

UCL Psychoanalysis Unit Conference: ‘Freud Then and Now’

OBSERVING THE OBSERVER: FREUD AND THE LIMITS OF EMPIRICISM

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In Freud’s representations of the origins of psychoanalysis he tended to deny the existence of any significant philosophical or literary precursors, preferring to present psychoanalysis as an empirical science. This paper will situate Freud’s work in the context of the philosophical crisis resulting from David Hume’s pushing of empiricism to its limits. The difficulties that Hume encountered in his attempt to observe the observer raised unsettling questions concerning the constitution of the psyche and its implications for the possibility of knowledge and agency that a succession of subsequent thinkers struggled to answer. Freud’s work can fruitfully be seen as an intervention in this debate, which, as we shall see, is still ongoing.

KEY WORDS: DAVID HUME, JOHN LOCKE, FRANZ BRENTANO, EMPIRICISM, ASSOCIATIONIST PSYCHOLOGY, CAUSATION, AGENCY, DECISION-MAKING

In Freud’s (1910) paper ‘A special type of choice of object made by men’ he wrote of the oedipal boy’s wish *to be his own father* (p. 173). A similar denial of origins marks Freud’s writings about the new discipline of psychoanalysis. On many occasions he denied the existence of any sources other than his own observations. In his ‘History of the psycho-analytic movement’ (Freud, 1914), he wrote:

The theory of repression quite certainly came to me independently of any other source; I know of no outside impression which might have suggested it to me, and for a long time I imagined it to be entirely original, until Otto Rank (1911a) showed us a passage in Schopenhauer’s *World as Will and Idea* in which the philosopher seeks to give an explanation of insanity. What he says there about the struggle against accepting a distressing piece of reality coincides with my concept of repression so completely that once again I owe the chance of making a discovery to my not being well-read. Yet others have read the passage and passed it by without making this discovery, and perhaps the same would have happened to me if in my young days I had had more taste for reading philosophical works. In later years I have denied myself the very great pleasure of reading the works of Nietzsche, with the deliberate object of not being hampered in working out the impressions received in psycho-analysis by any sort of anticipatory ideas. (p. 16)

He once joked to Helene Deutsch that he had invented psychoanalysis because it had no literature. He complained bitterly in his letters to his friend Wilhelm Fliess about the tedious chore of writing the literature review that constitutes Chapter 1 of *The Interpretation of Dreams*. When he was developing his concept of the death drive in 1919, he wrote to Lou Andreas Salome:

For my old age I have chosen the theme of death; I have stumbled on a remarkable notion based upon my theory of the instincts, and now I must read all kinds of things relevant to it, e.g., Schopenhauer, for the first time. But I am not fond of reading. (Freud, 1919, p. 99)

A voluminous body of interdisciplinary scholarship has shown the tendentiousness of claims such as these. Literary and philosophical influences on Freud have been shown to include Goethe, Schiller, Shakespeare, Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, Kant, and others too numerous to name (e.g. Assoun, 2000; Prokhoris, 1995; Tauber, 2010; Whyte, 1960). The psychoanalytic narrative of the origins of the psyche stresses that individuality is constituted out of a social matrix. In ‘Group psychology and the analysis of the ego’ Freud wrote that:

In the individual’s mental life someone else is invariably involved, as a model, as an object, as a helper, as an opponent; and so from the very first individual psychology, in this extended but entirely justifiable sense of the words, is at the same time social psychology as well. (1921, p. 69)

In fact Freud himself did sometimes acknowledge the existence of significant literary and philosophical precursors, commenting that ‘Everywhere I go I find that a poet has been there before me’ and acknowledging that there are certain philosophers ‘whose guesses and intuitions often agree in the most astonishing way with the laborious findings of psycho-analysis’ (Freud, 1925a, p. 60). But is the question of *who said it first* a matter of any more than historical interest? I want to suggest that Freud’s denial of philosophical precursors situates his work in the context of a philosophical debate that had been sparked by the work of David Hume and is still going on today.

In his writings on psychoanalysis Freud often suggested that his object of study – the unconscious mind – was by definition inadmissible to the majority of philosophers. In ‘The resistances to psychoanalysis’ (1925b) he wrote ‘The overwhelming majority of philosophers regard as mental only the phenomena of consciousness’ (p. 216). In this connection he was fond of quoting Hamlet’s words to Horatio after witnessing the ghost of his father in Act One of the play: ‘There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio/Than are dreamt of in your philosophy’ (Act 1 Scene 5) (e.g. Freud, 1905, p. 72; 1918, p. 12; 1933, p. 31). In an encyclopaedia article written in 1923, Freud defined psychoanalysis as an empirical science in explicit contradistinction from philosophy:

Psycho-Analysis an Empirical Science – Psycho-analysis is not, like philosophies, a system starting out from a few sharply defined basic concepts, seeking to grasp the whole universe with the help of these and, once it is

completed, having no room for fresh discoveries or better understanding. On the contrary, it keeps close to the facts in its field of study, seeks to solve the immediate problems of observation, gropes its way forward by the help of experience, is always incomplete and always ready to correct or modify its theories. There is no incongruity (any more than in the case of physics or chemistry) if its most general concepts lack clarity and if its postulates are provisional; it leaves their more precise definition to the results of future work. (Freud, 1923, pp. 253–4)

Philosophy and observation are opposed to one another. Referring to his later, more speculative writings in ‘An autobiographical study’ (Freud, 1925a), Freud wrote:

I should not like to create an impression that during this last period of my work I have turned my back upon patient observation and have abandoned myself entirely to speculation. I have on the contrary always remained in the closest touch with the analytic material and have never ceased working at detailed points of clinical or technical importance. Even when I have moved away from observation, I have carefully avoided any contact with philosophy proper ... I was less concerned with the question of priority than with keeping my mind unembarrassed. (p. 60)

But like old Hamlet’s ghost, philosophy haunts Freud’s intellectual biography and his writings. Freud’s credentials as an empirical scientist in his pre-psychoanalytic career as a researcher in zoology and cerebral anatomy are well established. His early interest in philosophy is less commonly highlighted. At the University of Vienna the young Freud studied philosophy under Franz Brentano, the scholar of Aristotle and author of *Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint* (Brentano, 1874). Brentano’s other students included Edmund Husserl. Paul Ricoeur (1970) described Freud along with Husserl as ‘the heirs of Brentano’ (p. 379). In the same year Freud wrote to his friend Eduard Silberstein that ‘I, the godless medical man and empiricist, am attending two courses in philosophy’ (Freud, 1874, p. 70) and under Brentano’s influence Freud even contemplated moving over from zoology to the philosophical faculty (Freud, 1875b). Brentano’s impact on Freud was profound and even disturbing. Freud wrote to his friend:

I can hardly convey to you how greatly my faith in what is generally held to be correct has been shaken and how much my secret leaning toward minority views has grown. Ever since Brentano adduced such ridiculously simple arguments in favor of his God, I have been afraid that one fine day I will be taken in by the scientific proofs of the validity of spiritualism, homoeopathy, by Louise Lateau, etc. In short, I have been too little of the dogmatist, adhering to all I believed in out of logical conviction alone. (Freud, 1875c, p. 106)

In the years of his friendship with Wilhelm Fliess, nearly 20 years later, when he was writing the *Project for a Scientific Psychology* (1895a), Freud recalled how ‘As a

young man I knew no longing other than for philosophical knowledge, and now I am about to fulfill it as I move from medicine to psychology' (Freud, 1895b, p. 180). There was something illicit about this: Freud tells Fliess it is a wish that 'I most secretly nourish' (Freud, 1895c, p. 159).

Brentano was instrumental in reversing the post-Kantian trend of German-Austrian philosophy (romanticist and idealist) in the direction of an empiricist scientific methodology (Jacquette, 2004). Aristotle, Mill and David Hume were key influences on this project. In his most famous work, *Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint* (1874), Brentano set forth his intentionality thesis, distinguishing psychological and physical phenomena by virtue of the intentionality or object-directedness of the psychological and non-intentionality of the physical or non-psychological. He followed Hume in affirming that the phenomenology of sensation is all that the strict empiricist can claim to know. The existence of a corresponding external reality can only be conjectural. What followed from this was that an objective scientific philosophical psychology had to take priority over all other branches of philosophy. It has been argued that these ideas provided a philosophical basis for Freud's recognition of the decisive importance of psychical reality in understanding neurosis (Frampton, 1991).

On 15 March 1875, Freud and his friend Paneth visited Brentano at his home and Brentano pronounced David Hume 'the most precise thinker and most perfect writer of all philosophers' (Freud, 1875b, p. 103). Brentano declared a preference for Hume over Kant; Freud reports that 'what people praise in [Kant] Brentano was ready to credit to Hume, what is entirely Kant's own he rejected as harmful and untrue' (Freud, 1875b, p. 104). At least at the time he was under Brentano's influence, Freud seems to have concurred with this assessment of the relative merits of the two philosophers. In a passing comment on the philosophical quality of the work of Adolf Douai, he notes that Kant's philosophy:

rests on the assumption of synthetic a priori judgments and stands or falls with them. Now, a large and truly scientific school, that of the English empiricists, decisively rejects the possibility of such judgments. 'All our knowledge not only begins with, but also springs from, experience,' they claim, which sounds materialistic enough, and is in any case more scientific than the idea of innate forms of understanding. (Freud, 1875a, pp. 110–11)

The dream of empiricism was to achieve a scientific method that could offer a perfect representation of things as they are, without subjective contamination. Thomas Sprat in his *History of the Royal Society* (1667) linked the establishment of the new empirical science with a linguistic programme of purification, reducing away the rhetoric which recalled the inflammatory language and enthusiasms of politically turbulent times. He wrote that eloquence is 'a thing fatal to Peace and good Manners' (Sprat, 1667, p. 111) and recommended 'a constant Resolution, to reject all the amplifications, digressions, and swellings of style: to return back to the primitive purity and shortness, when men deliver'd so many things, almost in an equal number of words' (*ibid.*, p. 113).

The English empiricist school of psychology was inaugurated with the work of John Locke, whose *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1689) turned the empirical method on subjectivity itself. Locke's essay was written in the wake of the Glorious Revolution, and the empiricist programme is presented as revolutionary, clearing away ideological forms of false consciousness (the supposed innate ideas which Locke [1975, p. 10] seeks to expose as 'false Foundations' for knowledge) and making it possible to get at truth which:

like Gold, is not the less so, for being newly brought out of the mine . . .
And though it be not yet current by the publick stamp; yet it may, for all that, be as old as Nature, and is certainly not the less genuine. (Locke, 1975, p. 4)

However, when the observing subject takes itself as object the empiricist procedure quickly runs into trouble. Locke acknowledges that 'The Understanding, like the Eye, whilst it makes us see, and perceive all other Things, takes no notice of it self. And it requires Art and Pains to set it at a distance, and make it its own Object' (Locke, 1975, p. 43). Yet he is confident that the limitations of the mind will not prejudice the success of a sufficiently rigorous enquiry once the false foundations of knowledge are cleared away and the enquirer's mind approximates to the condition of a purely receptive surface, *tabula rasa*. With Hume we discover how the rigour of the attempt to get beyond subjective and linguistic structures which are received, not natural, exposes the foundational role played by what seemed to be disposable superstructures in any knowledge or analysis whatsoever, including his own.

Hume appears to declare himself part of the endeavour to get beyond language and the structures of received authority to see things as they are in the 1740 *Abstract of the Treatise of Human Nature* (1739a). He writes, 'we must alter from the foundation the greatest part of the sciences. Such bold attempts are always advantageous in the republic of letters, because they shake off the yoke of authority, [and] accustom men to think for themselves' (Hume, 1740, p. 4). He complains that the philosophy of antiquity was founded more on 'delicacy of sentiment' than 'depth of reasoning and reflection' (Hume, 1740, p. 6), and that even in current debates on scientific matters, 'tis not reason which carries the prize, but eloquence' (Hume, 1739b, i, p. 306). His labour at the foundations of metaphysics required Hume to find a way of separating the chaff of ideology and rhetoric from the precious grain of real experience, which for the empiricist is the one sure foundation for synthetic knowledge. The analytic tool by means of which he hoped to achieve this was his distinction of two categories of perception, impressions and ideas. Impressions are unmediated sense data and unrationalized emotions, passions and desires. They are characterized by the degree of force and vivacity with which they strike us. Simple ideas are less vivid copies or representations of impressions, stored in memory and manipulated by imagination. The difference between impressions and ideas is 'the difference betwixt feeling and thinking' (Hume, 1739b, i, p. 311). We are also able to form complex ideas, juxtaposing what did not originally impress us as connected to form concepts which are ultimately though indirectly still founded in nature. The danger with this is that we

mistake links in the mind for connections really existent in the world. The test for ideas with real significance is an enquiry into the impressions on which these ideas are founded. Ideas unfounded on impressions are to be committed to the flames as mere ‘sophistry and illusion’ (Hume, 1975, p. 165), leaving the philosopher with the bare bones of a new, true epistemological order.

But the distinction between impressions and ideas proves not to be as stable in practice as when set out in theory. Repeated efforts to lift the veil of language and uncover the naked truth only seem to disclose more veils. The most famous example of this is Hume’s analysis of our idea of necessary connection. This idea is crucial to many of the structures of cognition holding our world together, for example, our belief that the future will conform to the pattern of the past (similar effects will proceed from similar causes). Where does the idea of necessary connection come from? Our assumption in any particular instance that a certain effect will follow a given cause is founded on nothing more than the memory that similar events have been conjoined or associated in the past, an imaginative extrapolation which always involves a leap of faith. The repetition of similar occurrences generates belief, whose force and liveliness qualify it for the category of impressions of reflection (our passions and emotions): what secures our knowledge of and reasonings concerning cause and effect turns out to be sentiment founded on imaginative activity. Metaphor with its logic-defying formula (a is like b, therefore, eliding the ‘like’, a is b) cannot be reduced away: it is structural to the possibility of what we call knowledge. Locke had appealed to the principle of association to account for only the extravagances of human reasonings, opinions and actions, which ‘I shall be pardon’d for calling . . . by so harsh a name as Madness, when it is considered, that opposition to Reason deserves that Name, and is really Madness’ (Locke, 1975, p. 395). According to Locke, in addition to reason which traces the ‘natural’ links between our ideas:

there is another Connexion of Ideas owing wholly to Chance or Custom; Ideas that in themselves are not at all of kin, come to be so united in some Mens Minds, that ’tis very hard to separate them, they always keep in company, and the one no sooner at any time comes into the Understanding but its Associate appears with it; and if they are more than two which are thus united, the whole gang always inseparable shew themselves together.
(Locke, 1975, p. 395)

Whereas Locke pathologized association as a deviation from rational norms, using a significantly politicized metaphor of ‘gangs’ united for inappropriate reasons, Hume makes it the generative principle of reason itself. The speculative leaps of analytic construction are necessary for any reading of the world whatsoever. It follows that the voice of most compelling authority will be the one with the power to make metaphoric transitions irresistible, for example, the voice of the poet: Hume writes that:

in the warmth of a poetical enthusiasm, a poet has a counterfeit belief, and even a kind of vision of his objects. And if there be any shadow of argument

to support this belief, nothing contributes more to his full conviction than a blaze of poetical figures and images, which have their effect upon the poet himself, as well as upon his readers. (Hume, 1739b, i, p. 423)

This is why, despite expressing suspicion of language, Hume also writes that ‘a vigorous and strong imagination is of all talents the most proper to procure belief and authority’ (Hume, 1739b, i, p. 420). If there is no beyond of the rhetorical, political, affective dimension, how can the philosopher’s task be to reduce away what has turned out to be fundamental to all the structures we use to make sense of the world? Hume writes that the idea of cause and effect ‘proceeds merely from an illusion of the imagination; and the question is, how far we ought to yield to these illusions’ (Hume, 1739b, i, p. 547). On what basis can we make decisions and take action? Hume’s account makes man the servant of his passionate nature. Hume showed in the first book of the *Treatise* that our convictions about the way the world works and even of our own identity through time are founded on sentiment. He writes that ‘what we call a mind, is nothing but a heap or collection of different perceptions, united together by certain relations [the blind mechanisms through which ideas are associated together], and suppos’d, tho’ falsely, to be endow’d with a perfect simplicity and identity’ (Hume, 1739b, i, p. 495). My being is affect: I am constituted by the impressions I suffer. *I am not myself*, and this is not an accidental (hysterical) derangement of my faculties; a certain originary passivity can be considered structural to the possibility of saying ‘I’. The second book of the *Treatise* goes on to argue that there can be no action without passion: ‘reason alone can never be a motive to any action of the will’ (Hume, 1739a, p. 413). Provocatively, Hume goes so far as to declare that ‘Reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them’ (Hume, 1739a, p. 415).

In the 1874 *Psychology*, Brentano quoted Alexander Bain’s observation of Hume that ‘As he was a man fond of literary effects as well as of speculation, we do not always know when he is in earnest’ (Brentano, 1874, p. 17). Hume has been attacked on the grounds that he has covertly to assume a transcendental perspective in order to deny categorically the possibility of knowledge unconditioned by circumstance. But he never claims the epistemological higher ground. Much of the wit of his writing, of whose power Kant was uneasily aware, comes from his dramatization of the fact that his philosophy is its own victim. There is something deeply unsettling about a dis-course part of whose insight is the explicit thematization of its own blind spot.

Like Hume, Freud drew on the language of empiricist and associationist philosophy to establish his scientific credentials. In his *History* he follows Hume in privileging impressions over ideas: ‘In later years I have denied myself the very great pleasure of reading the works of Nietzsche, with the deliberate object of not being hampered in working out the impressions received in psycho-analysis by any sort of anticipatory ideas’ (Freud, 1914, pp. 15–16). He repeatedly assures his readers that his more startling hypotheses are not speculations but theoretical inferences ‘legitimately drawn from innumerable observations’ (Freud, 1914, p. 17). However, while on a theoretical level impressions are invoked to validate the authenticity of ideas, in

connection with the patient impressions are also described as the residue of traumatic experiences. In Freud's early accounts of hysteria, he points to the effect of certain impressions that have not been subject to the usual process of wearing away. This effect can be understood as analogous to the effect of trauma:

The only difference is that in [traumatic paralysis] a major trauma has been operative, whereas in [non-traumatic hysteria] there is seldom a single major event to be signalized, but rather a series of affective impressions – a whole story of suffering. (Breuer & Freud, 1893, p. 10)

In his account of his treatment of Frau Emmy von N, he formulates his task as 'to take her frightening impressions away from her one by one' (Freud, 1893a, p. 62). But as Freud considers the impressions he uncovers, their epistemic status becomes more and more uncertain:

[I]t still strikes me myself as strange that the case histories I write should read like short stories and that, as one might say, they lack the serious stamp of science. I must console myself with the reflection that the nature of the subject is evidently responsible for this, rather than any preference of my own. The fact is that local diagnosis and electrical reactions lead nowhere in the study of hysteria, whereas a detailed description of mental processes such as we are accustomed to find in the works of imaginative writers enables me, with the use of a few psychological formulas, to obtain at least some kind of insight into the course of that affection. (Freud, 1893b, pp. 160–1)

At the root of the neuroses he analyses the impressions that Freud finds resolve themselves into *stories* whose status challenges the conventional distinction between fact and fiction, and which are placed in a new ontological category: psychical reality. Writing about psychical reality posed a particular difficulty for a man who prided himself on his 'correct and characteristic' prose style (Freud, 1873, p. 4). Working on Chapter 7 of *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud lamented to Fliess:

With regard to the psychology, I shall rely on your judgment whether I should revise it once more or take the risk of leaving it in its present form. The dream material itself is, I believe, unassailable. What I dislike about it is the style, which was quite incapable of noble, simple expression and lapsed into facetious circumlocutions straining after metaphors. I know that, but the part of me that knows it and knows how to evaluate it is unfortunately the part that does not produce. (Freud, 1899, p. 371)

Speaking of the objects of psychoanalysis necessarily involved Freud in speaking a language that felt foreign and disagreeable to him. Throughout his work Freud is somewhat defensive in relation to the question of the origin of the stories of suffering he finds himself compelled to tell: are they constructions of the patient or of the analyst? For example, after proposing the hypothesis of the primal scene in the case history of the Wolf Man, he writes:

There is at bottom nothing extraordinary, nothing to give the impression of being the product of an extravagant imagination, in the fact that a young couple who had only been married a few years should have ended a siesta on a hot summer's afternoon with a love-scene, and should have disregarded the presence of their little boy of one and a half, asleep in his cot. (Freud, 1918, p. 38)

There is an analogous defensiveness in Freud's various accounts of the origins of psychoanalysis, in which he seeks to exonerate himself from the charge of any undue influence. But this exists in tension with an increasingly thoroughgoing acknowledgment that the associations we produce, which provide the material that allows psychoanalytic inquiry to take place, always arise in the context of our relationships to our significant others:

In every analytic treatment there arises, without the physician's agency, an intense emotional relationship between the patient and the analyst which is not to be accounted for by the actual situation. It can be of a positive or of a negative character and can vary between the extremes of a passionate, completely sensual love and the unbridled expression of an embittered defiance and hatred. This transference—to give it its short name—soon replaces in the patient's mind the desire to be cured, and, so long as it is affectionate and moderate, becomes the agent of the physician's influence and neither more nor less than the mainspring of the joint work of analysis. (Freud, 1925a, p. 42)

Freud's work evolved in the direction of seeing the reciprocal determination of subject and object as the condition of possibility for productive analysis. This idea, scientifically scandalous since it makes the application of the categories subject/object in an analysis which could assign what is proper to either impossible, emerges through the rigour of the attempt to adhere to scientific standards of empirical detachment. Thus, while Freud's work can be read as dramatizing in condensed form the crisis of empiricism enacted in the development of empiricist philosophy from Locke to Hume, it also offers the beginnings of a resolution.

In conclusion I will allude to one small example to illustrate the persistence of the belief in the possibility of acquiring knowledge through observation that would allow us to make risk-free decisions about how best to act. Experimental studies of judgment and decision-making in cognitive science and behavioural economics still tend to assume that if the subject is given enough information, they should be able to use probabilistic reasoning to optimise their decision-making. Rational choices are possible. This may hold true in precisely defined contexts, but many decisions are made in contexts of uncertainty where not all possible outcomes are known. In his work on emotional finance, the psychoanalyst David Tuckett is currently exploring the role played by social interaction, narrative and emotion in decision-making (Tuckett *et al.*, 2015). His work on the recent financial crisis has shown that while the stories we tell ourselves about our actions ('conviction narratives') can get us into trouble

and lead us to take undue risks, these narratives are also key to enabling decision-making (Chong & Tuckett, 2015). Inspired as it is by Tuckett's psychoanalytic heritage, this line of argument can also be read as a contemporary affirmation of Hume's provocative proposal that 'Reason is, and always ought to be, the slave of the passions', which is as disturbing to our self-complacency today as it ever was.

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