

EXECUTIVE'S GUIDE TO UNDERSTANDING PEOPLE



HOW FREUDIAN THEORY CAN TURN
GOOD EXECUTIVES INTO BETTER LEADERS

REVISED EDITION

ABRAHAM ZALEZNIK



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Revised Edition

Abraham Zaleznik

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PREFACE

Dear Reader,

You probably bought this book because you are interested in motivating people. Any executive, or aspiring executive, should be concerned about what makes people tick and how to get them keenly interested in their jobs, their companies, and their work associates. But as with all practical questions, you have to do a lot of work before you're in a position to affect how people think and feel.

The first thing you have to do is get a better handle on your own motivation. The more you know and understand yourself, the more you will be able to know and understand other people. When I say get a better handle on your own motivation, I am referring at the outset to the ideas you already have. In a sense, we are all experts when it comes to figuring out what drives people to act the way they do. The trouble is that mixed in with good common sense are a lot of false ideas, wrong assumptions, and wishful thinking.

Let me give you an illustration. Most executives hold as a fixed truth that if you set a clear goal, show people how to achieve that goal, establish an incentive, and reward them if they meet the goal, you have a surefire method for motivating people. This theory of motivation comes from behaviorist psychology. Much evidence supports it, which is probably why executives believe it and texts of management espouse it. The problem with this theory is that it oversimplifies and leaves out crucial elements. For example, does an employee's relationship with his or her supervisor have a bearing on how the employee perceives the goal, the path, and the incentive? Does this perception have an effect on the employee's attitude and willingness to accept the goal and work toward attaining it?

People have a habit of loading meaning on to their own experience. What happened in the past and the inferences attached to past experience determine how people look at themselves and other people, particularly authority figures. Therefore, simply fixing a goal and providing incentives reverberates with the history that is condensed in the relationship between the person who is talking and the one who is listening. You can choose to ignore this history, and sometimes it is wise to do so, but you should be aware of what you are doing and why. In my experience, it's what you don't know that will hurt you. The stronger your grasp on the human condition, the wiser you will become in the human dimension of your job as an executive.

In no way is this book intended as a "self-help" or personal therapy book. I don't believe such books are very useful, although at times they seem to provide comfort for people in a quandary. Nor will I present material on the techniques of more formal therapy. It was never my intention to try to make executives into psychoanalysts. In fact I have cautioned my students, and caution my readers, that interpreting someone else's motives, conscious and unconscious, is poor practice in everyday life. Psychoanalytic therapy is a specialty requiring expert training and is used selectively for patients who can benefit from the treatment. But psychoanalytic psychology is available for general enlightenment, and, in this case, for executives who are taking responsibility for the use of power in human relationships.

I wrote this book for my students in the MBA program at the Harvard Business School. Originally called Social Psychology of Management and more recently, the Psychodynamics of Leadership, the course introduced MBA candidates to Sigmund Freud's theories of the mind. His was a depth psychology that established the importance of unconscious motivation in human behavior.

Over many years of teaching, I have included various introductions to psychoanalysis among the course materials. Most of these introductions assume that the reader is a mental health professional or has some interest in clinical practice. I found that business school students need a somewhat different introduction. So I wrote this book, trying to keep the perspective of a curious, if not skeptical executive who wants to learn about people, but is not especially interested in the problems of mental health, let alone the difficulties in curing mental illness. I concentrated on what we have learned from psychoanalysis and not on how this knowledge is revealed, and also examined, on the clinician's couch.

You will read in this book about transference and may wonder if it was wise to avoid the clinical perspective. Briefly, transference occurs when a person experiences in the present some aspects of a relationship with a figure from his or her past. Authority figures are natural targets for transference of unconscious ideas and emotions from the history of one's relationship to one's parents. Transference is an important discovery straight out of the clinical situation. In fact it is the lever that makes it possible to undo many of the adverse effects of past experience on character, perception, and behavior. I do not dwell on the clinical aspects of transference in this book. Instead, I try to show how transference occurs in everyday life and how it affects human relations in organizations. In connection with that thought, let me tell you about the variety of ways we learn about unconscious motivation other than in the clinical situation.

Most of what we learn in life comes on an installment plan, a piece at a time. I have encountered a few executives and even some students who seem to have a natural gift for understanding the human condition. This gift extends to the ability to sense aspects of unconscious motivation in self and others. Such people appear to be sensitive to the idea that dreams mean something beyond the manifest content, they realize that defenses are a part of everyone's psychological makeup, and they understand deep desires, fears, and the more apparent reactions of greed and envy as these voracious affects permeate human relationships.

We say that such people are psychologically minded. Like any other acuity, this one can be honed through reflection on experience, as well as through observation of people and the world around them. Exposure to literature and the other arts is another good way to develop psychological-mindedness.

I wasn't long into teaching the *Psychodynamics of Leadership* before I realized that it was silly to limit students' exposure to case studies. Good case studies are expensive to research and difficult to write. So why not take advantage of some of the rich literature so many genuinely talented writers have provided to deepen whatever degree of psychological-mindedness we possess?

Alongside case studies and chapters in this book, therefore, my students and I read Herman Melville's *Billy Budd*, to fathom the motivations of seaman Billy, Master-at-Arms Claggert, and Captain Vere. We read and discussed Arthur Miller's *A View from the Bridge* and, of course, *Death of a Salesman*. When we turned to group psychology—[chapter 8](#) in this book—I called on Woody Allen for help and showed his film *Interiors*. And of course we read several of the excellent biographies and autobiographies of noted business leaders. These works and virtually any other serious film, play, novel, or biography can greatly enrich and expand the chapters of this book. Reading or seeing them together with some like-minded friends or even work associates will lead to many stimulating hours of discussion.

When all is said and done, you will probably end up accusing me, as many of my students have done, of burdening your life with the notion that nothing can be taken for granted. To this charge I plead guilty. But in my defense, I can say that while I have stressed the art of decoding in the human context, I have also differentiated between thinking and acting. You and I can think anything we want and analyze to our hearts' content. But as long as we keep these thoughts to ourselves (except in

classroom or discussion group), we are enjoying the privilege of freedom of thought. Once words flow through the air, conditions have changed; action has occurred, consequences must be paid. You should never, *never*, give voice to your thoughts about someone else's unconscious motives, even if you are convinced that you know what you are talking about. Intimacy offers no license to use the intellect as a weapon.

Earlier I mentioned that I wanted to avoid introducing questions that clinicians argue at length. Yet this book includes a couple of chapters on neuroses, what they are, how they differ, and how they originate in early childhood. The reason for the emphasis on pathology is simply that that's what the material is about. When you read the chapter on development, you will discover that any progression in life is through conflict. To reach maturity is to struggle with neurotic conflict.

To further justify my focus on pathology, think about this: is it possible to discover much about the human condition if one sets out to study health? Along these lines, many of my colleagues look for "positive role models" whom the students can be encouraged to emulate. To me, today's heroes in business are tomorrow's potential bums. Witness the problems facing the managers and directors of the American automobile companies as consumers move away from gas guzzlers, and those facing the banking and financial industries dealing with underperforming loans.

I don't want to detain you much longer with this letter. But I need to acknowledge that although writing (and psychoanalyzing) is lonely work, many wonderful people have filled my life with kindness, understanding, and practical help. First of all, the staff of Cumnock 300, where emeritus professors work, including Paula Alexander, Jan Simmons, and Luz Velazquez, are a wonderful support group. I owe them a debt for their help in bringing this volume into print. Finally, I owe a lot to the Harvard Business School for its support over the years. I don't imagine there are many professional schools with the courage to allow me to pursue my life's work, which didn't exactly mesh smoothly with the agenda of this venerable institution.

I want to tell you something about my wonderful family. My wife of many, many years, Elizabeth Aron Zaleznik, has watched, helped, criticized, edited, and generally helped me learn how to write. She never lost interest in what I was doing even while she pursued her own career as a school psychologist and administrator. It was my lucky day in 1943 when I arrived at Alma College in Michigan and met this beautiful, gracious woman for whom the glass of life has always been half-full. My daughter, Dori Zaleznik, M.D., besides being a gifted physician, teacher, and clinical researcher in infectious diseases, has shown me by her example of thoughtfulness, decisiveness, courage, and commitment what it means to take responsibility. I love her dearly! My son, Ira Zaleznik, J.D., early on taught me the virtues of deliberativeness, care, and knowing one's own mind. As a litigator, he makes me proud, especially in carrying out his vow never to lose a case for lack of preparation. I forgive him for beating me so badly as a youngster in our chess games and for never having taught me how to swing a golf club properly. My daughter-in-law, Janet, has added much sweetness and warmth to our family. My grandchildren, Daniel, Eli, Aaron, Joshua, and Rachel, are my treasures.

I'll sign off now and let you turn to [chapter 1](#). I'll return with a postscript. If you want to sneak a look at it before you read the book, it's OK with me.

Sincerely yours

Abraham Zaleznik

WHERE FREUD FITS

Psychoanalysis, a theory and therapy of the mind, ranks among the most significant contributions to human knowledge in the twentieth century. Only rarely is it possible to link a watershed in man's understanding of himself with the work of a single individual. But such is the case with psychoanalysis and its discoverer, Sigmund Freud.

Informed and intelligent people have a number of reasons for attending to the observations and theories of psychoanalysis. First, psychoanalysis has had a profound impact on psychiatry and other medical specialties concerned with the understanding and treatment of mental illness. Second, it has given rise to a theory of the mind that has altered academic psychology, particularly in this field's approach to human motivation and development. Third, psychoanalysis has shaped Western civilization during the past century. Literature and the arts, philosophy, history, and the social sciences of the twentieth century bear the imprint of the psychoanalytic perspective. Indeed, the impact of Freudian psychoanalysis on Western culture has been likened to that of Copernican and Darwinian findings. Copernicus discovered that the earth is not the center of the universe. Darwin demonstrated that man, rather than being a distinctly unique species, is part of an evolutionary chain. Freud transformed man's image from the predominantly rational being that sixteenth- and seventeenth-century philosophers had supposed him to be to a multifaceted being governed by a range of irrational forces over which he struggles for control. In this discovery, Freud, together with Copernicus and Darwin, undermined man's sense of grandiosity.

These contributions to medicine, psychology, and culture secured a position in history for Freud and psychoanalysis. Another contribution may yet be realized in the further application of psychoanalysis to other professions, among them the practice of management and leadership. Leadership concerns people. It consists of the art of motivating people to apply their talents and best efforts to secure desired goals. Leadership therefore is also concerned with the context of human action—with the promises and demands of organizations. The application of leadership arts occurs most frequently in formal organizations. The basis for understanding these organizations begins with a working knowledge of human characteristics. Only from such a base is it possible to consider the transactions between individuals and organizations and between leaders and followers.

The purpose of this book is to present to people who occupy or aspire to positions of power and authority an introduction to the main concepts, theories, and observations of psychoanalytic psychology. The remainder of this first chapter will attempt to describe what they can legitimately expect from psychoanalytic knowledge and its implications for their thinking and practice.

Executives readily accept the proposition that their role involves relationships with other people. In fact, the most common definition of the executive's job is getting things done through people. What is less clearly understood is the fact that executives use beliefs about human nature to guide their organizational actions and decisions. These beliefs can range from very sophisticated ideas about human motivation to fantasies that resemble wishful thinking. Individuals cannot act without bringing into play their beliefs, both conscious and unconscious, about human nature and motivation.

The rationale for this book is to present a systematic view of human beings, one based on careful observation, as a possible substitute for the unsystematic layers of ideas that arise intuitively as a result of personal experience. There is some reason to believe that these layers of ideas, often unexamined, contain as many inaccurate notions as correct ones. It would therefore seem to serve the executive well to examine an exceptionally comprehensive and intellectually rigorous theory of mind and personality as a means of looking more closely at and possibly revising conceptions that have come to dominate his or her own thinking.

Given the proposition that it is potentially valuable to examine and reconsider conceptions of the mind, why choose a psychoanalytic perspective and not some other? Why not present a survey of various theories of the mind and allow the reader to consider alternatives, and possibly to select from among them a combination that may be personally satisfying?

A survey of theories of the mind is particularly useful for beginning students or as an introduction to the study of personality. For more experienced people, whether students or executives, surveys are less than satisfying. They tend to repeat material already learned elsewhere or to discourage attempts to gain relative mastery of a body of knowledge. Intensive work using one general theory encourages careful evaluation both of problems the theory attempts to resolve and of the relative successes in solving those problems. For the intended audience of this book—executives and students in professional schools of management—intensive investigation has another advantage. It helps overcome the tendency to use popular ideas as easy answers to complex problems. Such a practice on the part of professional people is dangerous and misleading, particularly where the object of attention is people and their relationships.

Executives should be equipped intellectually to distinguish among descriptive, explanatory, prescriptive, and ideological theories. Most expositions on management and human relationships contain a mixture of all these types of theory. But it pays to be conservative in dealing with ideas—that is, to exert care in understanding and evaluating theories and the observations underlying them. Intensive investigation of one general theory helps cultivate this approach. People who hold positions of power and responsibility should have sound knowledge of theories and findings about human nature. They should also be capable of evaluating these ideas in relation to their intuitive reactions and experience.

The psychoanalytic view of the individual is based on four major premises: (1) that all behavior is determined; (2) that unconscious mental life is an important determinant of behavior; (3) that the world outside the individual is represented internally, and these internal representations, together with internally generated impulses, lead to behavior; and (4) that the past determines present behavior of the individual. The use of the term “behavior” in these four premises, and throughout this book, means not only visible actions but also thinking and feeling that may be evident only to the individual and not to other people.

PREMISE 1: DETERMINISM

The concept of determinism signifies that an individual’s behavior is a result of a variety of forces, not necessarily within the individual’s awareness, let alone control. The conceptual opposite of determinism is free will. This means that the individual has control, even unlimited control, over his or her actions. Are free will, in the form of choice, and determinism contradictory? If they are contradictory, and if the premise of determinism is central to psychoanalytic psychology, then it would seem that this psychology would be of limited interest and value to people concerned with action.

Let us assume that individuals have free will and that how they behave is a function of their choice subject to imposed restraints. If one follows this premise, then the only way to explain behavior is to deal with the calculus of choice. This assumption is close to the rationalist's position, which depends on one other assumption: that people behave in such a way as to maximize gain (or pleasure) and minimize cost (or pain). But note that the free will premise, framed according to the principle of rationality, also implies causality: the rational individual weighs costs and benefits and arrives at a calculation.

The deterministic exploration of what causes behavior is directed at how individuals perceive the costs and benefits and how they calculate the net effects of actions. If an observer perceives that an individual is not acting in his or her best interests (as in the case of a person who is phobic and therefore restricts life activities to ward off improbable dangers), one could reach two conclusions: either the individual is acting irrationally, or there are considerations not perceptible or comprehensible to the observer. The notion of irrationality, in turn, suggests random action or action that cannot be explained by ideas in the mind of the observer.

From a perspective based on explanation, it is best to avoid framing discussion of behavior in terms of random or chance occurrence. Under this premise—anything I don't understand occurs randomly or by chance—inquiry would be foreclosed. However, by accepting the distinction between rational and irrational behavior according to the criterion of maximizing pleasure and minimizing pain, it may still be possible to explain so-called irrational behavior. That is to say, the irrational behavior is “determined” or caused by a complex of motives not yet comprehended by either the observer or the individual actor. We are then in the position where we must continue to inquire before we are able to comprehend. In order to inquire, it helps to assume that behavior is determined.

At this point let us enter a modification of the notion of determinism or causality. Caution would suggest that it would seldom be possible to link a specific motive with a particular action. It might be possible to link simple cause and effect in the case of animal experiments where, for example, one establishes conditions such that the animal is not rewarded unless it performs a particular act. In the case of the human being, it would appear impractical to attempt to follow the same approach. It is true that an individual eats because he is hungry, but what he eats, where he eats, and with whom are subjects of further inquiry. Actions are surrounded by a complex of motives, and consequent behavior, we assume, is a result of more than one motive. To put this assumption another way, any given action is a result of a compromise among a variety of motives, and the gains resulting from behavior are attributed to multiple motives.

PREMISE 2: UNCONSCIOUS MOTIVATION

To work within the premise of determinism and the multiplicity of motives, we must deal with the problem of awareness, or lack of awareness. If an individual were totally aware of the causes of his or her behavior, without necessarily ascribing total control over an array of actions, it would be relatively easy to work within the deterministic premise. Behavior then would be viewed as caused by the motives the actor attaches to his or her actions. But suppose an individual cannot attribute motives to those actions, as, for example, when he or she forgets an important date and misses an appointment. If the person were questioned about it, the response would probably be that he does not know why he forgot, and he might indicate how mortified he felt by the memory lapse. This example could lead us back to the notion of random events and chance occurrence: the missed appointment was an unlucky event. Another approach is to suggest that the behavior was caused, but by motives that lie outside the

awareness of the actor. Here we assume that behavior was caused by unconscious motives. The one basis for making such a weighted assumption is that the evidence demands it.

The premise of determinism may be made for logical purposes, but the premise of unconscious motivation requires a foundation in observation and facts. Abundant evidence for the premise of unconscious motivation will be described in [chapters 2 and 3](#). Once the evidence is accepted, the basis for the premise is established, leading to further observations that would otherwise be unavailable.

PREMISE 3: THE INTRAPSYCHIC POINT OF VIEW

Individuals are confronted with two kinds of realities: first, the reality that external world presents and second, the reality of the inner world. External reality, while seemingly objective, is colored by the perceptions of the individual. Objectivity concerning the real world should not be taken for granted. Rather, because it is mediated constantly by the way individuals take in and use the perceptions of the real world, it is to be under continual scrutiny. The inner or psychic reality of the individual is the aggregate of all the sensations connected with the stimulation that arises within the mind and body of the individual. The most important aspect of inner stimulation occurs in connection with bodily need and impulses.

The intrapsychic point of view in psychoanalysis establishes the inner world of the individual as the locus of investigation. This perspective does not neglect or diminish the importance of external reality. It simply denotes that the frame of reference is the individual and that observations occur in relation to what goes on under the skin, so to speak. Much of the inner reality that interests us is unconscious mental activity. The individual has little or no awareness of its content. This content also involves conflicting motives. Individual action can thus be viewed as a consequence of one's best efforts to mediate among conflicting forces generated both from within and from the environment. But once again, the forces generated from outside are taken in and responded to from within the existing state of this inner world.

PREMISE 4: THE PAST DETERMINES THE PRESENT

The fourth premise underlying psychoanalytic theory is that present behavior is determined by the past. The power of this premise lies in its relation to the intrapsychic point of view. The past determines the present in individual behavior because the individual retains all the residues of past experience. In this way, current stimuli acting on the individual from external reality combine with the residue of the past to establish the motivational set that determines how the person will act. Notice that there is no implication that the residue of the past will be or should be available to consciousness. Memory of the past may be, and frequently is, unconscious. How can the past be outside of awareness and yet determine behavior? This, of course, is a question central to psychoanalytic theory and inquiry.

Like the premises of unconscious motivation and the intrapsychic point of view, the premise that the past determines present behavior results from empirical observation. It is not a logical premise in the same sense that the premise of determinism is. In this context, logic signifies the postulation of a premise for purposes of making inferences. The value of this logical premise is established in the verification of the inferences derived from the set of empirically derived premises. By assuming that all behavior is determined and is not a result of chance, what appears inexplicable is a result of inadequate observation and interpretation since, for purposes of exploration, we assume that behavior

is caused and therefore can be explained.

This book is organized into ten chapters in addition to this introductory chapter. [Chapter 2](#) presents information on the life of Sigmund Freud and the paths he followed in arriving at his major discoveries of the causes of mental illnesses, the workings of the unconscious, and the nature of individual development. Since the observations on unconscious mental life are so basic to psychoanalytic psychology, [chapter 3](#) presents both observations and the theory of the unconscious. [Chapter 4](#) describes the neuroses, with detailed material on the phenomena of symptoms and how they are manifested. [Chapter 5](#) explains symptom formation as a compromise of forces in conflict with the psyche and also as a new version of conflict experienced in earlier stages of life, especially the formative years of infancy and childhood. [Chapter 6](#) provides a detailed view of psychological development from infancy through adulthood, with emphasis on the shifts that occur in instinctual drives and relationships with others. [Chapter 7](#) considers the concept of defense and describes the role of mechanisms of defense in neuroses as well as in development.

[Chapter 8](#) focuses on the psychoanalytic theory of groups and the relation between individual and group psychology. [Chapter 9](#) broadens the focus of the theory beyond groups to large organizations and to society. [Chapter 10](#) delineates the connections between psychoanalysis and the problems of power, authority, and leadership. [Chapter 11](#), the concluding chapter, addresses the role that psychoanalysis can play in changing organizations.

SIGMUND FREUD AND THE ORIGINS OF PSYCHOANALYSIS

It has become fashionable in recent years to describe Freud's psychoanalytic theory as outmoded, elitist and sexist, and based on work with abnormal patients whose neuroses reveal little about normal behavior. Such criticism overlooks the fact that Freud arrived at his theories, often with great reluctance and resistance, only after years of being confronted with the compelling evidence offered him both by the patients he treated and by his daily observations and reflections on the human condition.

By his own admission, Freud had a powerful predilection for "speculative abstractions" and often feared that he would be mastered by them. He thus consciously and carefully aligned himself with objectivity, observation, and the discipline of a natural scientist.

The debate over the issue of whether psychoanalysis is a science continues, even within the field of psychoanalysis itself. Some practitioners claim that the theory is indivisible; others, that some parts of the theory are useful while other parts are speculative, if not unsound. Some philosophers of science criticize psychoanalysis on the ground that its propositions do not lend themselves to experimental testing and cannot therefore be verified. Freud's own opinion is worth noting:

I have repeatedly heard it said contemptuously that it is impossible to take a science seriously whose most general concepts are as lacking in precision as those of libido and of instinct in psychoanalysis. But this reproach rests on a complete misconception of the facts. Clear basic concepts and sharply drawn definitions are only possible in the mental sciences in so far as the latter seek to fit a region of facts into the frame of a logical system. In the natural sciences of which psychology is one, such clear-cut general concepts are superfluous and indeed impossible. Zoology and Botany did not start from correct and adequate definitions of an animal and a plant; to this very day biology has been unable to give any certain meaning to the concept of life. . . . The basic ideas or most general concepts in any of the disciplines of science are always left indeterminate at first and are only explained to begin with by reference to the realm of phenomena from which they were derived; it is only by means of progressive analysis of the material of observation that they can be made clear and can find a significant and consistent meaning. I have always felt it as a gross injustice that people have refused to treat psychoanalysis like any other science. This refusal found an expression in the raising of the most obstinate objections. Psychoanalysis was constantly reproached for its incompleteness and insufficiencies; though it is plain that a science based upon observation has no alternative but to work out its findings piecemeal and to solve its problems step by step.¹

Freud's unique background as well as the cultural and intellectual milieu in which he lived had important effects on his ideas and the way in which he arrived at them. His theory and method thus can only be understood in their historic context.

Sigmund Freud was born on May 6, 1856, in Freiberg, Austria (now Příbor, Czechoslovakia). He died in London on September 23, 1939. When Freud began his life, the Crimean War, which changed the balance of power in Europe and led inexorably to World War I, had just ended; Charles Darwin was writing his *Origin of Species*, which he reluctantly and with grave misgivings finally published in 1859; and Karl Marx celebrated his thirty-eighth birthday. When Freud's life ended, Great Britain was on the verge of declaring war on Germany. Freud's eighty-three years thus spanned a period of

extraordinary change. Technological discoveries transformed industrial and business life. Science was heralded as the means of unlocking the secrets of nature and alleviating the suffering of mankind even as fruits of the industrial revolution were shocking the sensibilities of many.

Freud's father, Jacob, was a man of gentle disposition, humor, and freethinking skepticism. The little evidence available suggests that to his son he was "kindly, affectionate and tolerant, though just and objective."² Jacob Freud married three times, and Sigmund Freud was the first son of the third marriage. At birth he was both the youngest sibling in a family of two stepbrothers from Jacob's first marriage and the oldest child of the new family. John, the son of the elder of the two stepbrothers, was a year old when his Uncle Sigmund was born. The two children were inseparable companions until Sigmund was three and the Freuds left Freiberg. John left a lasting imprint on Freud's early life. They loved and fought each other with such intensity that John's personality remained "unalterably fixed in Freud's unconscious memory."³ An intimate friend and a hated enemy became indispensable to his emotional life, and at times the two were again fused in one person as they had been in his ambivalent relationship with his nephew John.⁴

Freud's mother, Amalie Nathansohn of Vienna, was a woman full of gaiety, spirits, and wit. She unashamedly loved her firstborn "*goldener Sigi*" more than any of the eight children who followed him. Freud suffered displacement, jealousy, and then grief and deprivation when Julius, Amalie's second son, was born eleven months after his own arrival and then died eight months later. But his mother's adoration for her oldest son counterbalanced these painful losses. Many years later he wrote "A man who has been the indisputable favorite of his mother keeps for life the feeling of a conqueror that confidence of success that often induces real success."⁵

In 1859, the warmth, security, and familial confusions of Freud's life in a small Austrian town ended when Jacob decided that the family must leave. In the 1840s a railroad had been built from Vienna to the north with a bypass around Freiberg. Once a flourishing trade center, the town became a declining backwater. The resulting economic dislocation, aggravated by the rise of Czech nationalism, led to the failure of business and the rekindling of anti-Semitism. In the face of this double danger, the Freuds left for Leipzig and then, a year later, for Vienna. The train ride from Freiberg to Leipzig through the blazing gas jets of the industrializing countryside left Freud with a painful phobia of traveling by train, which was to last until his self-analysis at the end of the century.

Another reason for going to Vienna was to give Sigmund the best education possible. Well into the twentieth century, children of European upper classes were given a strictly regimented and thorough education based on belief in the power of rationalism and the values of the Enlightenment. Freud's mother and then his father had been his first teachers, and he had shown a remarkable intelligence during those years. His family held his intellect in such esteem that his siblings had to tiptoe through their activities in order not to disturb the young scholar at his studies. His teachers at the gymnasium in Vienna were almost equally impressed by the gifts of this young student. He graduated *summa cum laude* at the age of sixteen, a year ahead of his classmates.⁶

The role of Judaism as faith and ritual in the life of the Freud family is not easily documented although Freud himself was deeply imbued with his Jewish heritage. Though he only belatedly acknowledged the enduring effect of the Bible on his thinking, even his earliest writings show evidence of it. He knew all the Jewish rituals and customs and showed a more than scholarly interest in his ancestry. The characteristic quality of his interest in speculative thinking and the riddles of the universe suggests that it was nourished by the rabbinical tradition as well as the Enlightenment and nineteenth-century rationalism.

On a more mundane level, Freud was acutely sensitive to anti-Semitism in any form. His first gre

disappointment in his revered father involved an instance of it. When Freud was twelve years old, his father told him that a Gentile had once knocked off his fur cap and shouted at him, “Jew, get off the pavement.” The young Freud was indignant and ashamed when his father added that he had complied. When Freud himself encountered anti-Semitism at the University of Vienna, where he was expected to “feel inferior and alien,” he refused to do so. He used his enforced isolation as a means of obtaining a certain degree of independence of judgment.”⁷

Freud’s Jewishness directly affected his choice of career, since in the Vienna of his day a Jew could only succeed in business, law, or medicine. Although he never felt an attraction to a career as a practicing physician, Freud decided on medicine, hoping thereby to satisfy his research interests.⁸

Given his personality and experience, it is not surprising that Freud found, in 1876, “rest and satisfaction” in a physiology laboratory while pursuing his medical degree. There he worked under the first of his great mentors, Ernst Brucke. Of Brucke, Freud later said, “He carried more weight with me than any one else in my whole life.”⁹ It was Brucke’s intellectual integrity and strict adherence to scientific standards and procedures that first attracted Freud. The two men soon became close friends. Brucke supported Freud at critical points in his career, long after Freud left the laboratory. They remained friends until Brucke’s death in 1892. From him Freud learned the rigorous scientific methods he later applied to the study of mental phenomena.

Freud remained at Brucke’s Institute for six years and left it only because of economic necessity. At the age of twenty-six Freud was still dependent on support from his aging and financially burdened father. Hopes for an assistantship in Brucke’s Institute were unrealistic. Brucke, who was forty years older than Freud and the same age as Jacob, gently advised his friend to abandon his theoretical career and stop relying on his father’s “generous improvidence.”¹⁰ The advice came at a timely moment. Freud had just fallen in love with Martha Bernays and could not marry her until he was self-supporting. Martha’s mother and father had endured eight years of being engaged. The young couple had no desire to imitate their example.

Accepting the inevitable, Freud applied for a position at the General Hospital of Vienna. As a junior physician he served in various departments and once again found a mentor of outstanding stature in the person of Theodore Meynert, the distinguished Viennese anatomist. In Meynert’s clinic he acquired his first experience in psychiatric work. Freud was again tempted to pursue a theoretical career—this time in cerebral anatomy—but once again financial considerations determined his decision to study nervous diseases. He spent fourteen months in the Department of Nervous Diseases, although he was revolted by the condition of the wards and the superintendent’s determination to keep costs down by doing as little as possible and restricting the number of patients.

In 1885, with Brucke’s enthusiastic support, Freud was awarded a much-coveted traveling bursary. This allowed him to take a step that had profound effects on his future and on the development of psychoanalysis. Freud used the grant to go to Paris to study for four-and-a-half months under the celebrated and somewhat infamous Jean-Marie Charcot—celebrated for his undeniable brilliance and ability, infamous for focusing on the unpopular topic of nervous disorders and for taking hysteria and hypnosis seriously. Charcot had made Salpêtrière, Paris’s ancient and substandard hospital for the care of women, his laboratory. In his memorial tribute to Charcot, Freud described Salpêtrière as a “wilderness of paralysis, spasms and convulsions.”¹¹ It was neither a pleasant nor a prestigious place to work.

Charcot’s method of working was to look at what was before him, to “look and look again at the things he did not understand, to deepen his impression of them day by day, till suddenly a understanding of them dawned on him.”¹² This approach frequently brought him into opposition with

colleagues who accepted current theories. On one occasion he was criticized by a student for contradicting a newly established theory of considerable merit. Charcot replied, "*La théorie, c'est bon, mais ça n'empêche pas d'exister*" (Theory is good, but it doesn't prevent things from existing.), a response that left an indelible mark on Freud's thinking and method.¹⁴

Freud described Charcot as "a man whose common sense is touched by genius," a compelling combination of qualities for Freud. He soon found himself turning away from neuropathology and toward the newer and less accepted field of psychopathology. Until Charcot began his study of hysterical patients, hysteria was thought to be either female malingering, undeserving of a respectable physician's attention, or a special disorder of the womb, correctable by the administration of an herb or by extirpation of the clitoris. Charcot dismayed the medical world by using hypnosis to bring on artificial hysteria that mimicked spontaneous hysteria in every detail. His recognition of male hysteria aroused the utmost scorn and ire.

Freud absorbed most of Charcot's methods and discoveries. One particular remark of the neurologist, made in passing, lay dormant for many years before Freud recognized its significance. Charcot remarked emphatically to one of his assistants that certain nervous disorders are always a question of "*la chose genitale*,"¹⁵ an insight whose significance Freud later felt even Charcot did not understand. Charcot's influence on Freud was unquestionably and immeasurably huge. Freud was always happy to acknowledge his indebtedness to the great neurologist. It was otherwise with Dr. Josef Breuer, whose influence on Freud began before he left for Paris and ended in a final break between the two men in 1896.

Freud had met Breuer at Brucke's Institute in the 1870s. The two men became close friends and colleagues. Breuer, fourteen years older than Freud and already an established and highly respected Viennese physician, relieved Freud's chronic poverty with frequent and generous loans. Shortly before Freud left for Paris, Breuer had told him of an extraordinary case he had been treating for hysteria. It was the case of Fraulein "Anna O.," the remarkably intelligent Bertha Pappenheim. Having cared for her father during the prolonged illness that preceded his death, she developed an array of severe symptoms after he died: her limbs became paralyzed; her sight and speech were disturbed; she had anxiety attacks, terrifying hallucinations, and suicidal impulses; and eventually she was unable to take any nourishment. Anna O. fluctuated between her "normal" self and a "bad" self. Her experience during the transition between these states excited Breuer's interest in the case. In the late afternoon Anna O. would fall into a somnolent state, followed by a deeper sleep she called "clouds," and then a hypnotic state. In the final hypnotic phase, she began to verbalize her torments and hallucinations. In the aftermath of this period she became calm and could look forward to a day or more of cheerful normality before her symptoms began to return.

Breuer, perceiving the rich possibilities of ameliorating symptoms through verbalization, began to encourage Anna to talk and then augmented her verbalizations by inducing hypnosis. When Anna O. was hypnotized, he led her to talk about the origin of each of her symptoms. To his amazement the symptoms caused them to disappear. He referred to the process as "catharsis." Unfortunately the joy of Breuer's discovery was marred by two subsequent developments. First, despite Breuer's persistent belief that the symptoms disappeared, his patient was never entirely cured. The second event concerned Breuer's emotional reactions and was charged with consequences for the development of psychoanalysis.

Breuer became aware of the fact that Anna O. had fallen in love with him. Evidently unable to tolerate and even investigate this fact, Breuer terminated the treatment. He abruptly announced his decision to Anna O., who up to that time had been improving rapidly. Breuer shortly thereafter was summoned to his patient's house with the alarming news that her condition had taken a sudden turn for the worse. Upon observing his patient, Breuer suddenly recognized that she was simulating

pregnancy and childbirth and surmised that in her fantasy she was delivering his child. Breuer, who looked upon his patient as being asexual and completely reticent about sexual matters, fled the house.

Fascinated with Breuer's story, Freud tried to interest Charcot in its implications, but without success. Charcot continued to use hypnotism to induce rather than alleviate hysterical symptoms. Both hypnotism and catharsis demonstrated that ideas played a powerful role in neuroses. Freud became increasingly aware of the potential importance of the sexual content of these ideas in understanding hysteria and possibly other neuroses. Many years were to pass, however, before Freud could establish the way sexual ideas and feelings resulted in neurotic suffering.

When Freud returned to Vienna in 1885, he resumed his close relationship with Breuer. The first sign of a change in Breuer's manner came in the form of an outburst against Freud's approaching marriage. To Freud the four years of his engagement were too long by far; to Breuer they appeared too short. He seemingly resented this sign of independence in his protégé. Freud took another step toward independence from his benefactor by accepting his last loan from Breuer nine months before he married Martha Bernays in September of 1886, although the final break was still a decade away. After the marriage the two families maintained their close ties, and the Freuds named two of their children after members of the Breuer family.

The two men continued to discuss and exchange ideas on hysteria. In applying Breuer's cathartic technique to his own patients, Freud had discovered that not all patients could be hypnotized and that even in those cases where hypnosis was induced, catharsis was not assured. After pondering the significance of these two facts, Freud began to concentrate his efforts on discovering the bases and mechanisms of all neuroses, rather than on removing the symptoms of hysteria. His observations forced him to recognize that sexual factors were repeatedly associated with the onset of a neurosis. Further, he found that different types of sexual problems produced different pictures of neurotic disorders. He used these distinctions as a means of classifying neuroses.

In discussing these issues with Breuer, Freud tried to revive the older man's flagging interest in hysteria with a view to a joint publication of their findings. Breuer remained curiously resistant to the idea until Freud realized that Breuer's reluctance seemed to be associated with his embarrassment and sense of responsibility over the events that terminated the case of Anna O. To reassure him, Freud told him of one of his own patients who had suddenly flung her arms about him at a critical point in the therapy. Freud said that the two incidents were examples of transference, the process whereby patients during psychoanalytic treatment develop emotional reactions toward their physicians that reenact their relations with previous love objects. Breuer, apparently reassured and relieved by this explanation, agreed to the joint publication, but differences in scientific ideas and the widening personal rift between the two men made the task a painful one. Freud's "initial satisfaction" with the undertaking turned into "uneasiness." When he wrote to his new friend Wilhelm Fliess, a Berlin physician and biologist, in 1893 to announce the publication of the first joint effort, he said, "It has meant a long battle with my partner." Nevertheless, *Studies in Hysteria* was published in 1895.

The scientific issues that drove Breuer and Freud apart centered on their differences concerning the role of sexuality in creating the intolerable conflicts that produce pathogenic effects. Breuer was ambivalent at best and often completely unwilling to accept Freud's belief that sexual problems were the essential causal factor in a neurosis. He was also disturbed by the conclusions Freud was drawing from his investigations of his patients' sexual lives. Breuer's negative responses to his discoveries became intolerable to Freud and he turned to Fliess, who had an intense interest in scientific problems.

Freud and Fliess had met in 1877, ironically through Breuer. They were mutually attracted at once, and the friendship soon became intense. Fliess was two years younger than Freud and possessed a love of speculation and imaginative intellectual play that Freud tried so hard to control and channel.

himself. Fliess set no limits on his own flights of imagination, building an elaborate structure theory on his discovery of sexual periodicity in men, women, and the universe.

Freud endowed Fliess with even more qualities of insight and brilliance than that unquestionably remarkable man actually possessed in order to turn him into a mentor and much-needed confidant. Fliess thus offered the support that Freud could no longer find from Breuer. Their friendship was approaching its most intense stage in 1896 when Freud made his final break with Breuer. Freud confided to Fliess that he had developed a violent antipathy for his former friend, supporter, and mentor.

Ernest Jones, relying on Freud's letters to Fliess, rather than on Freud's later reconstruction of the causes of his differences with Breuer, believed that in the 1890s Freud suffered from a "very considerable psychoneurosis," and that Fliess was essential to him as a means of alleviating his intense suffering, which usually took the form of paralyzing self-doubts. These were also the years during which Freud did his most original work. In 1895 Breuer wrote to Fliess, "Freud's intellect soaring at its highest. I gaze after him as a hen at a hawk."¹⁶ A year later Freud and Breuer made the final break.

Fliess served as a catalyst for Freud's ideas as well as a source of emotional support. Freud wrote Fliess in 1895, "One cannot do without people who have the courage to think new things before they are in a position to demonstrate them."¹⁷ But intellectual differences soon began to disturb the closeness of the relationship, and Fliess's inability to tolerate criticism of any sort might have led to their final break in 1900. By this time Freud had found a new source of strength in himself. In 1897 he had begun the painful and difficult process of analyzing his own unconscious. He had no precedent to follow, and in the initial stages, it drove him even more toward a dependence on Fliess. By the century's close, however, Freud had reached an emotional and intellectual maturity that remained with him permanently. An important offshoot of his own psychoanalysis was his massive work *The Interpretation of Dreams*, published in 1900.

Relieved of his overwhelming need for mentors and the repeated reenactment of the love-hate relationship of his childhood, Freud began to consolidate his ideas and hypotheses into a theory of psychoanalysis. Since his ideas were radical, unconventional, and often shocking to his colleagues, he needed to support them with convincing evidence. To provide this supporting evidence for his hypotheses and discoveries, Freud wrote a series of case studies that presented at least a small portion of his vast reservoir of observations and findings. But to write the case studies meant overcoming unusually formidable obstacles.

First, there was the problem of confidentiality. Freud knew that his patients would not speak openly of their most closely guarded secrets if they feared that their intimacies might one day become public. In addition, the closely knit fabric of Viennese life required that he disguise perfectly the identity of the patients whose cases he wished to use. Paradoxically, he found that it was "far easier to divulge the patient's most intimate secrets than the most innocent and trivial facts about him; for, whereas the former would not throw light on his identity, the latter by which he was generally recognized, would make it obvious to every one."¹⁸ Yet it was precisely these trivial details that were of great importance for the intelligibility and coherence of the material.

Second, the kind of material that Freud elicited by prodding his patients' psyches was both extremely complex and highly unusual. The most significant matters arose from the unconscious—level of the mind dismissed entirely, or at best considered suspect, by most of his medical colleagues. Moreover, the materials supplied by his patients alternately revealed the past and present, the conscious and unconscious, fact and fiction. Many of their verbalizations were contradictory and we

cloaked in varying forms such as dreams, fantasies, memories, associations, and symptoms. The meaning of these multifaceted materials could only be discovered through an equally complex and unusual form of analysis.

Third, the analyst was not an objective observer and reporter. Rather, he was the object of intense feelings on the part of the patient and had to examine with care his own reactions to each patient. Freud often presented this interplay in his written cases as a combat of wills by which he tried to convince his patients and his readers that the knowledge and technique of psychoanalysis could explain and remove neurotic disorders. Freud also used the theme of combat of wills as a literary device with an eye on the reading audience. To write in a reasonably compact and readable format, Freud compressed and synthesized in his case studies an overabundance of materials collected over many months and years; he countered or anticipated attacks on the credibility of his technique and theory; and he interpolated theoretical remarks, general comments, historical and other digressions, and suggestions for further investigation.

What Freud had to leave out was equally dismaying. He wrote at one point to Fliess:

It is a regrettable fact that no account of psychoanalysis can reproduce the impressions received by the analyst as he conducts it, and the final sense of conviction can never be obtained from reading about it but only from directly experiencing it.¹⁹

It took all of Freud's considerable literary powers to overcome these obstacles and to weave the diverse components into an exposition that served his many purposes, while remaining convincing, readable, and interesting. He found that he could not use a straightforward narrative form or, to use his words, that "linear presentation is not a very adequate means of describing complicated mental processes going on in different layers of the mind."²⁰ He sometimes despaired of finding an adequate form. In 1909, he wrote to Jung, "How bungling are our attempts to reproduce an analysis; how pitifully we tear to pieces these great works of art Nature has created in the mental sphere."²¹

But he persisted in his efforts and eventually published six lengthy case histories. That he was keenly aware of their limitations in serving as scientific evidence is apparent in many of his passing remarks. In the introduction to his case on obsessional neurosis, he wrote:

The crumbs of knowledge offered in these pages, though they have been laboriously enough collected, may not in themselves prove very satisfying; but they may serve as a starting point for the work of other investigators, and the common endeavor may bring the success which is perhaps beyond the reach of individual effort.²²

Freud adjusted the written presentation of the six cases to the neurosis, the subject, the circumstances, and the purposes of each situation; in general, however, they followed a similar pattern. Each began with an introduction, comprised of comments on the technical difficulties of the particular case, his primary and secondary purposes in presenting it, and brief remarks on his methods and theoretical assumptions. This was followed by a presentation of the clinical picture, interlarded with biographical and other materials, and an analysis of the case. He ended his cases with a discussion that might touch again on matters of theory, with supporting arguments for his points of whatever seemed in need of further investigation. A brief description of the purpose and specific characteristics of each of these six cases will shed some light on how this general format and aim were realized in practice.

Dora (1905) was the first case Freud published. He began her treatment in 1900, the year that he published *The Interpretation of Dreams*, but vacillated for five years before allowing her case to be published. His hesitation was apparently due to professional discretion as well as due to his fears that the case might provoke undue scandal or criticism. Moreover, it was merely a fragment of a case.

since Dora had broken off the treatment abruptly after only three months, a circumstance that Freud explained as due to his failure to master her transference to him of emotions she originally directed toward her father. As a result, the treatment was unsuccessful and the picture of her disorder incomplete.

Nevertheless, Freud felt that this case merited publication because it showed, however imperfectly, the internal structure of a case of hysteria and, more important, “how dream interpretation is woven into the history of a treatment, and how it can become the means of filling in amnesias and elucidating symptoms.”²³ Freud used his “Postscript” to the case to discuss the theoretical and practical implications of transference.

His *Analysis of a Phobia in a Five-Year-Old Boy*, known familiarly as the “Little Hans Case” (1909), is unusual in that information was elicited from the small patient by his father, under Freud’s tutelage. Little Hans’s father had kept a record of the development of his cheerful and amiable child from the age of three, coming to Freud when the child was five with the disturbing news that his son had developed a phobia preventing him from leaving the house: Hans feared that a horse would bite him if he ventured on the street. The two men thus became partners in their joint effort to relieve Hans of his fear and were eventually successful in their endeavors.

The case was of special interest to Freud since it illustrated both theory and technique. It supported his hypothesis regarding the existence and importance of infantile sexuality, and it illustrated the way in which a phobia, identified by Freud as a symptom that forms part of a neurosis, can develop. Its major significance in regard to technique was related to the part played by suggestion in determining the course of the analysis. In the case of Hans, who often had to have help from his father to verbalize his thoughts and feelings, the hypothesis that suggestion played a major role seemed plausible. Freud, however, argued that there were many instances in which Hans had shown considerable independence in his ideas. To cap this argument he confessed that he deliberately omitted telling Hans’s father that the child would approach the subject of childbirth by way of talking about the excretory function, a prediction based on Freud’s previous analytic experience. Hans, without any hints or promptings from his uninformed father, fulfilled Freud’s expectations and thus innocently offered confirmation of the hypothesis.

Freud’s third case, *Notes on a Case of Obsessional Neurosis*, or “The Rat Man” (1909), was also a fragmentary case, due to medical discretion in this instance rather than incomplete analysis. It is unique among the cases in that Freud’s original notes, recorded on a daily basis, were found in his papers after his death. Their subsequent publication thus allows the reader insight into the process by which Freud chose, condensed, and organized the materials into a case study. Freud’s modest remarks in his introduction that the case allows him to make “some disconnected statement of an aphoristic character upon the genesis and finer psychological mechanisms of obsessional processes.”²⁴

The case shows Freud’s free association method—first used in his treatment of Dora—in its pure form. Initially it was only when his patient showed resistance that Freud interrupted his monologue of free associations to remind him that “overcoming resistances was a law of treatment.”²⁵ Later he offered his patient some principles of psychoanalytic theory, interpretations of obsessional ideas, and conclusions regarding the precipitating cause of the neurosis in order to elicit and test his patient’s reactions.

Freud’s *Psychoanalytic Notes on an Autobiographical Account of a Case of Paranoia*, or “The Schreber Case” (1911), is noteworthy because the source of the materials analyzed by Freud was an autobiographical memoir published in 1903. The author, Dr. jur. Daniel Paul Schreber, once

presiding judge on the Court of Appeals in Germany, wrote an account of the incapacitating mental illness that led to his being discharged from his duties and being treated for many years in an asylum. The memoir was a valuable source because, as Freud said in his introduction, at the time access to patients suffering from paranoia was possible only for analysts attached to public institutions, and such patients had the useful but unusual peculiarity of disclosing, in a distorted form, what other patients tended to keep carefully secret.

Freud used the materials in the memoir to present a picture and analysis of paranoia, as well as to present some ideas that he was to explore in greater detail in later years, including comments on repression, the nature of the instincts, and narcissism. In his "Postscript," he remarked that the case might well "serve to show that [his disciple Carl] Jung had excellent grounds for his assertion that the mythopoeic forces of mankind are not extinct."

When Freud wrote his next case, *From the History of an Infantile Neurosis*, or "The Wolfman" (1918), he was already deeply involved in a controversy with Jung and Alfred Adler, two of his most devoted followers, that soon led to a final rift. Freud used the case to argue against divergences that he felt were incompatible with the principles of psychoanalysis.

"The Wolfman" allowed Freud to trace the origins of his patient's current and severe neurotic symptoms back to an infantile neurosis. It permitted him to study infantile neurosis without the limitations imposed by little Hans's inability to verbalize easily and to follow the erratic development of infantile neurosis into adulthood. Even Freud found many of the details related to him by the patient to be extraordinary and incredible, but he was delighted that they confirmed so many of his hypotheses about infantile sexuality. He concluded that the precipitant of the original neurosis was his patient's observation of his parents' sexual intercourse at the age of one and a half, which had led to an overwhelming fear of being devoured (seduced) by his father, a fear that took the form of being afraid that he would be eaten by a wolf. The patient had long forgotten this "primal scene," as it was later called, but it had left an indelible mark on his life, leading him to build and rebuild complicated defenses against a strong homosexual tendency that had been stimulated by the incident. Freud also considered issues such as memory of events and fantasy in the infantile neurosis in presenting this elaborate, difficult, and important case.

Freud's sixth and last case, *The Psycho-genesis of a Case of Homosexuality in a Woman* (1920), was far simpler in form and content. Its outstanding characteristic stemmed from the fact that the patient submitted herself to treatment only to please her parents and had no desire to be "cured." Freud used the case to discuss ego eroticism, or narcissism, and the determinants and characteristics of various forms of homosexuality.

The case studies formed the core of observation upon which Freud constructed a psychoanalytic psychology. The method employed to elicit these observations—psychoanalysis—involved the cooperation of patient and psychoanalyst in an effort to alleviate the pain and suffering resulting from psychological conflict.

During the years 1915 to 1917, Freud gave a series of lectures on psychoanalysis to an audience composed mainly of medical students at the University of Vienna. Aware that he had a particularly skeptical audience, and one that expected to be able to see the phenomena with which they were dealing, Freud introduced his subject by speaking of the difficulties his audience would confront in believing in psychic phenomena. He placed part of the responsibility on their training, which always focused their attention on the observable aspects of anatomy, physics, chemistry, and biology and never on the psychical life "in which, after all, the achievements of this marvelously complex organism reaches its peak." Then characteristically, he disarmed his listeners by saying that their new difficulty was the fault of psychoanalysis itself, for two of the hypotheses on which it was based "a

an insult to the entire world and have earned its dislike. One of them offends against an intellectual prejudice, the other against an aesthetic moral one.”²⁶ The first hypothesis states that a large portion of mental processes are unconscious; the second is the assertion that sexual impulses, in both the narrower and wider sense of the word, play an extremely large part in the causation of nervous and mental diseases.

These two hypotheses lay at the heart of the problem Freud faced in developing a method. He needed to find a technique capable of eliciting from a subject the information that he or she did not even recognize as existing. Moreover, the source of such information could not be localized. Only a few scientists at the end of the nineteenth century were willing to postulate its existence, although the concept had enjoyed some popularity earlier. Finally, the elicited material, which took the form of thoughts, feelings, attitudes, internalized objects, dreams, fantasies, was meaningless without interpretation.

Breuer's cathartic technique had provided limited access to such materials and had shown dramatic therapeutic effects. These effects were explained as arising from the discharge of emotional energy that previously had been “strangled” and thus appeared in the distorted form of symptoms. Once the discharge, or “abreaction,” of this energy took place through verbalization, the symptom disappeared. But Freud found that the cathartic method affected only the symptoms. It failed to get to the root of the patient's neurotic disorder, which he believed arose from the whole network of underlying and interlocking ideas and emotions. Oddly enough, one of the difficulties with the cathartic method was that it worked too easily; hypnosis allowed patients to bypass their normal control over painful matters that had been deeply buried.

More important, therapeutically and theoretically, than abreaction was the investigation of resistances to unconscious materials. Once this network of underlying unconscious emotions was revealed, it could be replaced with conscious acts of judgment that recognized and then either accepted or condemned what had formerly been repressed.²⁷

After some experimentation with alternative techniques for carrying out this type of investigation, Freud adopted the method of simply asking his patients to lie on a couch in a comfortable position free from distractions and try to say whatever came to mind, without censorship or selection. In listening to his patients' associations under these conditions, Freud noted gaps in their narratives. He believed they were caused by selective amnesia, and he directed his patients' attention and concentration to filling them in. The patients then became anxious and uncomfortable and energetically resisted the unwelcome memories. By examining the form such resistance took, he found he could begin to construct the pattern of the underlying conflicts.

He soon discovered that these patterns revealed themselves in an even more illuminating way when patients began to transfer to the physician the emotional attachments they had originally established with their parents or other intimates. To demonstrate to his patients that these networks of emotion and patterns of response appeared in their resistances in the transference, in every new relationship they established, and even in the most trivial aspects of their lives, Freud had to interpret them. This “art of interpretation” drew upon the theoretical system Freud had constructed over many years of clinical work. In making his interpretations, Freud did not simply throw hypothetical constructs at the back of his patients' reclining heads. Rather, he used his hypotheses to guide his own observations of the emerging materials, to point out and explain determinants that his patients failed to recognize, and, in some cases, to question his patients on particular points.

Freud, as earlier mentioned, had a penchant for imaginative speculation and metapsychological theorizing. Reading about Freud's complex and closely interwoven theory without access to the mass of his unrecorded cases and without working through some 600 papers and books in which he recorded

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