

Freud and Philosophy

While Freud never thought himself a philosopher, there are many scholars who argue that he was not only a neuroscientist and doctor, but primarily a thinker¹. Freud initially was very interested in philosophy, and, under the influence of his mentor Franz Brentano, considered studying zoology and philosophy in a joint PHD^{2 3}. While on many instances Freud not only didn't associate with philosophers but dismissed them entirely, this may have been a consequence of his environment and the nature of philosophy during his lifetime^{4 5}. In a letter to his friend Wilhelm Fliess, he said

"I most secretly nourish the hope of arriving, via these same paths, at my initial goal of philosophy. For that is what I wanted originally, when it was not yet at all clear to me to what end I was in the world."⁶

While there were others who proposed the idea of the unconscious (notably Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, von Hartmann), Freud later wrote in his book *Ego and the id*

"To most people who have been educated in philosophy the idea of anything psychical which is not also conscious is so inconceivable that it seems to them absurd and refutable simply by logic"⁷

His main issue was that he believed that his contemporaries and, more importantly, his teachers (notably Franz Brentano) disagreed with his own theories, and therefore he considered all self professed philosophers to be in different area of work to him. However, as many philosophers before and after him had accepted the notion of an unconscious, it is puzzling that he felt, or at least claimed he was the only one with these ideas⁸.

¹ Tauber, A. I. (2009). Freud's philosophical path. The Scandinavian Psychoanalytic Review

² Smith, D. L. (1999). Freud's Philosophy of the Unconscious. Kluwer Academic Publishers

³ Smith, D. L. (n.d). From philosophy to psychoanalysis: a classic Freudian move. Aeon Essays. Retrieved November 26, 2017, from <https://aeon.co/essays/from-philosophy-to-psychoanalysis-a-classic-freudian-move>

⁴ Tauber, A. I. (2009). Freud's philosophical path. The Scandinavian Psychoanalytic Review

⁵ Smith, D. L. (n.d), From philosophy to psychoanalysis: a classic Freudian move. Aeon Essays. Retrieved November 26, 2017, from <https://aeon.co/essays/from-philosophy-to-psychoanalysis-a-classic-freudian-move>

⁶ <http://ww3.haverford.edu/psychology/ddavis/ffliess.html>, January 1 1896 letter

⁷ Freud, S., & Strachey, J. (1962). The ego and the id. New York: Norton.

⁸ Brook, A (2002 April). Kant and Freud. Carleton University.

There are many who would consider Freud mainly a psychologist (which he was not⁹), however whatever name is given to what he was studying has definite philosophical roots. The definition of philosophy is “the study of the fundamental nature of knowledge, reality, and existence, especially when considered as an academic discipline.”

While a lot of Freud’s work was based in medicine, he also focused his studies on understanding humans, something philosophers had been doing for centuries. Early psychology originated from ancient philosophers such as Aristotle, Hippocrates, and Confucius¹⁰. Freud’s theories were just an advancement of this understanding of humanity through philosophy, combined with the influence of science. The introduction and popularity of Darwin’s ideas on evolution meant that Freud was part of the first generation truly able to view man not as a divine creature, but as an object of experiment. As well as being an influencer, he was also just a product of his time.

Freud’s theory on personality is comparable to Aristotle’s *table of values*, as both have a scientific method to what is ‘normal’, or in Aristotle’s case ‘moral’ (this is where the main contrast occurs). In *The Ego and the id*, Freud discusses human development, and particularly what was deemed by him normal and necessary stages of childhood and adolescence. For example, he considered the *Oedipus Complex* one of these key stages, and explained how disruption or trauma during this stage could affect the ego and superego later in life. Comparatively, in *The Table of Virtues*, Aristotle proposes that there is a *right* way to do things; ie, that virtue was essentially performing well in the task of being human. The basis of his theories was that if something was created to do a task, and said thing did the task well, it was inherently good¹¹. Freud, as a scientist, strived for truth and accuracy in his work, illustrated by his search for the honesty in his patients’ subconscious through psychoanalysis, a practice he created. Most philosophers have a distinct idea on the correct way to things. Plato talked about his personal theory in the ‘theory of Forms’, in which he explained that there exists, in the non-physical world a, set of archetypes; perfect visions that dictate what things in the physical world strive to be.¹²

When comparing philosophies before and after Freud, there is one distinction I see; the progressive dismissal of God, which eventually transforms into mainstream atheism¹³. One of the great late 19th century philosophers, Friedrich Nietzsche, famously (or infamously) said “God is dead”. This lay the foundations for 20th century mentality (or more accurately, encapsulated it into a short statement). This was a environment when, for the first time in millennia, not believing in a deity was acceptable. However, the concept of a god was

⁹ Smith, D. L. (1999), *Freud’s Philosophy of the Unconscious*, Kluwer Academic Publishers

¹⁰ Psychology. (2017, November 23). Retrieved November 23, 2017, from <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Psychology#History>

¹¹ SparkNotes Editors. (2005). SparkNote on Aristotle (384–322 B.C.). Retrieved November 26, 2017, from <http://www.sparknotes.com/philosophy/aristotle/>

¹² Theory of forms (2017, October 25). Retrieved November 23, 2017 from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theory_of_forms

¹³ Mastin, L (2008). A Quick History of Philosophy. Retrieved November 24, 2017 from http://www.philosophybasics.com/general_quick_history.html

arguably still there; it had just taken the form of/been replaced with Science: the superpower of the 20th and 21st century.

In my opinion, philosophy has always been an atheist practice; the very act of questioning one's existence is heretical. Socrates was almost certainly an atheist. However, two things differ from before and after the 20th century; although philosophers before didn't always conform to orthodox religions, many were spiritual, or had philosophies containing references to an outer power. As philosophy progresses, we see this become more extreme as we enter the middle ages, and the main focus is shifted almost entirely to organised religion, and specifically discussing the existence of god through philosophy. This starts to fall away during the enlightenment, and then is entirely irrelevant thereafter¹⁴. The second difference lies in the philosophers' *freedom* to be atheist; not only were they able to preach their ideas and not risk execution, but they had a large number of people supporting, agreeing, and encouraging them. This created a very new environment, and Freud was at the height of it; a non-practising jew who took the concept of the human psyche, something which previously was seen to be God given, inexplicable and/or inevitable, and brought it down to earth. He explained actions and thoughts through past experiences in life, and made the conscious and the unconscious objects that could be explained scientifically, thus birthing modern day psychology. This could be seen as a drastically different take on virtually the same ideas as had been believed before; that actions were not your own, but controlled by outer forces. Both dangerously assume that they are not responsible for their own actions. Additionally, Freud appeared to present *himself* as divine. Max Graf, a member of Freud's group 'The Wednesday Psychological Society' said this about the meetings:

"The gatherings followed a definite ritual. First one of the members would present a paper. Then, black coffee and cakes were served; cigar and cigarettes were on the table and were consumed in great quantities. After a social quarter of an hour, the discussion would begin. The last and decisive word was always spoken by Freud himself. There was the atmosphere of the foundation of a religion in that room. Freud himself was its new prophet who made the heretofore prevailing methods of psychological investigation appear superficial."

This reiterates the idea that maybe we didn't kill God, but replaced him.

Although most of Freud's work is now discredited, he initiated a process which heavily influenced the 20th and 21st centuries. His original ideas have been highly refined and developed, but the foundations of these recent ideas were set by Freud's ingenuity¹⁵. As his explorations were in an unknown area, this surmises why he was not quite right about most things.

¹⁴ Mastin, L (2008). A Quick History of Philosophy. Retrieved November 24 2017 from http://www.philosophybasics.com/general_quick_history.html

¹⁵ Dvorsky, G. (2013). Why Freud Still Matters, When He Was Wrong About Almost Everything. Retrieved 24 November 2017 from <https://io9.gizmodo.com/why-freud-still-matters-when-he-was-wrong-about-almost-1055800815>

Now, we're at a point where we still haven't left the mentality that Freud and his peers had; that science trumps all else. In fact, every day we progress further from ideas of spirituality. We require proof for everything, rules at all times, and boxes to fit ourselves into. We study philosophers of the past, but are not very interested in coming up with new general philosophies; we prefer to be much more specific, and hone in on singular items. Therefore, 21st century 'philosophy' no longer fits under this one umbrella term. The subject has diverged into many sub-parts that we now give different names; ethics, psychology, and economics are just a few examples. However, in the background, it's still there, and even if we don't call it philosophy anymore, we can never stop being creating philosophies.