2 Freud's *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*

In 1905 Freud published three works of major importance. The first of these, "Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria," destined to be known as the case of Dora, had been originally drafted in 1901; however, for reasons which remain unclear, Freud returned it to a drawer. Four years later, he took it up again, revised it and sent it forth into the medical world; it appeared in the *Monatschrift für Psychiatrie und Neurologie* during the autumn. Earlier in the year he published a volume called *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, one of the several larger spin-offs, derivatives, or subsidiary consequences that the monumental *The Interpretation of Dreams* had left residually in its wake. The third publication was a small paper-covered book, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*. Freud had written this work simultaneously with the book on jokes. He kept the two manuscripts on adjoining tables and moved freely back and forth between them according to his mood. Although it took more than four years to sell the thousand copies that were printed of the first edition, it was not very long before the exceptional importance of the *Three Essays* began to be recognized. Today it is by common consent regarded, along with *The Interpretation of Dreams*, as Freud's most fundamental and original work.

Freud himself was aware of this circumstance, and one of his ways of registering that awareness was by returning to this text repeatedly during the next twenty years in order to revise, correct, amend, alter, clarify, and add to its substance. As a result, as the contemporary reader of this work will quickly see, the text of the *Three Essays* is something of a palimpsest. Moreover, it is a peculiar kind of palimpsest. Not only is the visible surface or layer of writing difficult, sometimes obscure and frequently problematical. As we, so to say, peel away the surface and retrieve the hidden earlier layers, versions, or formulations, the difficulty, obscurity and problematicality tend to deepen. Indeed if one consults the first German edition of 1905 or the first English translation made by A. A. Brill in 1910 from the second German edition, it is difficult to know what an original generation of readers could have made out of the formidable darknesses that involve so many parts of this work. Freud was manifestly sensitive to these difficulties. He ends the text with a sentence of complaint that the "unsatisfactory conclusion... that emerges from these investigations... is that we know far too little... to be able to construct from our fragmentary information a theory adequate to the understanding alike of normal and of pathological conditions." He returns to this complaint in the preface to the second edition: "the author is under no illusions as to the deficiencies and obscurities of this little work," is the way he characteristically puts it. He is still at it in his preface to the fourth edition of 1920: "that part of the theory," he writes, "which lies on the frontiers of biology and the foundations of which are contained in this little work is still faced with unalleviated contradiction." And the reader will have no difficulty in picking up similar remarks throughout the text and in the additions and notes to it made up until 1924.

I am suggesting that what we have before us -- as is usual with Freud -- is something that cannot be thought of as an innocent text. This suggestion should come as no surprise, since it was Freud as much as anyone else in the history of the modern world who taught us to suspect the claim to, or the appearance of, innocence of any kind. The *Three Essays* are innocent in neither form, substance, nor intention. Indeed from the outset one of the overt aims of this work was to declare the end of a historical innocence. In its disclosure to the world of the universality and normality of infantile and childhood sexuality in all its polymorphously perverse impulsiveness, the *Three Essays* was bringing to a close that epoch of cultural innocence in which infancy and childhood were regarded as themselves innocent, as special preserves of our lives untouched by desires, strivings after selfish pleasure, twinges of demonic perversity, drives towards carnal satisfactions. Some considerable measure of the odium that was attached for years to Freud's name has to be understood in this light. In the name of truth and reality, he undertook to deprive Western culture of one of its sanctified myths. Cultures do not as a rule take kindly to such demythologizings, and it should come as no surprise that of all of Freud's findings those that have to do with infantile and childhood sexuality were resisted with the most persistency.

If we turn to the form of the *Three Essays*, the evidence of Freud's complex intentionality is immediately in view. Each of the essays is divided into a number of sections, each of which is given a title. These sections are in turn further divided into smaller subsections, to each of which another substantive heading is also attached. The work as a whole is composed out of these small juxtaposed blocks of material. If the *Three Essays* resemble a palimpsest in the dimension of historical time, then they resemble a mosaic in either the dimension of printed space or in the dimension of the experiential time that any single reading of them requires. In contrast to the grand expository sweep
that we usually associate with Freud's writing, the discourse of the
Three Essays is made up of these fragments that are both connected
and easy to separate, manipulate, revise, or delete. They function as
movable parts of a system, and Freud's complex intentionality in this
text includes the explicit intentionality of being systematic, of setting
forth a coherent, systematic theory. Freud is explicitly conscious of
the circumstance that he is on this occasion setting forth a theory that
as a psychology has to stand up in point of comprehensiveness, depth,
systematic integrity, and heuristic value to the demands of what a
theory should be.

A second question of form has to do with the large structure of
these essays. Why, it may be asked, did Freud begin the way he does?
Why did he start out with an essay on "The Sexual Aberrations" and
move on from these to essays on "Infantile Sexuality" and "The
Transformations of Puberty"? His strategy in this context is not
difficult to understand. In starting out with the sexual aberrations he
was seeking to deal in the first place with certain forms of adult sexual
behavior; in addition, the sexual practices in question were familiar
and recognizable to whatever limited audience he might in 1905 think
he was addressing. Such behaviors were, moreover, aggregated
wholes, and Freud's procedure in the opening essay is to take these
aggregated phenomena and arrange them in such a way that they can
be disaggregated and decomposed. A further pertinence of this device
of working backwards begins to be revealed when we see Freud
regarding these adult manifestations of sexual behavior as being on
one level integrated forms of sexual activity and at the same time on
another level failures of integration, developmental outcomes in
which the various component drives of the sexual instinct have not
been put together in a fully integrated way. In addition to the relative
familiarity of this material, however, a further strategic consideration
vis-a-vis his audience may have been guiding him. The explosive
material of this book is to be found in the second essay; it would have
been imprudent in the most elementary sense to begin straightforward
with that material. A groundwork in the familiar and paradoxically
less inflammatory subject of the sexual aberrations had first to be put
down before Freud could proceed to the unsettling question of
infantile sexuality.

In this connection, it may be useful to note that in the Three Essays
Freud is writing with a model somewhere in his mind. That model is
Darwin, and the Three Essays is Freud's most truly Darwinian work.
It occupies the boundary that both separates and connects the
biological and the psychological realms of existence, and it touches
unavoidably upon the complex relations that obtain between
phylogenesis and ontogenesis. It is about "origins" in more ways than
one, and is written from a consistently evolutionary point of view.
Like Darwin, Freud is concerned with the "variations" in form and
structure that the sexual instinct takes, and he is interested in
arranging or classifying these "variations" in such a way that both
their resemblances and differences be rendered in full account. Thus
in enumerating the various kinds of homosexual activities, Freud
reminds us that though there are certainly distinctions and differences
among them, it is nonetheless "impossible to overlook the existence
of numerous intermediate examples of every type, so that we are
driven to conclude that we are dealing with a connected series." At
the same time, he is concerned to discover the "general conditions
under which mere variations of the sexual instinct pass over into
pathological aberrations." This double interest is clearly analogous to
the interest in Darwin of tracing both the relations of variations
within and species to one another and discovering the point or points at
which variations subtly pass over into new or different species. And
just as the principal theme of Darwin's work was the "transmutation
of species, so the fundamental preoccupation of the Three Essays is
with "the transformation[s] of the sexual instinct." Yet each time that
he works out such a transformation, Freud hastens to remind us "that
an unbroken chain bridges the gap between the neuroses in all their
manifestations and normality. The distinctions between variation
and species or the normal and the pathological are never simple, nor
are they ever held simply. The purpose of Freud's taxonomy is not
merely to create new distinctions and classifications: its purpose is to
understand how all the distinctions are related to one another, and
how one is created out of the transformation of another.

Freud also reminds us of Darwin in some of his larger statements
and speculations. The penultimate paragraph of the section on
"Deviations in Respect of the Sexual Object" reads as follows:
The very remarkable relation which thus holds between sexual
variations and the descending scale from health to insanity gives us
plenty of material for thought. I am inclined to believe that it may
be explained by the fact that the impulses of sexual life are among
those which, even normally, are the least controlled by the higher
activities of the mind. In my experience anyone who is in any way,
whether socially or ethically, abnormal mentally is invariably
abnormal also in his sexual life. But many people are abnormal in
their sexual life who in every other respect approximate to the
average, and have, along with the rest, passed through the process of
human cultural development, in which sexuality remains the
weak spot.

What Freud is saying in this passage among other things is that in
human cultural evolution—which the species as a whole has undergone, and which each individual recapitulates in his own development—sexuality remains the "weak spot." That is to say it is the part of us that is most recalcitrant to civilized constraints and does not undergo evolution smoothly. Hence individual development is precarious, and the achievement of "normal" heterosexual maturity is in fact something that has to be achieved. Nothing about it is assured or inevitable; it is contingent upon almost everything else. In a similar sense, Freud regards the childhood of each person as a "primal period, which falls within the lifetime of the individual himself," and he goes on to remark of infantile amnesia that it "turns everyone's childhood into something like a prehistoric epoch and conceals from him the beginnings of his own sexual life." Although Freud, like Darwin, was rigorously antitheological in his formal point of view, there are some moments in this text when the evidence of structure, design, and a coherent and meaningful sequence of developments seems so overwhelming that he (like Darwin again) wrote passages that can only be construed in a teleological way. One of these he later excised.

Darwin mulled over his materials for two decades before he sent it into print. (And even then he only did so because Alfred Russell Wallace had in the meantime also discovered the principle of natural selection.) Freud had been dealing with much of the material in the Three Essays for almost ten years, and he too, living in his self-styled "splendid isolation," was in no great hurry to publish his theoretical findings. Darwin was a confirmed empiricist who was at the same time capable of pursuing a grand theoretical hypothesis with originality and ingenuity and thus introduce a successful scientific revolution. A similar though not the same assertion may be made about Freud. Freud parts company with Darwin at the point at which empirical evidence on the one hand and speculation and inferential boldness of thought on the other meet. How beforehand in his boldness Freud can be is revealed in two critical footnote which he almost casually sets down. The first of these is the first footnote in the first essay. In its original form Freud says that the information on homosexuality and the adult perversions on which the first two-thirds of the essay are based is derived from the "well-known writings" of Krafft-Ebing, Havelock Ellis, et al. In other words, Freud went through these large volumes of medical and psychiatric case summaries and drew from them the material on which he based his analysis. What goes without saying, and which does not quite get said, is that in 1905 Freud had as yet had no direct psychoanalytic experience of either homosexual patients or adults who practiced some form of perverse sexual behavior. This lack of first-hand empirical evidence appears to have been in no way a deterrent to Freud's theoretical inclinations and energies. A similar circumstance occurs in the second essay on infantile sexuality. In a footnote added in 1910, Freud writes: "When the account which I have given above of infantile sexuality was first published in 1905, it was founded for the most part on the results of psychoanalytic research upon adults. At that time it was impossible to make full use of direct observation on children: only isolated hints and some valuable pieces of confirmation came from that source." In their original form, therefore, the first two essays have the character of grand inferential constructions that happen somehow—almost incidentally, one might say—to coincide with or catch up a good deal of the truth. Based on experience of some kind, they are nonetheless not primarily empirical in nature but are systematic and relatively coherent reworkings of glimpses into, intuitions of, and insights about hidden truths which still remain partly hidden.

In order to gain some sense of how this work might have affected its early readers, let us reconstitute in a general way part of the argument of the text of 1905. (I will of course refer to later additions and revisions when it seems appropriate.) Freud begins the first essay on "The Sexual Aberrations" by making an axial distinction. He divides all sexual behavior into two categories. One has to do with the "sexual object," the person towards whom sexual activity is directed or sexual desire felt. The second has to do with the "sexual aim," the act towards which the sexual instinct inclines. Both of these categories contain numerous deviations, and Freud classifies these deviations by means of this first distinction. The first class of aberrations contains those sexual activities that are deviant in respect of the sexual object. The most important and largest population in this class consists of adults whose sexual object has been "inverted." These "inverts," or homosexuals as they are ordinarily called, "vary greatly in their behavior in several respects." Freud divides such behavior according to exclusiveness at one end of a scale and contingency at the other. He also notes variations that have to do with the subjective views of inverts towards their own behavior and with the date of onset and persistency of such behavior. Although the range of variation is great, the variations seem nonetheless connected, and he is forced to conclude that they form "a connected series." If there is a totality here it is organized heterogeneously.

When he turns to contemporary explanations of this aberration, he
finds that the explanations explain very little. As for the currently popular medical assumption that inversion is “an innate indication of nervous degeneracy,” Freud rejects both parts of the diagnosis as inadequate in classificatory precision and explanatory value. Inversion occurs among too many otherwise normal and indeed gifted and highly developed people to be regarded as a sign of some kind of organic degeneration. As for the argument about whether homosexuality is “innate” or “acquired,” Freud refuses to choose exclusively between the two opposed alternatives. He then turns to certain theories of bisexuality. He cannot accept those explanations of homosexuality that ascribe it to either somatic or psychical hermaphroditism, nor does he think that it can be traced to certain localized centers of the brain. Nevertheless, partly because of the evolutionary evidence in normal human anatomy that points towards “an originally bisexual disposition,” Freud accepts the notion that this disposition “is somehow concerned in inversion, though we do not know in what that disposition exists, beyond anatomical structure.” Along with this, which explains nothing, he accepts the hypothesis that in confronting inversion “we have to deal with disturbances that affect the sexual instinct in the course of its development,” which is a little better.

He turns next to homosexuals’ attitudes towards their sexual objects and demonstrates that there is no uniformity of attitude to be found. And the same variety exists in respect of sexual aim – a whole array of activities characterizes homosexual behavior, not any exclusive kind of activity. What Freud is doing here is refusing to accept homosexuality as a simple or single entity; indeed he does the opposite. He stresses its complexity and hints that it may consist of more than one entity. And he continued to place stress in this direction. In 1915, he added as part of a long footnote the following reflection:

Psycho-analytic research is most decidedly opposed to any attempts at separating off homosexuals from the rest of mankind as a group of a special character. By studying sexual excitations other than those that are manifestly displayed, it has found that all human beings are capable of making a homosexual object-choice and have in fact made one in their unconscious, . . . Thus from the point of view of psycho-analysis the exclusive sexual interest felt by men for women is also a problem that needs elucidation and is not a self-evident fact based upon an attraction that is ultimately of a chemical nature.

In refusing to separate out homosexuals from other “normal” human beings, Freud was emphasizing the continuity and relatedness that exists between both groups – or between pathology and non-pathology, if you will. And in adding that heterosexual normality is itself problematical, unelucidated, and not self-evident, he was drawing attention to the uncertain and complex character of what we ordinarily take to be the natural human norm.

Freud concludes this section by remarking that the present state of knowledge does not provide a position on which to base “a satisfactory explanation of the origin of inversion.” Nevertheless, his “investigation” of the material before him has led him to discover that the connection between the sexual instinct and the sexual object is not as intimate as is commonly supposed.

Experience of the cases that are considered abnormal has shown us that in them the sexual instinct and the sexual object are merely soldered together – a fact which we have been in danger of overlooking in consequence of the uniformity of the normal picture, where the object appears to form part and parcel of the instinct. We are thus warned to loosen the bond that exists in our thoughts between instinct and object. It seems probable that the sexual instinct is in the first instance independent of its object; nor is its origin likely to be due to its object’s attraction.

In this passage of speculative flight Freud is making a number of theoretical proposals. He is suggesting that the sexual instinct is plastic and labile, that it can be displaced, that it is not entirely dependent upon its object – or the object world – and that it may indeed be at first independent and without an object. All of these suggestions will lead to momentous consequences later on.

Deviations in respect to the sexual aim comprise those practices that are known as “perversions.” They begin for Freud with activities in which the mouth is brought into contact with the genitals of another person. Such practices, Freud remarks, “have no doubt been common among mankind from primeval times.” And those who indulge these acts as perversions “are giving way to an unmistakable feeling of disgust, which protects them from accepting sexual aims of the kind. The limits of such disgust are, however, often purely conventional.” In other words, perversions are commonly known or recognized by the subjective feeling of disgust that their contemplation elicits; moreover, this subjective sign is for Freud in part a historical and conventional circumstance. It is in some measure a socially induced force, and its action leads “to a restriction of the sexual aim.” Nevertheless, Freud wryly adds, “the sexual instinct in
its strength enjoys overriding this disgust." The same holds true for those activities which make sexual use of the anal orifice.

The sexual instinct extends its interest to other parts of the body as well, and in those activities described as fetishism we see one such extension. These activities can extend to inanimate objects as well, such as "a piece of clothing or underlinen." What is interesting about such practices -- and about all the other perversions as well -- is that they are in some degree "habitually present in normal love," especially in its preliminary aims. And Freud regards them as pathological only when they take the place of the normal sexual aims and object "in all circumstances," when they take on the "characteristics of exclusiveness and fixation." Such characteristics apply as well to the perversions that have to do with looking and being looked at, namely voyeurism and exhibitionism. These connected symptoms occur in both active and passive forms, which leads Freud on to "the most common and the most significant of all the perversions," sadism and masochism. He finds the roots of sadism in the "element of aggressiveness" that is usually part of the sexuality of most male human beings. In sadism, the "aggressive component of the sexual instinct ... has become independent and exaggerated and, by displacement, has usurped the leading position." Masochism is a more complex and mysterious phenomenon, and in 1905 Freud had to content himself with the remark that "no satisfactory explanation of this perversion has been put forward and ... it seems possible that a number of mental impulses are combined in it to produce a single resultant."

Yet sadism and masochism have a further interest because both are "habitually found to occur together in the same individual." This co-presence of opposites, Freud remarks, has "a high theoretical significance," and he proceeds to connect these opposites "with the opposing masculinity and femininity which are combined in bisexuality -- a contrast which often has to be replaced in psychoanalysis by that between activity and passivity." At this point even a casual reader cannot escape the sense that a large theoretical design is beginning to take shape.

As he moves towards a conclusion of this section, Freud notes once again that the sexual life of healthy adults is rarely without perverse constituents in it, and he repeats his admonition that when it comes to the sphere of sexuality "we are brought up against peculiar and, indeed, insoluble difficulties as soon as we try to draw a sharp line to distinguish mere variations within the range of what is physiological from pathological symptoms." This "most unanswerable of all the instincts" can lead people whose behavior is in other respects normal to activities of the most astonishing and repulsive kind. In such activities, Freud observes, it is impossible to overlook the important role played by the mind in the transformations of the sexual instinct. "It is impossible to deny that in their case a piece of mental work has been performed which, in spite of its horrifying result, is the equivalent of an idealization of the instinct." It was the ancients, one recalls, that Freud describes as idealizing the instinct; and the inference must follow that in the perversions the past survives in the present, and that there is something archaic about these expressions of sexuality in which the highest and the lowest intersect and are joined. Indeed some perversions are intelligible only if we assume such a convergence. "If such perversions admit of analysis," Freud concludes, "that is, if they can be taken to pieces, then they must be of a composite nature. This gives us a hint that perhaps the sexual instinct itself may be no simple thing, but put together from components which have come apart again in the perversions." The obscure circularity of this chain of reasoning may be interpreted as follows. The sexual instinct is not a single or unitary entity. It is made up of different components that are brought together -- amalgamated, aggregated, or synthesized -- in normal adult sexual activity. In the perversions, however, we see that the components have come apart again; they have decomposed, and some of them have been recomposed to form these alternate kinds of behavior. The disaggregation and decomposition that Freud had chosen as the analytic and expository form in which to treat the sexual aberrations is now revealed to be an essential attribute in the formation and structure of those aberrations themselves. The fit between form and content or analytic intellectual style and material structure is very snug indeed.

At this point, Freud abruptly shifts gears and begins without warning or transition a new section entitled "The Sexual Instinct in Neurotics." At once the reader becomes aware that the territory has been shifted as well, as has the pitch of explanatory discourse. Persons who suffer from such complaints as hysteria or obsessional neuroses, Freud begins, are approximately closer to the normal than the aberrants with whom he has just finished his preliminary dealings. Nevertheless, psychoanalytic investigation has determined that the sexual instinct is fundamental in the maintenance of neurotic symptoms; it provides the most important "source of energy" of the neuroses, and as a consequence the sexual life of neurotics tends in varying degree to be expressed in their symptoms. Indeed, Freud continues, "the symptoms constitute the sexual activity of the patient." The symptoms are in fact substitutes -- "transcriptions as it were" -- for certain highly charged wishes and desires which have undergone the peculiar and unexplained mental process called
repression and have as a result been lost to consciousness. They have not, however, lost their force, and since they cannot be discharged by conscious mental representation, they find expression in “somatic phenomena.” By means of another mysterious process called “conversion,” they appear as the somatic symptoms—paralyses, convulsions, blindnesses—of hysteria. Hysteric is thus an embodiment or exemplification of the mind–body problem, one expression of that apparently insoluble—and indissoluble—relation. Moreover, hysteric is excessively civilized persons. In them the restrictive forces of “shame, disgust, and morality,” which are overridden in the perversions, act with decisive power against sexual desire. Yet their excessive aversion to sexuality is regularly combined with a characterizing opposite, an “exaggerated sexual craving,” although this craving is also fostered to become at some point unconscious. Torn between sexual strivings and his aversion to sexuality, the hysteric chooses illness as a means of escaping his conflict. Unfortunately illness “does not solve his conflict, but seeks to evade it by transforming his libido impulses into symptoms.”

At the same time, it would be misleading to assert that such symptoms originate either solely or exclusively at the cost of normal adult sexuality—though that Freud notes—is what he is commonly taken to be saying. Neurotic symptoms also express perversions and abnormal sexual instincts and ideas, and these are formed in part out of them. Hence, Freud concludes, rising to his large formulation, “neuroses are, so to say, the negative of perversions.” Inversion, the perversion, and all the “component instincts” in their paired opposites—excluding sadism and masochism—appear “without exception” in the “unconscious mental life” of neurotics. We suddenly see what Freud is doing. In a bewilderingly brief few pages on the neuroses he has recapitulated the entire structure of the earlier part of the essay, which was, one recalls, about actually perverse sexual behavior. But the recapitulation is now on the level of the neurotic symptom, of unconscious mental life, of fantasies, ideas, and mental representations. It is, in other words, on the level of theory. Just as for Marx political economy was the theory of capitalism, so for Freud the neuroses contain the theory of sexual behavior in both its normal and aberrant modes of expression. They contain that theory, and with Freud’s help they will contain it in an integrated form. Having decomposed the perversions into component parts, he has at once recomposed them in the neuroses. In the neuroses the language of sexuality begins to speak articulately, coherently, and theoretically. But Freud is not content with letting the neuroses speak just yet. Instead he begins to speak himself about “Component Instincts and

Erotogenic Zones,” and of the linkage of the two in both perversions and psychoneuroses. He reminds us again of the role played by perverse impulses in both the neuroses and normal life, and of the unbroken series of gradients that connect “the neuroses in all their manifestations and normality.” He reaches the conclusion that “there is indeed something innate lying behind the perversions but that it is something innate in everyone, though as a disposition it may vary in its intensity and may be increased by the influences of actual life.” He is speaking about the “inns of instinctual, biological life; and what is at stake are the ‘inns of constitutional roots of the sexual instinct.’” In one class of persons—those with perversions—those roots “may grow into the actual vehicles of sexual activity.” In another, the neurotics—they have undergone insufficient repression and persist as symptoms. And in “the most favorable cases” they have undergone such restrictions and modifications that somehow “what is known as normal sexual life” is brought about or achieved. In addition, he remarks, these roots and this constitution will only be demonstrable in children.

A formula begins to take shape which lays it down that the sexuality of neurotics has remained in, or been brought back to, an infantile state. Thus our interest turns to the sexual life of children, and we will now proceed to trace the play of influences which govern the evolution of infantile sexuality till its outcome in perversion, neurosis or normal sexual life.

The recomposition that was summarily demonstrated in the neuroses has now been displaced in historical time. In order to make the full demonstration of recomposition Freud is going back to the very beginning. The theory will exist in fully integrated coherence only after—having first disassembled the perversions—Freud has been able to take the fragments and components of infantile sexual life and show how they develop historically and emerge in adulthood into integrated coherences themselves—or into the deformed coherences of the neuroses and sexual aberrations. Once again the discursive form taken by the theoretical structure is inseparable from the experiential form taken by the material content of which that structure is the theory.

III

Freud begins the essay on infantile sexuality by noting that as far as he
is aware "not a single author has clearly recognized the regular existence of a sexual instinct in childhood." He is indeed so struck by the boldness of this assertion that he has gone through the literature on the subject yet once more to test its validity. It remains valid. What Freud means is that no one before him had unequivocally recognized the pleasure-seeking activities of infantity and childhood as both sexual and normal. There was in fact a wealth of literature on childhood sexuality published during the Victorian period, but that literature tended almost uniformly to regard the sexual experiences or activities of children as pathological, abnormal, and deplorable. In the growing literature that was concerned with the development of the child, sexuality was not included as part of that development, nor did it have a special development in childhood itself. Freud sets out to repair this neglect, this cultural amnesia that is the counterpart to the personal infantile amnesia in which we are all cloaked this decisive period of life.

We cannot follow Freud in any detail as he develops his exposition - and as it additionally develops in the much-revised text across a period of twenty years. In brief, Freud sees both the occurrence of sexuality in childhood and the building up of restrictions against it and inhibitions of it in a double sense. Both the sexuality and the constraining structures are in the first instance organically determined and arise endogenously or endosomatically in the course of normal growth. At the same time both sexual impulses and the constraining structures are open to influences from the outside, are affected by experience and education, and the final form which they will take will bear upon it the marks of such influences.

Freud begins with the phenomenon of thumb-sucking or sensual sucking. This early behavior itself refers back to a still earlier one, and is a search for a pleasure that is remembered. The child's "first and most vital activity, his sucking at his mother's breast" is also his first experience of pleasure. This first experience arises out of and is associated with a vital organic function; moreover, the membranes of the lips and mouth of the child function as an erogenous zone. The experience is exemplary and determinative. "No one," writes Freud, in one of his most famous remarks, "who has seen a baby sucking back satiated from the breast and falling asleep with flushed cheeks and a blissful smile can escape the reflection that this picture persists as a prototype of the expression of sexual satisfaction in later life." Later on, or when the mother is not present, the child's need to repeat this pleasure becomes "detached from the need for taking nourishment." The child then can take a part of its own body - his thumb - to suck on, and recapture the pleasure. The pleasure is therefore autoretic, which leads Freud to remark that at first the sexual instinct in childhood is without an object - a speculative construction of considerable theoretical depth and resonance.

The oral phase is followed by activities at the other end of the alimentary canal. The anal zone is the second area of erogenous pleasure. The sexual excitations of this zone are both active and passive and involve both the stimulation of the mucous membrane and the control (and release) of the sphincter muscle. As with the oral phase, the persistence of significance into later life of the erogenous importance of this zone has a determining influence on what character or personality will be like. The third erogenous zone in children is the genitals. This zone is also connected with a vital function, urination. Although it is not the site or vehicle of the oldest sexual impulses, it is "destined to great things in the future." It is easily and regularly stimulated, and "it is scarcely possible to avoid the conclusion that the foundations for the future primacy over sexual activity exercised by this erogenous zone are established by early infantile masturbation, which scarcely a single individual escapes." Freud also distinguishes two kinds of infantile masturbation - that which is associated with early infancy and that which revolves during the later-named phallic and Oedipal phases.

It should be noted that although Freud represented infantile sexuality from the very beginning as a matter of overlapping periodicities and interlocking phases, in 1905 he was not yet able to particularize with full concreteness what those periodicities and phases are and when they specifically occur. One corollary of this uncertainty was that he put his theoretical system together in such a way that revisions of, deletions from, and additions to it could be conveniently and easily made. This combination of openness to new experience and material with genuine systematic coherence at a high level of abstract theoretical generality is one of the identifying qualities of Freud's thinking. As is the similar alliance in him of a simultaneous commitment to the idea of the determination, and overdetermination, of all events and developments in mental and sexual life along with the idea that such events and developments are also contingent upon accidents of both disposition and experience. An essential part of the distinction of this text is to be found in the poised equilibrium in it of the open-ended and the systematic, the concrete and the abstract, and the contingent and the determined - and in the delicacy with which that equilibrium is sustained. It is what leads Freud to emphasize repeatedly, for example, that "persons who remain normal may have had the same experiences in their childhood" as those who become neurotic or perverse later on.

In other words, there is no single causal or developmental scenario that leads to a particular adult outcome. Different scenarios may in
fact lead to the same outcome in maturity. And the converse is also possible and demonstrable: a single scenario may lead in different persons to different adult outcomes. Hence, although it is true that "under the influence of seduction children can become polymorphously perverse, and can be led into all possible kinds of sexual irregularities," it is equally true that: (1) "seduction is not required in order to arouse a child's sexual life; that can also come about spontaneously from internal causes"; and (2) it is "impossible not to recognize that this same disposition to perversions of every kind is a general and fundamental human characteristic."

Freud proceeds with his recapitulation of the first essay and his recomposition of the adult aberrations out of the normal development of sexuality in childhood. He turns to those component instincts in childhood "which from the very first involve other people as sexual objects." These are scopophilia, exhibitionism, and cruelty. Freud followed the discussion of these developments by adding in 1915 two entirely new sections on the sexual researches of childhood and the phases of development of the sexual organization in which the "pregenital organizations" of childhood are brought into full explicitness. He closes the essay with a section in which he brings forward some additional sources in childhood of sexual stimulation, excitation and satisfaction.

With the arrival of puberty a further series of transformations take place. New objects appear along with a new sexual aim. And the component instincts must now be brought together, assembled, integrated and subordinated to "the primacy of the genital zone." Freud rehearses in his customary, compact style the three sources of stimuli that impinge on the developing organism. These are stimuli that come from the external world, from the organic interior, and from mental life, "which is itself a storehouse for external impressions and a receiving post for internal excitations." He takes up for a second time the puzzling and multi-sided problem of the nature of sexual tension or excitement and its relation to pleasure, describes how the erogenous zones "fit themselves into the new arrangements" as forepleasures, and relates once again those forepleasures to the mechanism of the perversions. He passes on to the extremely complex question of the differentiation between men and women, a differentiation in which the notion of bisexuality makes an important return. In addition, this transformation involves for women a further change. In little girls, genital sexuality is experienced on a phallic model or prototype, with the clitoris as the organ of stimulation and pleasure. When a girl turns into a woman, this organ both enlarges and relinquishes a part of its function: "When at last the sexual act is permitted and the clitoris itself becomes excited, it still retains a function: the task, namely, of transmitting the excitation to the adjacent female sexual parts, just as — to use a simile — pine shavings can be kindled to set a log of harder wood on fire." In view of the tragicomedy that so much subsequent discussion of female sexuality has turned out to be, it is appropriate to bring forward this early and largely neglected remark, including the homely and half-inappropriate metaphor that Freud enlists to illustrate it. The clitoris does not altogether give up its excitability; it what it does is to transfer "susceptibility to stimulation" to "the vaginal orifice." It ceases to be the exclusive or leading zone for female sexual activity. For 1905 that is not an altogether condemnable formulation.

Yet we cannot let the matter rest there. In the first essay there is an important theoretical subsection on the "over-valuation of the sexual object," which contains the following passage:

The significance of the factor of sexual overvaluation can be best studied in men, for their erotic life alone has become accessible to research. That of women — partly owing to the stunting effect of civilized conditions and partly owing to their conventional secretive and insincerity — is still veiled in an impenetrable obscurity.

If we juxtapose these remarks with those taken from the third essay, we are left with a series of questions. Where did Freud get the information that he construes into the theoretical construction of the third essay, information which, in addition, he denies having access to in the first? From the street? From folklore? From experience? Out of his ear? From the observations he said he was unable to make? From unconscious hints let drop by his patients? Are the two passages compatible or incompatible? It is quite impossible to say, and the matter remains veiled in impenetrable obscurity.

Nevertheless, along with the establishment of genital primacy at puberty, there takes place as well the completion of the process that permits the organism to seek and find a sexual object. Here too psychic preparations have been made from a very early date. "At a time at which the first beginnings of sexual satisfaction are still linked with the taking of nourishment, the sexual instinct has a sexual object outside the infant's body in the shape of his mother's breast. It is only later that the instinct loses that object, just at the time, perhaps, when the child is able to form a total idea of the person to whom the organ that is giving him satisfaction belongs." It is then, Freud writes inconsistently, that the instinct becomes autoerotic, and
not until latency has been passed through is it ready to resume and restore the original relation. The inconsistency has to do with his earlier statement that at first, at its origin, the sexual instinct in infants has no object. And since he is making conjectural inferences about such occluded matters as the origin and formation of object relations — matters about which reliable data are still today very hard to come by — one can understand his lack of certitude and oscillation. His conclusion, however, has a sturdy coherence to it: “There are thus good reasons,” he wrote, “why a child sucking at its mother’s breast has become the prototype of every relation of love. The finding of an object is in fact a refining of it.” The past is the prehistory of the present in the sense that it is the necessary precondition of present existence. And history repeats and recapitulates prehistory, though at a further stage of organization and development.

Hence the child’s relations with those who care for it — especially its mother — are sexual in character. And the mother in turn regards the child “with feelings that are derived from her own sexual life,” as she mothers and nurses and nurtures it. There is nothing to be horrified at in recognizing the sexual nature of this relation, Freud quickly adds. Moreover, “if the mother understood more of the high importance of the part played by instincts in mental life as a whole — in all its ethical and psychical achievements — she would spare herself any self-reproaches even after her enlightenment. She is only fulfilling her task in teaching the child to love.” Although love takes many forms, the kind of love Freud has in mind is associated with the idea of a vigorous and autonomous adult human being.

This autonomy is a goal that cannot be reached directly. For the object that is found in adult life cannot be the identical recloud object of infancy and early childhood. The Oedipal experience must be gone through and resolved. The barrier against incest — “a cultural demand made by society” — must be internalized, along with other prohibitions and restraints. When at puberty the incestuous fantasies are reawakened, they must again be overcome and repudiated. If this work is gone through successfully, “one of the most significant, but also one of the most painful, psychical achievements of the pubertal period is completed: detachment from parental authority, a process that alone makes possible the opposition, which is so important for the progress of civilization, between the new generation and the old.”

In view of the widespread tendency to regard Freud’s thinking as essentially classical and conservative in affinity, it is helpful to be reminded of such a remark. Freud is also one of the last great legatees of the Romantic tradition in European thought. His theories are grounded in the idea of conflict, and this conflict exists in the realm of the normal as much as it does in the pathological. Even his

conceptions of integration are touched by it. He sees integration as falling within the larger contexts of conflict and of incompatible needs, contradictory aims, and implacably opposed demands. Such integration as he finds is never complete, rarely adequate, and more often than not unstable. He never envisions the human or the social world as composing now or in the future to some harmonious order. There is the recognition and remembrance of bliss and satisfaction in his world, but there is no music of the spheres. In his world men and women go through a long development of striving for autonomy, but the achievement of such autonomy is arduous, unpredictable, and easily subverted.

At this point Freud closes his exposition. He adds to it a “Summary” in which the arguments of the three separate essays are rehearsed together and a few further theoretical observations put down. He closes with a reminder of the importance for all later development of the experiences of childhood, “a period which is regarded as being devoid of sexuality.” After writing this text Freud was to live for more than thirty years. During that period he would continue to write and develop his ideas. But with the Three Essays now fitted alongside of The Interpretation of Dreams, the new theoretical paradigm — and the new vision of human existence — that he was to introduce into the consciousness of the Western world was there in its essentials. He and his followers would go on filling in new details, adding observations, plugging up gaps, throwing out new explanatory epicycles. They would, in short, begin to operate — as they are operating today — on the analogy of normal science. But the fundamental theory was there in 1905. That it was a theory fully deserving of the name is in part suggested to us in the circumstance that nothing has come along in seventy years that remotely resembles it in explanatory power, coherence, and integrity. No intellectually serious challenges to it have been taken or lasted. The superseded of it that have been regularly announced have just as regularly fallen away. And Freud’s own followers continue working on the boundaries of knowledge, about four inches ahead of where Freud left off. Such a circumstance is no discredit to them; it is one more illustration of how rarely genius of revolutionary proportions occurs in both science and other theoretical disciplines. And it illustrates as well how when such a genius occurs the world changes.

Notes

2. About the only kind of innocence that Freud allowed of was a small class of "innocent joke.

3. At the end of the text Freud offers the following related observation: "In consequence of the inverse relationship between civilization and the free development of sexuality, of which the consequences can be followed far into the structure of our existence, the course taken by the sexual life of a child is just as unimportant for later life where the cultural or social level is relatively low as it is important where that level is relatively high." Whatever one may wish to make of the last part of this statement, the opposition between civilization and "the free development of sexuality" is a notion that Freud obdurately held to throughout his life; behind this notion is a further idea that human cultural evolution is founded on a deep-seated set of contradictions.

4. In a footnote situated further on in the 1905 text, he did make the admission in respect to homosexuals.

5. One of them is to be found in a footnote that he added in 1910. "The most striking distinction between the erotic life of antiquity and our own, no doubt, lies in the fact that the ancients laid the stress upon the instinct itself, whereas we emphasize its object. The ancients glorified the instinct and were prepared on its account to honour even an inferior object; while we despise the instinctual activity itself, and find excuses for it only in the merits of the object.


7. Some slight modifications of this claim have to be made. See Stephen Kern, "Freud and the Discovery of Child Sexuality," History of Childhood Quarterly, 1 (Summer 1973), 117-41, in which a number of partial anticipations of certain of Freud's findings are mentioned.

8. On a later occasion, Freud addressed this difficult subject directly. "So long as we trace the development from its final outcome backwards, the chain of events appears continuous, and we feel we have gained an insight which is completely satisfactory or even exhaustive. But if we proceed the reverse way, if we start from the premises inferred from the analysis and try to follow these up to the final result, then we no longer get the impression of an inevitable sequence of events which could not have been otherwise determined. We notice at once that there might have been another result, and that we might have been just as well able to understand and explain the latter. The synthesis is thus not so satisfactory as the analysis; in other words, from a knowledge of the premises we could not have foretold the nature of the result. . . . But we never knew beforehand which of the determining factors will prove the weaker or the stronger. We only say at the end that those which succeeded must have been the stronger. Hence the chain of causation can always be recognized with certainty if we follow the line of analysis, whereas to predict it along the line of synthesis is impossible." "The Psychogenesis of a Case of Homosexuality in a Woman" (1920), Standard Edition, Vol. XVIII, pp. 167-8. Such a passage suggests Freud's awareness that psychoanalytic theory, like the modern theory of evolution, is essentially a historical theory; its powers are explanatory rather than predictive.

9. In addition, "the sexual instinct is now subordinated to the reproductive function; it becomes, so to say, altruistic." This is at the other extreme from the archaic or primitive or perverse arrangements in which the instinct itself is idealized.

10. Freud is in this text undecided about the degree to which the clitoris has to "abandon its excitability," and the passage is ambiguous on this score.

11. One can add as a piece of crowning confusion the following leap in the dark from the second essay. In his discussion of the polymorphous perverse sexuality of children, Freud pauses for an illustration: "In this respect children behave in the same kind of way as an average uneducated woman in whom the same poly-