

Freud and the Industrial Self

1. Welcome to this 24th Video lecture. In this lecture we will explore the emergent industrial self through the work of one of the age's most seminal thinkers on the self, Sigmund Freud and how the new field of psychoanalysis which he founds understands the nature of religion.
2. But, first we must begin with a quick word on Freud's philosophical mentor: Arthur Schopenhauer. During the height of the wave of idealist and romantic thinkers in Germany, whom we have covered in earlier lectures, Schopenhauer, in a contrarian spirit, translated (1) the protean subjectivity of transcendental idealism into the materialist, objective (2) language of power. An individual's (3) conscious feelings and desires were the product of unconscious, (4) instinctual forces of nature. When he first began teaching this reduction of idealism to materialism, first person subjectivity into impersonal objectivity, his words fell on deaf ears. However as the industrial revolution took off by mid-century, his fortunes reversed, and in his old age Schopenhauer became Germany's pre-eminent philosopher, his materialism, atheism and cynical pessimism virtually synonymous with philosophy in the popular mind.
3. Now Freud would argue that he was not presenting a philosophy at all, but rather researching objective scientific fact, but he would follow Schopenhauer, whom he admits he may have read in school, in interpreting human feelings and desires in terms of unconscious instinctual force. He will use Newton's first law of motion to argue that the (1) evolution of life generates two conflicting inertial drives: (2) first, life's inertial momentum to keep itself going by reproducing more life and (3) an opposing inertial force drawing life back towards death, an inertial drag on life, so to speak, that not only gradually exhausts its energy in the individual organism, but also manifests itself in destructive impulses to destroy life, all under the inertial pull to restore the prior inorganic equilibrium that the emergence of life had disturbed. The force of life finds expression in consciousness as (4) sexual desire, extended beyond the desire to reproduce to include sensual pleasure of any sort; the latter finds expression in (4) aggression, whether directed outwards towards others in anger and sadism or deflected back inwards upon oneself in depression and guilt.
4. Freud argues that Schopenhauer's objective and impersonal instinctual energy, (1) an "it" in us, or in Latin, the "id," is (2) a nexus of this sexual and (3) aggressive energy. Freud argues along with Schopenhauer, that these instinctual impulses feel to the individual more as

temptations emerging unsummoned from without, alien and unwanted, with which he or she is afflicted rather than desired by the self. (4) The individual's "I" or again, in Latin, his or her "ego", the locus of self-consciousness, is an inertial drive to (5) maintain the momentum of his or her individual identity and purpose in life, by channeling this instinctual energy welling up from the unconscious id, into safe and productive outlets to optimally satisfy their interest and desires. (6) Here too there is a conflict of two drives, one a pleasure principle devoted towards the optimization of sex and pleasure, the other a "reality principle" that seeks to optimize its instrumental efficacy in the world. Finally Freud locates yet a third psychic power, (7) a supervisory agency, or superego, (8) as an expression of the ideals of the individual's culture, that inspires the individual to transcend his base instincts by acting for the good of society rather than simply focusing on himself. The superego is the individual's idealized self, his moral conscience, (9) which calls for him to transcend himself, punishing him with moral anxiety or guilt when he falls back into self-centeredness

5. In this way Freud analyzes subjectivity into a conflictual series of opposed objective inertial forces: (1) Life vs death, (2) individual vs species, (3) society vs individual. He will understand anxiety, as well as impulsive and rigid behaviors (4) in terms of conflicts between these forces where unwanted feelings and desires are "repressed" from consciousness until like steam under pressure, the energy eventually explodes.
6. Freud thereby presents an industrial model of the self, one that can be modeled in terms of the transformative new technology of his own day, the steam locomotive. Instinctual energy is like steam, always under pressure continuously being generated in the boiler by the burning coal. The id is (1) like this boiler; the ego, (2) like the engineer whose job is to channel the steam into the pistons that power the locomotive to move down the tracks. The engineer is in turn supervised (3) by stationmasters along the route who telegraph instructions to coordinate with other trains running on the same railway, and ultimately the home office, who will punish, even fire him if he does not do his job satisfactorily, that is if he fails to keep the train on time and running smoothly.
7. The engineer's task can be overwhelming: (1) he needs to keep an eye on the pressure gauges, venting steam if the pressure builds in the boiler; he also needs to keep an eye out (2) for potential obstacles on the track as well as vehicles that may be crossing the track oblivious to the train as it barrels down it. He can blow the whistle to warn those ahead, but

ultimately his control of the train is limited. He can hardly stop it on a dime. (3) And he needs to keep an eye on the clock, periodically checking his pocket watch, to ensure that he stays on schedule, not running too fast or too slow, so as to coordinate with all the other trains on the railroad.

8. If he fails at any of these three tasks, catastrophe threatens. (1) He can “blow a gasket” if the pressure builds too high. To prevent this he may need to blow off steam from time to time. (2) On the other hand he can run off the rails if the train picks up too much steam around a bend or (3) become a wreck if another train plows into him. He can be sidelined, to make way for another more important express train. (4) He can also breakdown if he runs his engine too long, too hard without a break, neglects to lubricate the machinery or a spanner is thrown into the works.
9. The industrial self, like the steam engine, needs to both (1) optimize productivity at work, in order to survive in the competitive marketplace, let alone get ahead, and find safe, that is socially acceptable (2) outlets to relieve pressure and vent pent up sexual and aggressive desires at home. Sexual activity that does not lead to the production of offspring is from the viewpoint of society, a waste of time and energy and so is discouraged if not positively punished. And yet he cannot simply repress his sexual and aggressive urges. (3) Ideally he can sublimate them, transforming his base instincts into culturally sublime outlets like art and religion.
10. The home is a refuge from the industrial workplace, a haven where the industrial worker can relax, recharge his batteries, vent frustrations from the job, repair any damage so as to be ready to return and be an efficient tool at work.
11. Freud argued that psychological trauma creates blockages where pressure can build unawares. He found confirmation in reports of survivors of train wrecks (1) who would walk away unscathed and seemingly unaffected from an accident only to fall victim to overwhelming anxiety, obsessive thoughts, compulsive behaviors, mania and depression days later once things had seemly returned to normal. He argued that they had (2) repressed the fear and terror of the original trauma until he course release it (3) safely later, albeit indirectly and only in part. But since the indirect release does not address the original trauma, relief is only temporary, pressure is bound to rebuild again, leading to the continuous

neurotic repetition of a perverse, that is irrational, pseudo-religious ritual in a continual yet ultimately futile effort to restore psychic order, one's peace of mind.

12. For Freud trauma is inevitable, and begins with birth itself, as evidenced in the infant's cry. Freud will track stages of psychosexual development in terms of how the individual learns to deal with trauma by psychologically separating himself or herself from mother and father, society and world to become an autonomous adult.
13. In doing so he recapitulates the trajectory of the creation myths we have seen in archaic religion in early Israel and its Mesopotamian and Egyptian roots. (1) For example just as in Genesis, the first flash of conception is followed by a separation of the waters above and below, or in (2) Mesopotamia, a separation of the pure fresh water of the river from the brackish salt water of the sea, so the first task of psychological development for Freud (3) is for the child to differentiate its own feelings and desires from those of its mother with whom it begins life in mimetic attunement.
14. Freud will also see this process of successive separations as violent sources of potential trauma. For example, just as Adam and Eve disobey God's commands and are punished with banishment from paradise, so a child disobeying their parents risks punishment, but is likewise inevitable, even necessary, to become one's own autonomous self. So too, (1) just as Marduk slays Tiamat, the primal maternal sea monster and splits her carcass to create the human cosmos, so the young boy must separate from his mother, fighting through fears of abandonment and resisting the now regressive pull back into the undifferentiated unity of the womb. As the child grows, the maternal embrace originally sacred, becomes demonic in that the safety and nurturance it promises is at the cost of remaining a child.
15. Freud famously understands the boy's task of separation from the father to become his own authority through a psychological retrieval of the archaic Greek myth of Oedipus. Coming into one's own requires (1) figuratively "killing" the authority figure of childhood, the father and sublimating maternal love through (2) marrying a wife, who unconsciously evokes past mimetic attunement with one's own original mother. Through marriage one (3) becomes a father to one's own kids, thus reproducing the (4) inertial momentum of the species.
16. Despite these affinities between his model of psychosexual development and religious beliefs, Freud will claim that religion is an illusion. In fact it is these very affinities that convince Freud that religious beliefs (1) are a projection of psychosexual development onto

the cosmos as a whole, as an objective, scientific explanation of reality renders religious understandings superfluous.

17. However, while diagnosing religious belief and practice as an illusion, it is (1) a shared illusion affirmed as reality by all in society. Which makes it a (2) useful, culturally adaptive illusion. That is, religion offers socially sanctioned illusions and rituals that (3) can allay fears and soothe anxieties evoked by the existential traumas of the human condition: vulnerability to suffering and ultimately death itself. (4) He interprets mystical religious feeling as a comforting nostalgia for (5) the original undifferentiated unity with the mother in the womb. He interprets (6) religious guilt as a sublimation (7) of oedipal fears of paternal punishment. Thus while a shared cultural neurosis, (8) religion can serve as a substitute for, and so a protection against individual neurosis and all the social dysfunctions that personal neurotic symptoms engender.
18. Freud also retrieves spiritual direction by translating it into psychoanalytic practice. (1) He claims to cure neurosis through listening to his patient's temptations and inspirations, dreams and fantasies and interpreting them allegorically, in psychological rather than spiritual language but with (2) the same goal of liberation from one's inner demons now understood as neurotic symptoms, and the attainment of health, from whose Latin equivalent, *salus* the religious term "salvation" is derived. So too (3) the relationship between patient and analyst is as crucial to the healing process as is the faith of the believer in his or her spiritual master or priest. (4) Michel Foucault has argued that the psychoanalytic session is a secularization of the Christian sacrament of confession to a priest. Or conversely, that confession is therapeutic, enlisting the patient's religious resources to work through demonic threats to a meaningful, "purpose-driven" life.
19. Freud does claim however, that as science and technology continue to advance, humanity is reaching the day when it can shed its childhood religious illusions and come into its own as a rationally autonomous species in control of its own destiny. Medicine for example is replacing the need for healing rituals. Greater technological power and control over nature, reduces our vulnerability and hence our need to propitiate and appease it. For Freud, the scientist, in particular the psychoanalyst, is the prophet calling for humanity to courageously face reality as it is, rather than as the loving all-powerful parents he would wish reality to be.

(1) In other words, scientific truth is what Freud holds sacred, and scientific research and study the activities that give human life its highest meaning and purpose.