fascinating letter of March 23 1900, we find Freud first describing his love and need for

Fliess: 'There has never been a six month period in which I so constantly and arly longed to be living in the same place with you,"[5] but then going on in very tortured prose to explain why he can't bear to meet him.

It has often been said that Freud's self-analysis was both remarkable and unique — unique because from then on, nearly everyone would be able to carry out an analysis with analyst. But in fact Freud's self-analysis took place in the relationship with Fliess. It was a proto-analysis with proto-analyst. It remains a remarkable achievement that Freud was able to use this difficult and painful relationship as a kind of laboratory, within which he could see various processes going on. And he also perceived the same processes going on his patients' relationship with him: 'I am beginning to understand that the apparent endlessness of the treatment is something that occurs regularly and is connected with the transference.'[6]

For humanistic psychology this beginning of psychoanalysis is of great importance. Freud's early formulations have sometimes been parodied as a kind of cerebral philosophising, detached, remote from human passions, whereas in fact, as we see, they were rooted in his own life, his own relationships, his own yearnings and inhibitions.

In another parody of Freud the biological side is often stressed — the man who constructed the model of drives, that arise in the body as blind instinctual forces demanding relief, but without connection with other people.

Undoubtedly there is a tension in Freud between the biological drive model and the model of human relationships. This tension has remained a vital one in psychoanalysis. British object relations theory could be said to represent the working out of the second theme, while in America drive theory has been preeminent: 'For the drive model analyst the patient comes into treatment with self-contained, encapsulated pathogenic conflicts . . . for the relational model analyst the psychoanalytic situation is inherently dyadic, events within the analysis are not understood as unfolding within the dynamic structures of the patient's neurosis. Rather, they are created in the interaction between patient and analyst.'[7]

The humanistic world has naturally been most interested in object relations, and it is surely important for humanistic psychology that psychoanalysis had its origins, not in abstract thought, not in mechanistic biological models — but in a living relationship between two people. In a sense the drive model can be seen as antithetical to object relations — but this in itself provides us with an illuminating insight into Freud's split view of himself partly as tormented by instinctual drives in a rather isolated disconnected way.

What of the seduction theory, now controversial since writers such as J.M. Masson and Alice Miller have criticised Freud for a failure of courage in denying that sexual abuse was a reality for his patients?[8]

If we relate this to Freud's relationship with Fliess, we can see that he perceived that his homosexual yearning for Fliess was a reflection — or refraction — of his yearning for his father. Did Freud's father seduce Freud? Freud decided not, and that his own yearning existed sui generis, and that his conflicts over homosexual desire must have other roots (for example, in his father's remoteness).

In some ways I find Masson and Miller's criticisms anachronistic. I don't see how a doctor living in bourgeois Vienna at that time could have exposed child sexual abuse; it's only recently that we have been able to — and still we see that the pressure to cover it up again is enormous.

Furthermore, Freud was not denying the existence of sexual abuse, but was making the important point that neurosis and psychosis are not automatically to be derived from it. Surely this is correct? There are many unhappy, conflict-torn, and mad people who were not seduced as children. To make a rather obvious point: there are so many people who had insufficient incestuous links with their parents. Andrew Samuels makes this comment about the father-daughter relationship: 'Numerous problems met with clinically stem from an insufficiency of kinship libido or incest fantasy, not an excess of it. The father who cannot attain an optimally erotic relation with his daughter is damaging her in a way which deserves therapeutic attention.'[9]

Unfortunately, as Alice Miller has pointed out, some analysts and therapists have denied the reality of child abuse, and have insisted on the primacy of infantile fantasy. This has probably been less common in Britain, where object relations has been the dominant paradigm.

Indeed in the last few decades the importance of childhood trauma has been brought back to the forefront of both psychoanalysis and psychotherapy, but such traumas are no longer conceived of as 'seductions' pure and simple. They are often far more complex and subtle than that. The rejection of the seduction theory crucially led to a psychological understanding of neurosis and psychosis, rather than an organic one.

Perhaps I am idealising Freud. But I get weary of the parodies of him, which represent demonisations — and with Masson this has now extended to therapy as a whole (in his book *Against Therapy*). If humanistic psychology and analytical therapy are to come together and form a marriage, then such shadow projections have to be withdrawn. The time for witch-hunts is over, isn't it? I am not saying that Freud is beyond criticism, but that if we don't recognise how his own theories grew out of his own life, out of his relations with others, maybe we are missing something important about psychotherapy and therapeutic models today. How do we train therapists? Crucially, by immersing them in an intense therapeutic relationship, which will bring to their attention the conscious and unconscious ways in which they relate to people (and don't relate to them).

But the insights that Freud arrived at through his friendship with Fliess go way beyond the development of psychoanalysis and psychotherapy. We see certain principles emerging that have dominated modern thought: that I cannot know myself in isolation; that it is only with another that I truly become myself. In technical language: 'In Freud's metapsychology, the human experience is essentially conditioned and determined by object-relationship.'[10]

Thus the development of Freudian thought was part of the massive rehabilitation of subjectivity that went on at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries. The worship of 'objectivity' began to be dethroned in many areas — quantum physics and relativity shattered the Newtonian mould; modern art pursued a fierce anti-naturalism, as did the novel, theatre and music; and psychology itself began to escape the clutches of biology and neurology.

A new *psychological* psychology was developed by Freud. Although he retained certain parts of nineteenth century physicalism, nonetheless his great discovery was that mental life has its own laws, and cannot be derived from anatomy or the structure of the cortex.

Freud perceived the importance of subjective experience, and discovered that it has its own highly complex structure — and he achieved this through the study of his own subjectivity in relation with others. This led to the creation of the analytic situation, which allows for the 're-creation [of] all the vital elements of the dreamer's situation.'[11] (Psychoanalysis is a wakeful dreaming.) But equally importantly, this therapeutic space requires the presence of another person: I dream in the company of someone else. Freud's 'self-analysis' had in fact demonstrated the impossibility of self-analysis.

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1. Letter to Fliess, July 7 1897, *The Complete Letters of Sigmund Freud to Wilhelm Fliess: 1887-1904*, ed. J. M. Masson, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1985, p.255

2. Letter to Fliess, October 27, 1897, *ibid.*, p.274

3. Jay R. Greenberg and Stephen A. Mitchell, *Object Relations in Psychoanalytic Theory*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1983, p.310

4. Letter to Ferenczi, October 6, 1910, Masson, *op. cit.*, p.3.

5. *ibid.*, p.405

6. Letter to Fliess, April 16, 1900, *ibid.*, p. 409

7. Greenberg and Mitchell, *op. cit.*, pp. 388-89

8. For example, J. M. Masson, *The Assault on Truth*, London, Fontana, 1992; Alice Miller, *Banished Knowledge*, London, Virago Press, 1990

9. Andrew Samuels, 'A Relation called Father. Part 2: The Father and his Children', *British Journal of Psychotherapy*, Vol 5, 1, 1988, p.69

10. Masud Khan, 'Montaigne, Rousseau and Freud', *The Privacy of the Self*, London, The Hogarth Press, 1974, p.109

11. Masud Khan, 'Dream Psychology and the Evolution of the Psychoanalytic Situation', *ibid.*, p.29