The introduction of the Oedipus Complex and the reinvention of instinct

Freud’s *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*

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*Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, first published in 1905, is undoubtedly one of Freud’s most important texts and, in many respects, the most contemporary. It is a *summa* in which Freud summarizes and articulates his insights into the meaning of sexuality for human existence in general, and for psychopathology in particular. As can be deduced from the fact that he added several passages to every new edition of his book, Freud himself considered this text to be extremely important for his psychoanalytic theory. In these new passages he explained the new insights and theories at which he had arrived since the publication of the first version. I write ‘added’ because Freud invariably left the earlier versions virtually unchanged. If we leave out the passages that were written after 1905, we are more or less left with the first edition as it was originally published. This means, on the one hand, that the *Three Essays* is, to some extent, an unbalanced text. The later versions are, at times, simply contradictory: Freud’s theories of 1924 are quite different from those he defended some twenty years earlier. On the other hand, however – and for the same reason – *Three Essays* is a precious document for an in-depth study of the evolution of Freudian thinking on psychopathology in its relation to sexuality. More particularly, it makes it possible to investigate the evolution of Freud’s views on the relation between ‘normality’ (‘psychic health’) and pathology. That is the aim of this article.

The fundamental hypothesis that guides my reading of the *Three Essays* is as follows: the earlier versions of the text – those of 1905 and 1910, to be precise – contain a quasi *patho-analytic* interpretation of the relation between sexuality (which is the domain in which, according to Freud, the difference between humans and animals is decided – hence the primacy of this domain in Freudian thinking), pathology and ‘normality’. Or, more precisely and more radically, these early editions contain a deconstruction *avant la lettre* of the normative and essentialist distinction between ‘normality’ and pathology. This ‘deconstruction’ is carried out by way of an analysis of human sexuality for which the so-called ‘crystal-principle’ serves as a fundamental heuristic guideline. This is why I refer to a ‘patho-analytic interpretation’ of human existence. Freud’s ‘crystal-principle’ implies that one has to start from psychopathology in order to understand properly the basic structures of human existence. Like crystals, humans too ‘break’ along fault lines that were previously hidden. Psychopathology shows the fundamental and hidden structure of human existence that, in turn, has to be rethought in the light of these fault lines. Pathology thus appears, as we will see, as a necessary and inevitable failure of human existence such that ‘normality’ (‘psychic health’) can no longer be defined in any positive way.

The later editions – and more specifically those of 1920 and 1924 – are much less patho-analytic. On the contrary, they seem to contain a developmental psychology, albeit one that is psychoanalytically inspired. This leads to a reformulation of the meaning of pathology for the understanding of human existence. Pathology is no longer thought of as a necessary and structural failure of human existence. Rather, pathology is seen as a secondary modification of it that – at
least in principle – can and should be avoided. At the same time, and for reasons we shall have to explore, pathology is henceforth regarded as developmental disturbance, and psychological development itself as a teleological process founded on biology. In this way sexuality seems to regain, once again, all the characteristics of the instinct and it becomes possible to give a meaningful and determinate – as well as inevitably normative and inherently conservative – content to the concept of ‘normality’.

But it is one thing to describe an evolution; it is quite another thing to understand it. In other words, how can we explain the radical changes in Freud’s argumentation? In the earlier versions of the Three Essays the notion of an organic repression plays a pivotal role in the deconstruction of the hierarchical opposition between ‘normality’ and pathology. This notion goes along with a radical and inextricable opposition between infantile and adult sexuality that problematizes, from the outset, every developmental and teleological perspective. In the later versions, on the other hand, it is no longer this ‘organic repression’ but instead the Oedipus complex that structures Freud’s position. The Oedipus complex, as Freud defines it, undoes the radical opposition between infantile and adult sexuality, and as a result makes it possible to think in developmental terms. More specifically, the reintroduction of a normative and essentialist definition of ‘normality’ is the inevitable counterpart of this shift. It is therefore – at least this is my hypothesis – the introduction of the Oedipus complex in the 1920s which explains the Kehre in Freud’s text.

All of this remains, of course, still very obscure and needs to be elucidated in detail. In order to do so I will first look at the early editions of the Three Essays, and more particularly at the first part of the text, which, strangely enough, remained virtually unchanged after its first publication in 1905.

The patho-analysis of human existence

The first part of the Three Essays – Freud’s discussion of the ‘sexual aberrations’ (Sexuelle Abirrungen) – is often considered to be less important than the following two parts of the text, on infantile sexuality and the transformations of puberty respectively. In this first part Freud considers the different sexual syndromes (homosexuality and the so-called perversions/paraphilias) as they are distinguished by traditional sexology and psychiatry. Freud, so it is often said, mainly discusses these syndromes in order to show that the sexual drive has no object of its own assigned to it by nature. Precisely for this reason, the drive should be distinguished from the instinct as it is found in the animal world. Of course, this is not incorrect. But there is much more at stake in this chapter than the traditional interpretation of it allows us to see.

Freud starts out from what he calls the ‘popular opinion’ on sexuality, according to which sexuality is a heterosexual instinct that only appears at the beginning of puberty and that is absent from childhood. Proceeding from this Freud not only makes it clear that the different forms of (sexual) pathology (homosexuality and the perversions) are far from monolithic and cover a great variety of concrete phenomena, but also – and more radically – that they have to be placed on a continuum with what is usually considered to be ‘normal’: that is, according to the ‘popular opinion’, heterosexuality. The way in which Freud argues for this continuity implies a radical deconstruction of the essentialist and normative distinction between pathology and ‘normality’. How are we to understand the fact that it is precisely this last point that is neglected in many readings of the first part of the Three Essays.

With regard to the problem of homosexuality, Freud writes in a footnote from 1915 that we have all made both homosexual and heterosexual object choices in early childhood so that – despite the qualitative differences at the level of manifest behaviour – in the unconscious both homosexual and heterosexual tendencies necessarily and structurally coexist. At the level of the determining factors for manifest object choice (whether these factors are accidental or constitutional) there are only quantitative differences: whether we become hetero- or homosexual is exclusively dependent upon the relative strength of the unconscious investments of objects of both sexes, and not on the presence or absence of the investment of either male or female objects. The strength of these unconscious investments is, furthermore, not given once and for all. It varies across time and in the course of our personal history. This explains, according to Freud, why manifest homosexuals can become homosexual under certain circumstances – one thinks for instance of homosexuality among prison inmates – and vice versa.

With regard to the perversions, Freud also stresses their fundamental continuity with what popular opinion considers to be a ‘normal’ sex life. At first sight, however, his claims about the relation between perversion and ‘normality’ seem to have a different status than the previous statements on the relation between homo- and heterosexuality. With regard to the latter, Freud primarily (although not exclusively) emphasizes
the absence of qualitative differences between the various determining factors that are situated at the level of the unconscious. The former, however, relates to manifest sexual behaviour. It is a matter of all of us being, to a greater or lesser extent, manifest ‘perverts’. But this is only an apparent contradiction. Freud not only observes that there are no ‘pure’ heterosexual relations – that is, heterosexual relations in which ‘perverse’ elements would play no significant role – but also explains why this is the case. This explanation leads him back to the unconscious factors that determine our manifest sexual behaviour. It is in this context that Freud introduces the hypothesis of an ‘organic repression’ – what in his later texts he calls an ‘original repression’ (Urverdrängung) – which not only accounts for the genesis of the unconscious but also plays a crucial role in the deconstruction of the concept of ‘normality’.

Freud first introduces this hypothesis in his letters to Fliess in order to explain how it is possible that the recollection in puberty of pleasurable infantile experiences can cause displeasure. The problem is as follows: in the context of the elaboration of his seduction theory in the explanation of neurosis, Freud progressively came to the conclusion that in order for the seduction to be pathogenic it should have a perverse character9 and – most importantly – that the little child should be capable of experiencing pleasure through it. This insight led to a problem that occupied Freud for many years. Why is it that these pleasurable infantile experiences, when recalled in puberty, cause displeasure which accounts for their repression into the unconscious and for the eventual generation of neurotic symptoms through their continuous tendency to return to the (pre-) conscious system?

As always, when confronted with problems concerning the origins of human subjectivity – which in fact for Freud refers to the origins of the unconscious system – Freud relies on Von Haeckel’s biogenetic principle, which states that ontogenesis repeats phylogenesis in a condensed format. For our ancestors – just as for animals today – most oral and anal experiences were pleasurable in an unproblematic way. When humans started to walk erect, however, the erotogenic significance of the sense of smell and of oral and anal experiences diminished considerably; at the same time, the (erotogenic) importance of visual experiences increased. The sense of sight became dominant in our relation to ourselves, to others and to the world that surrounds us in general. Every human being, Freud claims, repeats this evolution – which is rooted in our organic/biological constitution – at the beginning of his or her existence. The little child experiences oral and anal pleasures in an unproblematic way, as did our distant ancestors. At the beginning of puberty, however, the memory of these experiences is repressed and replaced by what Freud calls the ‘reaction-formations’ of disgust (in relation to oral and anal drives), shame (in relation to the scopic drive) and morality or guilt.10

It is not unimportant to note that here, according to Freud, the original ‘oral’ and ‘anal’ experiences of pleasure are essentially ‘auto-erotic’. At its origin the sexual drive has no object outside of one’s own body. It is not yet directed towards others.11 These pleasurable experiences, Freud claims, are nothing but
ʻorganic' inscriptions on the body. The sexual drive only becomes outwardly directed at the beginning of puberty. This also implies that infantile sexuality is not yet mediated by phantasies. Indeed, phantasies, at least in Freud, imply a scenario in which an object is always present one way or another.

Two points deserve particular attention here. First, it is clear that the hypothesis of an ʻorganic repression' cannot be disconnected from the bi-phased character of sexuality. Human sexuality is essentially introduced at two times: auto-erotic infantile sexuality is, after a phase of latency during which the different reaction-formations progressively develop, replaced by pubertal/adult sexuality which is directed towards objects in the outside world. According to the first editions of the Three Essays the emergence of (sexual) phantasy life coincides with the beginning of puberty. These phantasies, however, imply a recathexis of the abandoned erotogenic zones (and of the pleasures connected to them), which now can play a role in the relation to libidinous objects.

Second, the fact that Freud refers here to ʻreaction-formations' is sufficient indication that the infantile perverse tendencies remain active in the unconscious. Furthermore, Freud emphasizes that they can and will be re-cathed with libido in every love relation. The ‘psychic valuation' (psychische Wertschätzung) of the object of love is indeed only very rarely limited to its genitals. On the contrary, it concerns its body as a whole. All the parts of the body of an object of love can become ‘interesting' to us and get re-cathed with libido. Freud speaks of a libidinal overvaluation (libidinöse Überschatzung) that is inherent in every relation of love. This ‘overvaluation' implies, according to Freud, a return to infantile sources of pleasure that were later abandoned. Depending on its relative strength and on the relative strength of the corresponding reaction formation, this re-cathexis of infantile sources of pleasure will lead to varying degrees of ‘anatomic extensions' in and through which the reaction formations are neutralized.

Freud himself gives the following example: the use of the mouth for sexual purposes, he says, is often considered to be of a ‘perverse' character when the lips of one person touch the genitals of another, but not when we kiss another person on the mouth. Those who reject the first practice as being ‘perverse' thus testify, Freud continues, to the disgust that can protect us against such types of behaviour. The difference between the two practices is, however, quantitative rather than qualitative. The precise form of these feelings of disgust is to a large degree determined by convention: we might be disgusted by the idea of using somebody else’s toothbrush but have no problem kissing him or her. This last example illustrates, according to Freud, both the factor of disgust that opposes the libidinal overvaluation of the sexual object, and the possibility for the libido to overcome this opposition. The problem for Freud, then, is not whether ‘anatomic extensions' – that is, a return to infantile, perverse sources of pleasure – will or will not occur in a sexual relation, but rather the extent to which they will occur. The distinction between perversion and ‘normality' thus becomes essentially a matter of degree and no longer of essence.

Not all perversions can be rendered intelligible by using the
theory of ‘organic repression’ and of ‘anatomic extensions’ exclusively. But even with those perversions that cannot be explained in this way, Freud stresses their continuity with ‘normal’ phenomena. Freud thus links fetishism, for example, to the ‘psychological overvaluation’ – the psychic counterpart of the libidinal overestimation referred to above – which is inherent in every relation of love. In every love relation we overestimate to a certain extent the psychic and intellectual qualities of the other. This ‘overvaluation’ also applies to everything that can be related in an associative way to the beloved object. Thus we can, for example, attach great value to a piece of hair belonging to the person with whom we are in love. Fetishism then becomes an exaggeration of this essentially ‘normal’ tendency.16

Generating symptoms: normal neuroses

But Freud not only stresses the intrinsic continuity between ‘normality’ and pathology in the first part of his Three Essays. He takes us still one step further by distinguishing between the different elements which comprise the sexual drive in the light of these perversions. Every perversion exaggerates and renders independent one of the elements that together make up the sexual drive.17 Genital sexuality is then established by linking these different elements and subordinating them to (the primacy) of the genital zone. Seen from the perspective of what Freud calls ‘popular opinion’, however – according to which sexuality is a heterosexual instinct – this process is bound to fail. As we already know, the sexual drive has no object assigned to it by nature. As a result the different composite elements of the sexual drive always and necessarily become independent to a certain (and variable) extent (in, for example, ‘anatomical extensions’ and psychic overvaluation), while at the same time heterosexual and homosexual object-choices inevitably continue to coexist and struggle with each other in the unconscious. We cannot therefore find a norm inherent to sexuality itself (in its very ‘nature’ so to speak) that would allow us once and for all to determine what is ‘normal’ and what is not. What we call ‘normality’ is nothing but a precarious equilibrium between ‘perversion’ tendencies that, out of themselves, would lead us to the ‘pathological’ states we know. ‘Normality’, according to this perspective, can no longer be determined apart from pathology – and for the time being this means, apart from homosexuality and the perversions – which is an intrinsic part of it.18 In other words, the way in which different societies and cultures distinguish between ‘normality’ and pathology is nothing but a social construct for which there is no ultimate fundamentum in re.19

In the first part of the Three Essays Freud further links neurosis to the repression of perverse tendencies and to the necessity of generating symptoms which act as a compromise between these tendencies and ‘higher’ psychic impulses that deem them unacceptable.20 The patho-analytic circle is thus closed: not only are we once again referred back to ‘organic repression’ for the understanding of pathology, but at the same time Freud discovers here a dynamic link between the different syndromes that classical psychiatry distinguishes: neurosis is the negative of perversion.21

The link between organic repression and neurosis bears further comment. We know that ‘organic repression’ – which in this text Freud does not distinguish from what he elsewhere calls ‘secondary (neurotic) repression’ – is inherent to human nature as such. It is universal because it is founded upon our biological constitution and, at the same time, it accounts for characteristically human affects such as disgust, shame and guilt. If the possibility of neurosis is thus linked up with a universal process which is typically human, it seems that neurosis itself cannot but become – and for essential reasons – a universal phenomenon. We all repress our perverse drives, which, at the same time, continuously attempt to realize themselves and break through the barriers of censorship. This implies that we all have to generate symptoms, to a greater or lesser extent – that is, look for compromises between our ‘perversion’ drives and our higher psychic functions. The reaction formations mentioned earlier are prefigurations of this. Neurosis, therefore, can no longer essentially be distinguished from ‘normality’. Here again it will be a matter of ‘to a greater or lesser extent’ rather than a matter of being neurotic or not.

What is most striking in Freud’s account of pathology as we find it in the first part of the Three Essays, however, is the fact that traditional psychiatric nosography (the different psychiatric syndromes) is here invested with an anthropological significance. Analogous to plants in Linnaeus’s botanical classification, psychiatric syndromes are no longer conceived of as separate ‘species’ to which one either does or does not belong.22 On the contrary, they now refer to tendencies and processes that are constitutive of humanity as such and from which nobody escapes. Consequently, these different syndromes have to be thought of in terms of their dynamic interplay. The idea that ‘normality’ cannot be thought apart from psychopathology and the idea that psychiatric nosography has an intrinsic and
essential meaning for philosophical anthropology are two sides of the same coin.

Let us briefly summarize Freud’s position with regard to the distinction between ‘normality’ and pathology as we find it in the first editions of the Three Essays. Humans differ from animals because of the peculiarities of their sexual constitution. This constitution cannot be understood without referring to the concept of an ‘organic repression’ which is founded in the evolutionary process. This ‘organic repression’ dislodges us, as it were, from the animal kingdom and condemns us to an irreversible ‘inadaptation’. Human beings are necessarily ‘out of joint’. The conflict between infantile sexuality, which is essentially auto-erotic (pleasurable experiences as ‘organic inscriptions’), and adult sexuality, which is directed towards objects and which is constantly threatened from within by the former, leads us inevitably and structurally, as Freud puts it in later texts, ‘on other roads’: to neurosis and perversion. What is particularly striking is the absence of a developmental and/or teleological perspective. In the first editions of his text Freud distinguishes two ‘episodes’ in the development of infantile sexuality – infantile masturbation and its return at the age of three or four – but these episodes are not (yet) conceived of as the successive phases of a teleological evolution in which the first phase is subsumed under the second and then further developed.

Enter King Oedipus

All of this – that is, the whole patho-analytic perspective as I just sketched it out – changes and even progressively disappears in the editions of the Three essays from 1915 onwards and more particularly in the editions which appeared in the 1920s. In the earlier versions of the text Freud makes a sharp distinction between infantile sexuality, which is claimed to be without an object (and therefore without phantasy) and intrinsically ‘perverse’, and adult sexuality, which only starts at the beginning of puberty, aims at an object and is essentially mediated by phantasies. What is at stake here is obviously the idea that sexuality is fundamentally dichotomous or consisting of two phases: after its first appearance in childhood and its relative absence from the latency period, it reappears in a new form during puberty. Pubertal (and adult) sexuality, however, is of a fundamentally different nature to infantile sexuality, and the conflict between these two ‘types’ of sexuality remains characteristic for human existence as such. To a large extent Freud changes this point of view in the later editions of his text. From now on sexuality is thought of as a progressive succession of ‘phases’ (for example the oral, anal and phallic phases). With the possible exception of oral libido, in all these different phases – that is, from the outset – sexuality is characterized by a (minimal) relation to an object. With regard to the sadistic–anal organization of the libido Freud writes, for example, that it not only prefigures the bipolarity of adult sexuality – the opposition between men and women here being anticipated by the opposition between activity and passivity – but also that both these tendencies (towards activity and towards passivity, which are linked to the muscular system and the anal zone respectively) are not without an object outside of the individual’s own body. Precisely because the sexual drive is already, during these early phases of its development, directed towards objects in the outside world, can they be seen as preparations and prefigurations of the Oedipus complex. With regard to the Oedipus complex Freud explicitly states that it resembles adult sexuality in every aspect. The child has sexual desires towards the parent of the opposite sex, manifests feelings of jealousy towards its rival, and so on.

There is one point, however, at which infantile sexuality, even at this stage in Freud’s intellectual development, remains clearly distinct from adult sexuality: the little child interprets sexual difference in terms of castration. The little Oedipus understands sexual difference in terms of the absence or presence of the male organ. Even if infantile sexuality is identical to adult sexuality, with respect to the problem of sexual difference both types of sexuality remain essentially different from one another. Does this mean that Freud sticks to the fundamental opposition between infantile and adult sexuality, albeit now articulated around the problem of castration?

Several places where Freud goes even further would seem to suggest not. In ‘The Dissolution of the Oedipus Complex’, for instance, Freud says that a ‘happy’ solution to the Oedipus complex is possible. It is possible, he states more concretely, to overcome and destroy its contents (the logic of castration) completely. In the ideal scenario the Oedipus complex would not so much be repressed – in which case it would continue to insist from out of the unconscious – as destroyed or, better still, overcome without remnant. What does this mean?

Traditionally the Oedipus complex (and the castration complex that goes along with it) is thought of as the ultimate phase of psychosexual development, in the course of which the different perverse tendencies that,
until then, existed separately can and will be integrated in and subordinated to the primacy of the genital zone. At the same time it would allow overcoming and integration of homosexual tendencies into stable heterosexual bonds. The ways in which this process of integration comes about should not concern us too much here. The important point, rather, is the following: if this complex has a 'happy' outcome, then this would imply the establishment of a 'pure' heterosexual relation that would in no way be threatened from within by either perverse or homosexual drives. In Fairbairn's words: it would make possible a 'mature, non-incorporating and “giving”' attitude between partners of the opposite sex, in which genital libido is perfectly integrated as a source of pleasure.

If we understand this in the light of what was said earlier about the way in which Freud interprets the relation between the successive phases of psychosexual development, we come very close to an object-relational view of human development in general and psychosexual development in particular. On this view, the psychic development of the human being is to be understood as a progressive and teleological development towards heterosexuality; a progressive and teleological development rooted, furthermore, in our biological constitution. Like 'organic repression' in the early editions, the Oedipus complex in the later versions of the Three Essays is, according to Freud, an ontogenetic repetition of phylogensis. Every human being repeats in his or her own history the history of humankind. But whereas the theory of an 'organic repression' founded the distinction between the human drive and the animal instinct – the former being fundamentally and essentially inadapted because of it – the Oedipus complex and its evolutionary foundation account for a progressive and continuous development towards adult heterosexual relations; towards, in other words, what 'popular opinion' thinks sexuality to be. Beginning as a critique of the 'popular opinion' of sexuality, Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality progressively becomes instead the theoretical foundation which ultimately underwrites it.

All of this implies that in the later editions of the Three Essays sexuality is in danger of becoming once again an instinct, such that it is no longer possible to distinguish it from other instincts. This fundamental distinction is necessary, however, for the defence of the psychoanalytic primacy of sexuality. Sexuality has to be fundamentally different from other vital functions for it to be the most fundamental dimension of human existence. In the earlier editions of the Three Essays the peculiar status of sexuality, and the intrinsic link between 'normality' and psychopathology that goes along with it, was founded on the internal conflict that characterizes the drive. This internal conflict has to be linked to the dichotomous structure of psychosexual development and to the conflict between infantile and pubertal (adult) sexuality that results from it. It would be absent from the other vital functions that follow a continuous and teleological development without fundamental or structural ruptures that condemn human beings to be out of joint both in their relation to themselves and to the world they inhabit. In so far as the sexual drive, through the introduction of the Oedipus complex, is once again characterized – just like the other vital functions – by a continuous and teleological development, its primacy seems to be in jeopardy or at least less assured then it was before. Furthermore this requalification of our psychosexual constitution in terms of a teleological development goes along with a requalification of psychopathology in terms of developmental disorders, for which the Oedipus complex is a crucial point of reference – developmental disorders that, at least in principle, would be preventable.

It is true that Freud mostly refers to the 'happy' outcome of the Oedipus and castration complex, as I just sketched it, as an illusion, if not structurally impossible. In so far as the problems related to this
complex (for example, the castrative logic according to which the little child interprets sexual difference) in principle cannot but continue to haunt adult sexuality – and Freud here once again invokes biology – the structural gap between infantile and adult sexuality remains in place, and so too does the internal conflict between them. All of this does not, however, change anything about the fact that the introduction of the Oedipus complex makes it at least possible to give a meaningful and determinate content to the concept of ‘normality’, something that was impossible in the earlier versions of the Three Essays. It is one thing to say that we cannot positively determine the concept of ‘normality’, and quite another to say that although we know what ‘normality’ would be like – overcoming the Oedipus complex with everything it implies – we are incapable of ever reaching that ideal, which is, according to Freud dictated by biological evolution.

Whether or not we can overcome the Oedipus complex, the fact remains that its introduction undoes – or at least profoundly relativizes – the deconstruction of the essentialist distinction between ‘normality’ and pathology as we find it in the earlier editions of the Three Essays.

Classic and romantic

In a recent book Peter Fonagy distinguishes between a classic and a romantic tradition in the history of psychoanalytic thinking. The classic view – rooted in a Kantian philosophical tradition – approaches psychopathology largely in terms of conflicts that can never be completely overcome; while the romantic view, which goes back to Rousseau and Goethe, sees humans as intrinsically good and capable, but vulnerable to restriction and injury by circumstances. Authors such as Klein, Bion and Lacan belong to the first (‘classic’) tradition; Anna Freud, Winnicott and Kohut belong to the second (‘romantic’) tradition. Our reading of Freud’s Three Essays suggests that both traditions are present in the work of Freud in general, and in his Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality in particular. In the first editions of the Three Essays psychoanalysis is indeed founded on a structural conflict, while in the later editions it is thought against the background of a possible reconciliation. There is an intrinsic tension in Freud’s work between the two traditions in psychoanalytic thought that Fonagy distinguishes. We thus find at the heart of Freud’s work a philosophically inspired debate that is still relevant today.

Is this sufficient to characterize the specificity and the philosophical importance of Freud’s text? It is obvious that the first editions of the Three Essays belong to what Fonagy calls ‘the classic tradition’, but Freud does more than simply place conflict at the heart of human existence. He does so in a way that forces us to rethink human existence in the light of the different pathologies of which it is capable, and in so doing he reveals the anthropological significance of psychiatric thinking. More concretely, Freud develops in the first versions of his Three Essays the project of a clinical anthropology. This might be the true scandal of Freudian psychoanalysis. For is it not precisely the idea that pathology is not the ‘other’ of a ‘successful’ human existence, but rather that human existence can only be properly understood from the perspective of pathology, that is unacceptable for many of us? Freud himself claimed that what is scandalous about psychoanalysis is the primacy of sexuality. Our reading suggests that it might not be so much this primacy but the project of a clinical anthropology that is the real scandal (and thus the shibboleth?) of psychoanalysis. For it is not the emphasis on sexuality as such, but its intrinsic link to (sexual) psychopathology, that makes it possible to break down the ideological opposition – at work not only in philosophy and culture in general, but in many discussions in psychotherapy – between ‘normality’ and pathology.

Notes


3. Ibid., p. 148. This point has often been obscured by the confusing translation (into English) of Freud’s Trieb (‘drive’) as ‘instinct’ (which would more properly translate the German Instinkt).

4. Ibid., p. 135.

5. Ibid., pp. 145–7. One should, of course, link these ideas to Freud’s speculations on a constitutional bisexuality (ibid., pp. 141–4).

6. Ibid., pp. 146, 137.


9. For Freud this means that erogenetic zones other than the genital zone are implicated.

10. One might question whether Freud is justified in putting shame, disgust and mortality at the same level. Are shame and disgust not ‘natural’ affects and does morality not
belong to culture? Freud, however, rejects a strict distinction between nature and culture. The fundamental conflict that characterizes humankind is not a conflict between nature and culture, but a conflict that originates in the drive itself. Freud is very clear about this: the organic repression ‘is organically determined and fixed by heredity, and it occasionally occurs without any help at all from education’ (Three Essays, pp. 177–8). The internal division of human existence is thus not the result of the confrontation between an (amoral) drive and the moral demands of society. Humans become human on the basis of a conflict that constitutes the drive as such and that carries the seed of culture within itself. Without shame and disgust there can indeed be no morality, just as there can be no art without a sense of beauty. The drive is not the other of culture. It is not the animal in the human. Culture (morality) does not stand opposed to nature (shame, disgust), but develops it further.

11. ‘In childhood, therefore, the sexual instinct is not unified and is at first without an object – that is, auto-erotic’ (Three Essays, p. 233). ‘At first’ was only added in 1915.

12. Ibid., p. 227.

13. Ibid., pp. 177–9.


15. Ibid., pp. 150 ff.


17. See, for example, ibid., pp. 171–2.

18. This seems to be the Freudian version of Lacan’s famous dictum: ‘There is no sexual relationship.’

19. For Freud, however, this does not mean that we can do without this distinction. The notion of an ‘organic repression’ implies that in sexualibus we will inevitably make an opposition between what is shameful and what is not, between what is disgusting and what is not. These distinctions will inevitably give rise at the level of different societies and cultures to different norms that determine what is ‘normal’ and what is not. Freud’s point seems to be that although there are no societies without taboos, the content of these taboos is structurally contingent and cannot be founded in human nature. Thus while homosexuality was no problem for the ancient Greeks, it was, and to a certain extent still is, for some Western societies.

20. Three Essays, p. 165.

21. ‘Thus symptoms are formed in part at the cost of abnormal sexuality; neuroses are, so to say, the negative of perversions’ (ibid., Freud’s emphasis.)


23. What follows could and should be developed in a much more detailed way than we can do here. See Van Haute and Geyskens, Spraakverwarring.

24. The chapter on ‘The Phases of Development of the Sexual Organization’ was only added to the text in 1915.


26. ‘In order to complete our picture of infantile sexual life, we must also suppose that the choice of an object, such as we have shown to be characteristic of the pubertal phase of development, has already frequently or habitually been effected during the years of childhood: that is to say, the whole of the sexual currents have become directed towards a single person in relation to whom they seek to achieve their aims. This is, then, the closest approximation possible in childhood to the final form taken by sexual life after puberty. The only difference lies in the fact that in childhood the combination of the component instincts and their subordination under the primacy of the genitals have been effected only very incompletely or not at all (Three Essays, p. 199). Although Freud does not mention the Oedipus complex here yet – it will only be introduced as such in the early 1920s – the idea seems to be already present in this fragment from 1915. Most importantly, however, Freud is clearly suggesting here that there is a strict continuity between infantile and adult sexuality, a major change with regard to the editions of 1905 and 1910.

27. Freud, ‘The Infantile Genital Organization’, Standard Edition, Volume XIX, pp. 139–45. This text was explicitly written as a postscript to the Three Essays.


29. The passages on castration in the Three Essays date from 1915 and later. In between Freud had written his study on ‘Little Hans’ (1909), in which the problem of castration plays a crucial role. This problem – like the Oedipus complex that is related to it – will become more and more important over the years. In a footnote added to the Three Essays in 1920 Freud calls the Oedips complex ‘the nuclear complex of the neuroses’ (p. 226). This would have been unthinkable from the perspective of the editions of 1905 and 1910.

30. Further discussion of the castration complex is beyond the scope of this article. However, for an interesting discussion of the various reasons that forced Freud to give the castration complex a central place in his later texts see T. Geyskens, Never Remembered: Freud’s Construction of Infantile Sexuality, Other Press, New York, forthcoming.


33. However, one might wonder whether the complete overcoming of the Oedipus complex would be such a ‘happy’ outcome of psychosexual development. What else would it be than the horror of an (purely hypothetical) ‘Alltagmensch’ whose life one does not want to live?

34. One may recall that Freud calls the castration complex the ‘biological rock’ against which every psychoanalysis inevitably founders.

pathology is seen as a secondary modification of it that can and should be avoided. At the same time, and for reasons we shall have to explore, pathology is henceforth regarded as developmental disturbance, and psychological development itself as a teleological process founded on biology. The Oedipus complex, as Freud defines it, undoes the radical opposition between infantile and adult sexuality, and as a result makes it possible to think in developmental terms. More specifically, the reintroduction of a normative and essentialist definition of normality is the inevitable counterpart of this shift. Frank O'Connor's literary piece, My Oedipus Complex portrays childhood in a subverted light. He is exploring exaggerated aspects of mother-child relationships as a reflection upon human nature. Themes and ideas present within the story are of possession, in the protagonist's view of his mother, and of jealousy. This short story shows the faults and dangers of human nature. Through the introduction of various figures, the attention that Larry receives is diminished. The entrance of his father is a major disruption to Larry's life. Described as a stranger, the paternal entity is now a source of jealousy. The repeated assertion of unacknowledgement and disassociation is a representation of Larry's inner turmoil. 3 pages, 1139 words.