

A Brief Outline of Psycho-analytic Theory

Freudian, Lacanian and Object Relations Theory

Freudian Theory

Freud's psychoanalytic theory, coming as it did at the turn of the century, provided a radically new approach to the analysis and treatment of "abnormal" adult behavior. Earlier views tended to ignore behavior and look for a **physiological** explanation of "abnormality". The novelty of Freud's approach was in recognizing that neurotic behavior is not random or meaningless but **goal-directed**. Thus, by looking for the **purpose** behind so-called "abnormal" behavioral patterns, the analyst was given a method for understanding behavior as meaningful and informative, without denying its physiological aspects.

The Pre-Oedipal Stage

Freud claimed that all human beings are born with certain **instincts**, i.e. with a natural tendency to satisfy their biologically determined needs for food, shelter and warmth. The satisfaction of these needs is both practical and a source of pleasure which Freud refers to as "sexual". Thus, when the infant, sucking at its mother's breast discovers the pleasure inherent in this activity, the first glimmers of sexuality are awakened. The child discovers an **erotogenic zone** which may be reactivated later in life through thumbsucking or kissing. Through this intimate interaction with the mother, upon whom the child is dependent, a sexual **drive** emerges. As this drive is separated out from its original function as a purely biological instinct, it achieves a relative autonomy.

During the early stages of childhood development, other erotogenic zones emerge. The **oral stage**, associated with the drive to "incorporate" objects through the mouth, is followed by the **anal stage** during which the anus becomes an erotogenic zone as the child takes pleasure in defecation. This pleasure is characterized by Freud as "sadistic" because the child is understood to be taking delight in expulsion and destruction. The anal stage is also associated with the desire for retention and possessive control (as in "granting or withholding" the faeces).

The next stage the child enters is the **phallic stage** when the sexual drive is focused on the genitals. (Freud refers to this stage as "phallic" rather than "genital" because, he claims, only the *male* organ is recognized as significant.)

What is happening in this process -- though the stages overlap, and should not be seen as a strict sequence -- is a gradual organization of the libidinal drives, but one

still centred on the child's own body. The drives themselves are extremely flexible, in no sense fixed like biological instinct: their objects are contingent and replaceable, and one sexual drive can substitute for another. What we can imagine in the early years of the child's life, then, is not a unified subject confronting and desiring a stable object, but a complex, shifting field of force in which the subject (the child itself) is caught up and dispersed, in which it has as yet no centre of identity and in which the boundaries between itself and the external world are indeterminate. Within this field of libidinal force, objects and part-objects emerge and disappear again, shift places kaleidoscopically, and prominent among such objects is the child's body as the play of drives laps across it. One can speak of this as an 'auto eroticism', within which Freud sometimes includes the whole of infantile sexuality: the child takes erotic delight in its own body, but without as yet being able to view its body as a complete object. Auto-eroticism must thus be distinguished from what Freud will call 'narcissism', a state in which one's body or ego as a whole is 'cathected', or taken as an object of desire. [\[1\]](#)

The child in this state is described by Freud as "anarchic, sadistic, aggressive, self-involved and remorselessly pleasure-seeking" -- wholly within the grip of the **pleasure principle**. It is also **ungendered**. That is to say, even though it is riddled with sexual drives, it draws no distinction between the gender categories *masculine* and *feminine*.

The Oedipus Complex: Gendering the Subject

At the center of Freud's theory of childhood development is the **Oedipus Complex**. According to Freud, a boy's close relation to his mother, as the primary love-object, leads to a desire for complete union with her. A girl, on the other hand, who is similarly attached to the mother and thus caught up in a "homosexual" desire, directs her **libido** (love, sexual energy broadly construed) toward her father (for reasons which we'll consider shortly). This produces a triadic relationship regardless of one's sex, with the parent of the same sex cast in the role of a rival for the affections of the parent of the opposite sex.

The boy will eventually abandon his incestuous desire for his mother out of fear of being castrated by his father. (This fear arises when the boy comes to realize that females are "castrated" and imagines that this may be his fate if he does not subordinate his desire for the mother.) Thus, the boy **represses** his incestuous desire, adjusts to the **reality principle**, and waits for the day when he will be the patriarch. In this way the boy identifies with his father and the symbolic role of manhood.

The girl's route through the Oedipal stage is far more problematic in Freud's view. "Realizing" that she is castrated and thus inferior, the girl turns away from her similarly castrated mother and attempts to "seduce" her father. When this fails, she returns to the mother and identifies with her feminine role. However, she still envies the penis that she will never have; so she unconsciously substitutes a desire to have her father's baby. (How she goes about giving up this desire is not made clear. Since she is already "castrated", fear of castration will not do the job.)

Needless to say, Freud's theory shows little insight into femininity and the experience of women. His claim that female sexuality is a "dark continent" says as much.

The Unconscious

As we say, the unconscious is that part of the mind that lies outside the somewhat vague and porous boundaries of consciousness, and is constructed in part by the **repression** of that which is too painful to remain in consciousness. (Not *everything* in the unconscious is repressed. However, repression is the ego's primary defense against disruption.) Freud distinguishes repression from **sublimation** -- the rechanneling of drives that cannot be given an acceptable outlet. The unconscious also contains what Freud calls **laws of transformation**. These are the principles that govern the process of repression and sublimation. In general we can say that the unconscious serves the theoretical function of making the relation between childhood experience and adult behavior intelligible.

Ego, Id and Super-Ego

According to Freud, the **ego** is an aspect of the subject that emerges from the **id** -- the biological, inherited, unconscious source of sexual drives, instincts, and irrational impulses. The ego develops out of the id's interaction with the external world. It is produced from the non-biological (social and familial) forces brought to bear on one's biological development and functions as an intermediary between the demands of the id and the external world.

Thus, the ego can be thought of as a variable aspect of the subject constructed as a system of beliefs that organize one's dealings with the internal and external demands of life according to certain laws referred to by Freud as **secondary process**. It reconciles the biological, instinctual demands and **drives** (both unifying and destructive in nature) of the **id** (governed by **primary process**) with the socially determined constraints of the **super-ego** (internalized rules placing limits on the subject's satisfactions and pleasures) and the demands of **reality**.

The healthy, mature ego translates the demands of both the id and the super-ego into terms which allow admission of them without destruction. Thus, **constructive acceptance** and transformation of the demands made by both the id and the super-ego are techniques of the ego and essential elements of mental health.

Psychoanalytic therapy involves reliving repressed fantasies and fears both *in feeling and in thought*. This process involves a **transference**, i.e. a projection of the attitudes and emotions, originally directed towards the parents, onto the analyst. This is necessary for successful treatment. Access to these repressed fears is gained often through **dream interpretation**, where the **manifest content** in dreams is understood as a symbolic expression of the hidden or **latent content**. (Internal censorship demands that the wish be transformed, leading to a disguised or symbolic representation.) The sources of dream content results from

lost memories

- linguistic symbols
- repressed experiences
- "archaic" material inherited but not directly experienced.

Dreams are "guardians of sleep", i.e. wish fulfillments that arise in response to inner conflicts and tensions whose function is to allow the subject to continue sleeping.

Dream-Work is the production of dreams during sleep -- the translation of demands arising from the unconscious into symbolic objects of the preconscious and eventually the conscious mind of the subject. **Dream Interpretation** is the decoding of the symbols (manifest content) and the recovery of their latent content, i.e. the unconscious and, hence, hidden tensions and conflicts that give rise to the dreams in the first place.

Problems

Some of the problems typically raised in response to Freudian theory are:

1. Freud's hypotheses are neither verifiable nor falsifiable. It is not clear what would count as evidence sufficient to confirm or refute theoretical claims.
2. The theory is based on an inadequate conceptualization of the experience of women.
3. The theory overemphasizes the role of sexuality in human psychological development and experience.

Lacanian Theory

The Imaginary

French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan has reinterpreted Freud in structuralist terms, bringing the theory into the second half of the Twentieth Century. Like Freud, Lacan discusses the importance of the pre-Oedipal stage in the child's life when it makes no clear distinction between itself and the external world; when it harbors no definite sense of self and lives symbiotically with the mother's body. Lacan refers to this stage as the **Imaginary**.

The Mirror Stage

Lacan characterizes the period when the child begins to draw rudimentary distinctions between self and other as the **mirror stage**. This is the period when the

child's sense of self and the first steps in the acquisition of language emerge. The "I" (which is constituted as the still physically uncoordinated child in the "imaginary" state of being) finds an image of itself reflected in a "mirror" (i.e. other people or objects). The "mirror" is at once self and not-self. The child typically takes pleasure in this process.

The image which the small child sees in the mirror is...an alienated one: the child 'misrecognizes' itself in it, finds in the image a pleasing unity which it does not actually experience in its own body. The imaginary for Lacan is precisely this realm of *images* in which we make identifications, but in the very act of doing so are led to misperceive and misrecognize ourselves. As the child grows up, it will continue to make such imaginary identifications with objects, and this is how its ego will be built up. For Lacan, the ego is just this narcissistic process whereby we bolster up a fictive sense of unitary selfhood by finding something in the world with which we can identify. [\[2\]](#)

The Phallus: Entry Into the Symbolic Order

Prior to the entry of the father, the infant's life can be characterized as unified and "full". The appearance of the father in the Oedipal stage opens the child up to sexual difference (denoted by the phallus) and initiates the construction of the unconscious, i.e. the repression of incestuous desire. This Oedipal stage is reinterpreted by Lacan in linguistic terms. (Here is where the influence of structuralism becomes more apparent.) Thus the child can be thought of as a **signifier**; and the image it sees in the mirror is the **signified**, i.e. the meaning that the child gives to itself.

The symbols referred to here are not icons, stylized figurations, but signifiers, in the sense developed by Saussure and Jakobson extended into a generalized definition: differential elements, in themselves without meaning, which acquire value only in their mutual relations, and forming a closed order -- the question is whether this order is or is not complete. Henceforth, it is the symbolic, not the imaginary, that is seen to be the determining order of the subject, and its effects are radical: the subject, in Lacan's sense, is himself an effect of the symbolic....According to Lacan, a distinction must be drawn between what belongs in experience to the order of the symbolic and what belongs to the imaginary. In particular, the relation between the subject, on the one hand, and the signifiers, speech, language, on the other, is frequently contrasted with the imaginary relation, that between the ego and its images. [\[3\]](#)

Thus, as a result of the transition from the imaginary to the **symbolic order** -- to the construction of the self-image and the acquisition of language -- the child is socialized into the family through acknowledgment and acceptance of **difference** (in gender) and **absence** (of the mother's body).

The Imaginary, the Symbolic and the Real

It is the repression of desire and, hence, the unconscious, that determines human

behavior. The relation between language and desire is described in *Ecrits* in the following way:

The human individual sets out with a particular organism, with certain biological needs, which are satisfied by certain objects. What effect does the acquisition of language have on these needs? All speech is demand; it presupposes the Other to whom it is addressed, whose very signifiers it takes over in its formulation. By the same token, that which comes from the Other is treated not so much as a particular satisfaction of a need, but rather as a response to an appeal, a gift, a token of love. There is no adequation between the need and the demand that conveys it; indeed, it is the gap between them that constitutes desire, at once particular like the first and absolute like the second. Desire (fundamentally in the singular) is a perpetual effect of symbolic articulation. It is not an appetite; it is essentially excentric [sic] and insatiable. That is why Lacan coordinates it not with the object that would seem to satisfy it, but with the object that causes it... [4]

Thus, to acquire language is to subject oneself to the inevitability of desire. As language articulates the "fullness" of the imaginary and cuts it up into parts, it also cuts one off from the **Real** -- that which is *beyond* the symbolic order.

The 'real' emerges as a third term, linked to the symbolic and the imaginary: it stands for what is neither symbolic nor imaginary, and remains foreclosed from the analytic experience, which is an experience of speech. What is prior to the assumption of the symbolic, the real in its 'raw' state (in the case of the subject, for instance, the organism and its biological needs), may only be supposed, it is an algebraic x . This Lacanian concept of the 'real' is not to be confused with reality, which is perfectly knowable... [5]

Object Relations Theory

Symbiosis and Separation/Individuation

Another adaptation of psychoanalytic theory known as "object relations theory" starts from the assumption that the psychological life of the human being is created in and through relations with other human beings. Thus, the object relations theorist distinguishes between the *physical* and the *psychological* birth of the individual. While the physical birth is a process that occurs over a specific and easily observable period of time, the psychological birth is typically extended over the first three years of life and can occur only in and through social relations. During this time, certain "innate potentials and character traits" (the ability to walk and talk) are allowed to develop in the presence of "good object relations". The quality of these relations affects the quality of one's linguistic and motor skills.

The first three years of life are characterized by (a) the establishment of a close

(symbiotic) relationship to the primary caretaker (which is generally the mother), and (b) the subsequent dissolution of that relationship through **separation** (differentiating oneself from the caretaker) and **individuation** (establishing one's own skills and personality traits). A central element in this emerging "core identity" is one's gender, which tends to be determined within the first one and a half to two years. Unlike Freudian and Lacanian theories, in object relations theory this gendering of the subject has little to do with the child's own awareness of sexuality and reproduction. It does, however, involve the internalization of any inequities in the value assigned to one's gender, as well as the associated imbalance in power.

This psychological development of the child is part of a reciprocal process of adjustment between child and caretaker -- both must learn to be responsive to the needs and interests of the other. During the symbiotic stage (one to six or seven months) the infant, as we saw in Lacan's "imaginary", has little if any sense of distinction between self and other, and is extremely sensitive to the moods and feelings of the caretaker.

In order for this phase to be adequate [i.e. "good enough"], the mother must be emotionally available to the child in a consistent, reasonably conflict-free way. She should be able to enjoy the sensual and emotional closeness of the relationship without losing her own sense of separateness. She should be concerned for the child's well being without developing a narcissistic overinvestment in the child as a mere extension of her own self. Her infantile wishes for a symbiotic relationship should have been adequately gratified in childhood. If this was not the case, resentment and hostility may be aroused in her by the infant's needs. The mother requires adequate support, both emotional and material, during this period from adults who are able both to nurture her and reinforce her own sense of autonomy. [\[6\]](#)

The process of separation begins at around the sixth month and continues through the second year. During this time, the child experiences both pleasure and frustration as motor skills develop along with the corresponding awareness of one's limitations.

The child explores and continually develops its separateness, then returns to the mother for 'emotional refueling'. The potential presence of the relationship between child and mother allows the child to leave it. Gradually the relationship is internalized and becomes part of the child's internal psychic reality. Both members of the dyad must learn to let go of the early bond without rejecting the other. The ambivalence present throughout this process gradually intensifies. The child both wants to return to the symbiotic state and fears being engulfed by it. In 'good enough' social relations a resolution is achieved in which both members of the dyad come to accept their bond (mutuality) and their separateness. This is the basis of a truly reciprocal relationship with others. [\[7\]](#)

Self Identity and Gender Identity

The process of becoming a "gendered subject" adds further complications to the

child's development during this period. Since its initial identity is fused with that of the primary caretaker, and since that role is generally filled by the mother, it follows that initially the child's *gender* is the same as the mother's. Thus, boys and girls are originally "feminine". To become "masculine", the boy must repress much of his early, symbiotic experience. (Girls are less likely to repress infantile experience.) By the age of five, the boy will have repressed most of the feminine components of his nature along with his earliest memories. He will deal with the ambivalence of the separation/individuation period by means of **denial** of having been identified with the mother, by **projection** of blame onto women as the source of the problem, and by **domination**.

These defences become part of ordinary male behavior toward adult women and to anything which seems similar to them or under their (potential) control -- the body, feelings, nature. The ability to control (and to be in control) becomes both a need and a symbol of masculinity. Relations are turned into contest[s] for power. Aggression is mobilized to distance oneself from the object and then to overpower it. The girl, on the other hand, seeks relationships, even at the expense of her own autonomy. The two genders thus come to complement each other in a rather grotesque symmetry. [\[8\]](#)

As we can see, there are two important aspects of child development: **self-identity** and **gender-Identity**. In the traditional context of the nuclear family, we must also be able to account for the contribution of the father to the separation/individuation process. Since the child must move away from the mother in order to achieve autonomy, the father offers an alternative with which to identify. This is less problematic for the boy since the father also facilitates gender identification. Thus, the boy tends to develop strong self-identity but weak gender-identity. Since the girl does not experience the same kind of gender transformation, but at the same time cannot identify as closely with the father, she will tend to form a weak self-identity, but a strong and less problematic gender-identity.

Reproduction of Social Patterns

Finally, it must be remembered that the key insight contained in object relations theory is that the human subject is largely the product of the interaction that it, as a developing person, has with its caretakers. And since those caretakers are themselves socially determined persons, they will pass on to the child their own personal tendencies and social experiences with respect to race, class and gender. In this way, social relations are constitutive of "human nature".

T. R. Quigley, 1998

Notes

[\[1\]](#) Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, Minneapolis: University of

Minnesota Press, 1983, 153-4.

[2] Ibid., 165.

[3] Jacques Lacan, *Ecrits*, ix.

[4] Ibid., viii.

[5] Ibid., ix-x.

[6] Jane Flax, "Political Philosophy and the Patriarchal Unconscious: A Psychoanalytic Perspective on Epistemology and Metaphysics", in *Discovering Reality*, 252.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Ibid., 253.