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FREUD CONVENTIONALIZED

(A Review of Freud: Biologist of the Mind by Frank J. Sulloway
Basic Books, New York 1979)

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Frank Sulloway, a Harvard-trained historian of science touts his ambitious study of psychoanalysis as a "comprehensive intellectual biography of Sigmund Freud", a work which will expose "the Freud legend" perpetrated by a closed group of traditional "Freud scholars." Sulloway hopes to expose the fallacies of these traditional readings and demonstrate that Freud was a "cryptobiologist", or "biologist of the mind." His new reading will show the errors of previous views and bring about major realignments in our view of psychoanalytic theory. For someone like myself, deeply immersed in psychoanalysis as theory and practice, these bold claims are challenging indeed. Perhaps, precisely because he approaches psychoanalysis from another field -- as a foreign visitor -- Sulloway will be able to see things that we on the inside miss because of our very familiarity. For the most deeply ingrained customs and assumptions may be more visible to a foreigner -- one thinks of Tocqueville's account of American life -- than to the natives. There are dangers in a view from the outside, of course. The foreign visitor may overestimate the importance of the trivial and miss the heart of native life, fail to distinguish what is truly essential from the desiderata. This is a special danger in the case of psychoanalysis since Freud's work, not to mention the corpus of psychoanalysis elaborated by his followers, is such a mixture of ideas, hypotheses, observations,

interpretations, new and old theory blended together, grand speculations alongside of theory with a solid grounding in clinical experience, and much else. Even the natives often lose their way, and the danger is greater for the foreigner.

I am afraid that Sulloway turns out to be more of a lost wanderer than the Tocqueville of psychoanalysis. He persistently mistakes the flotsam and jetsam in Freud for the vital essence of psychoanalysis; indeed, his case for Freud the cryptobiologist is constructed from peripheral bits and pieces while the central core of psychoanalysis -- the unconscious, transference, anxiety, sex, aggression, guilt and conscience in their experiential forms -- find little place in his work. There are two interrelated reasons for this. First, Sulloway knows psychoanalysis from books and related historical research, but not at all as a living enterprise, as a psychotherapeutic transaction between persons. He visits the library -- and his research here is truly impressive -- but not the consulting room. Second, while he never makes his own point of view clear, he seems guided by assumptions and values which direct him back to the very biological-medical-scientistic world view from which Freud extricated himself when he developed psychoanalysis. For Sulloway this is a virtue: according to his reading, Freud never left biology, is not "on psychological ground" -- to use Freud's words from The Interpretation of Dreams -- but is a "cryptobiologist." Sulloway's unfamiliarity with the living form of psychoanalysis and his attempt to biologize it are related of course, for it is much easier to mistake the biological bits and pieces in Freud for his

core ideas if you are not familiar with the practical as well as theoretical definition of terms. There seems an essential, if obvious, point here; psychoanalytic theory cannot be understood apart from the psychoanalytic method since it is the method -- the production of free associations, dreams, fantasies, transference and counter-transference reactions and interpretations, within the unique analyst-patient interaction -- that produces the data from which the theory is constructed. And the method cannot be called "biological" in any but the most general sense of the term; it is psychological, interpersonal, social.

The overall thrust of Sulloway's analysis, his version of Freud as cryptobiologist, is one of many efforts in which the personally threatening, socially critical, often revolutionary insights of psychoanalysis are assimilated to a conventional world view. (See my forthcoming book for a more detailed treatment of this theme [Breger, in press.]) It bears a close affinity to other current trends: the scientization of psychology, the popularity of Sociobiology and the remedicalization of psychiatry. In all these cases, one finds a movement away from theory that directs people inward in uncomfortable ways, or that raises critical questions about established values, toward some form of safe conventionality. Sulloway's book is worth examining in some detail as an example of this sort of "return of repression" since it is a serious, scholarly and well researched work.

I In what sense can Freud be said to be "a biologist of the mind" or psychoanalysis a "psychobiology"? To be "biological" can

mean different things, some quite loose and general others much more precise. Part of the difficulty with Sulloway's argument is that the meaning of "biological" shifts through the course of his book. The most general meaning is the emphasis on man's animal nature, on instincts, sexuality and aggression. Freud is certainly biological in this sense but so were many philosophers long before the rise of biology as a modern science: this is a relatively unimportant claim. At the other extreme, to be biological means to work within the tradition of physical science. As is well known, Freud began his scientific career as a research neurologist in the laboratory of Ernest Brücke, a proponent of the physicalist-mechanist approach to biology. Freud was impressed with the assumptions and commitments of this approach as seen in his attempt to construct a neurological model of the mind in the Project for a Scientific Psychology. He chose not to publish The Project and, in his next major work, The Interpretation of Dreams, abandoned his overt physicalist-neurological assumptions for psychoanalysis. But, as a number of scholars have shown, certain key assumptions of Freud's neurological background found their way into his new psychological theories (see Amacher 1965; Holt 1965, 1976.) As Strachey puts it "The Project, or rather its invisible ghost, haunts the whole series of Freud's theoretical writings to the very end." (1966, p.290) In his early chapters Sulloway reviews this aspect of Freud's biological background, covering ground well worked by previous commentators. There is no question

that Freud's background in biology influenced his early theories both directly and as a ghostly legacy. The problems with this for Sulloway's claims are two. First, there is nothing novel to it, it hardly qualifies as a startling revelation of the cryptobiological in Freud. Second, and more importantly, most of this biological legacy has had a baneful influence on psychoanalytic theory, particularly as it has perpetuated an out-moded and inaccurate model of the mind-brain as a passive-reactive mechanism that takes in, stores and discharges "energy." In other words, insofar as Sulloway's case for Freud as psychobiologist rests on this meaning of "biological" it is both derivative and the biology invalid.

Fortunately there is more to Sulloway's argument than this, though he does mix in these uses of biological from the most general and precise ends of the continuum. The core of his thesis rests on a middle ground definition of biological, one in which the term refers to the general assumptions and approach that stem from Darwin. In this sense, "biological" refers to a general evolutionary-developmental approach. One certainly finds evidence of this in Freud, in the theory of psychosexual development, the general preference for explanations of current phenomena in terms of their developmental history, and other ways. There should be little quarrel with this view of the imprint of Darwin and evolutionary thinking on Freud though it is important to distinguish the general from the specific influence, that is, to see that, for the most part, Freud reworked evolutionary models to his own ends rather than taking over the specific ideas of others. Once again, if this were all that Sulloway were claiming his

book would hardly be worthy of notice.

But he does claim more -- and it is here that we come to Sulloway's central argument, that part of his work on which his case for the cryptobiological nature of psychoanalysis rests. Once one has sorted out the other well-known aspects of the biological in Freud, one can see what Sulloway is saying that is original and, seeing it, attempt to evaluate it. To put it in other words, one must ask, "in what specific way does Sulloway show Freud to be a cryptobiologist, apart from the well-known sense in which his ideas were influenced by the Darwinian-evolutionary heritage?" The central answer -- and Sulloway gives a number of peripheral ones as well -- lies in the way Freud deals with three major psychoanalytic problems or questions: 1) what is the nature of repression? 2) why sex? 3) the choice of neurosis. An examination of Sulloway's analysis of these three issues will allow us to evaluate the validity of his claim. But, before taking them up let me sketch the form of Freud: Biologist of the Mind, for the analysis of these three issues is embedded in a good deal of material, some of it quite valid and interesting and other parts rather unimportant, that makes it difficult to discern the main shape of Sulloway's argument.

II Freud: Biologist of the Mind contains two interwoven themes, the first, which I have been discussing, centers on the various claims about the biological, cryptobiological and evolutionary nature of psychoanalytic theory. The second is Sulloway's analysis of the way previous historians, and particularly those affiliated with the

psychoanalytic movement, have created what he terms a heroic mythology surrounding Freud. Sulloway refers to this group as "the Freud scholars" or "Freud's followers-turned-biographers" and he rather persistently depicts them as a much more homogenous group than they are, in my view. According to Sulloway's version of the myth created by "the Freud scholars", Freud was a lonely hero who broke with his biological-medical past, created psychoanalysis -- with his self-analysis playing a central role -- and persisted alone in the early years in the face of hostility and indifference. Gradually, he collected a group of followers and won the day for psychoanalysis as a pure psychology. It is one of Sulloway's main points that the claim of Freud's follower-historians that psychoanalysis is a pure psychology is important to their view of him as a mythical hero and psychoanalysis as a lonely embattled field. Sulloway's own view -- that psychoanalysis is much more the child of the Darwinian tradition, that it grows from biology and remains connected to it as a cryptobiology or psychobiology -- is put forth as an alternative to Freud-the-lonely-psychoanalytic-pioneer. In other words, Sulloway's two central points are interdependent: by showing Freud to be more connected to his biologist past he makes him less the lonely hero, and by showing how "the Freud scholars" have exaggerated the early isolation of psychoanalysis he attempts to buttress his case for the psychobiological nature of psychoanalytic theory. While the first argument is logical, the second is not: the way in which Freud's work was received -- and the account of this reception by later historians -- cannot, strictly speaking, tell us anything about the

psychological versus biological nature of the theory.

There is a more telling point that one becomes aware of when going through Sulloway's account of the reception of Freud's ideas in the early 1900s, however. He attempts to show that hostility and indifference were not the only reactions to Freud's early work, The Interpretation of Dreams received a number of reviews, some of them quite perceptive, and some of the criticisms of the other early books were sincere and well taken. With these historical clarifications Sulloway attempts to demythify Freud's isolation during this period, he attempts to show that later historians have exaggerated the early resistance to psychoanalysis. This argument is undercut by the fact that we still, today, encounter the same resistance to the core of Freud's discoveries not only in the wider public but in ourselves and our patients as well. While we are much more open, now, to such general ideas as infantile sexuality, it is still enormously difficult to accept the idea that our lives are run by unconscious forces, that there are ways in which we all remain needy infants, angry rebellious, guilty children, or that, more generally, there are sexual, aggressive and frightened emotions behind the most "rational" and "mature" of adult facades. It is in this sphere that Sulloway's lack of familiarity with the living version of psychoanalysis shows through: he can point to the number of reviews The Interpretation of Dreams received or show that Freud's sexual theories were connected to the work of others, but this sort of historical research simply misses the more important source of resistance to Freud's discoveries.

The case of Sulloway and "the Freud scholars" is complicated in other ways as well. I think he is correct in pointing out the tendency of some of those in the psychoanalytic movement to neglect the contributions of others, and to mythologize Freud. The best parts of Sulloway's book, in my view, are his detailed historical accounts of the contributions of others to the growth of Freud's thought. Breuer emerges as a much more substantial figure, Fliess as more than a numerological oddball, Freud's sexual theories are placed in the context of work by other "Sexologists" -- particularly Havelock Ellis and Albert Moll -- and of course, the influence of the more general Darwinian heritage is noted: the importance of childhood, the centrality of instinct and man's animal nature -- particularly sexuality -- and the general preference for evolutionary, historical and developmental forms of explanation. All of this research shows how Freud's ideas grew from an intellectual-historical-cultural context. No creative genius, no matter how great, arrives fully formed on the earth: Freud's theories were connected in many ways to these sources and Sulloway provides us with a good deal of valuable historical detail.

Sulloway's interpretation of the historical material is marred in two ways, however. First, he continually refers to others in the field as "the Freud scholars", implying that they are all of one mind about the issues under discussion. As anyone familiar with psychoanalysis knows, there is much more diversity, even amongst those who call themselves psychoanalysts, than Sulloway's account suggests. Wollheim (1979), in a careful review notes how Sulloway's "Freud scholars" is a group put together with ". . . high-handedness . . .

he collects material that comes from very different periods and variegated sources and, lumping it all together, claims it deserves a common functional explanation."

Sulloway's treatment of historical influence is marred in a second and more important way, a way that again betrays his failure to appreciate what is most central in psychoanalysis. The crucial concept here is transformation; in the construction of theory Freud drew on many sources, but he transformed this material into new and unique forms. Sulloway, in his eagerness to demonstrate Freud's connection with his biological predecessors, markedly underestimates the extent of this transformation. Let me cite just two examples. Freud was not alone in pointing to the prominence of sexual disturbance or the facts of infantile sexuality. His work here is related to that of a small but important group who were concerned with uncovering the truth about human sexual life; Sulloway refers to them as the "Sexologists," he reviews their work which, in some cases, predated Freud's. But, and here is the crucial point, none of the Sexologists had a theory about the role of sexual pleasure, sexual frustration and sexual conflict in psychological development, nor does one find in their writings an anticipation of the many specific ideas concerning unconscious sexual conflict that we owe to Freud. They played their part in creating a climate of greater openness regarding sex -- just as the Darwinian heritage provided a climate favorable to evolutionary-developmental explanations -- but, in both cases, Freud's specific theories go far beyond these general trends.

A second example: Sulloway devotes much space to Wilhelm Fliess and tries to redeem him as a lost source of psychobiological influence. Perhaps the most important idea that Freud took from Fliess was "bisexuality." But, for Fliess, bisexuality was a matter of inborn male and female sexual cycles. According to his view, disturbances in the sexual sphere such as homosexuality were explained in terms of the incomplete dominance of one side of the constitutional bisexuality that was everyone's biological legacy. Freud began with this sort of physicalist model of bisexuality but already calls it into question in The Three Essays of 1905. He later transforms these early suggestions into his larger theory of the formation of personal identity in the resolution of the oedipus complex; and here, biological bisexuality is transformed into psychological bisexuality. The main form of this theory, stated most clearly in The Ego and The Id, traces the masculine and feminine components of both men and women to their identifications, as children, with their fathers and mothers. As Stoller (1972) has shown, aside from some very rare congenital conditions, "bisexuality" -- as well as core gender identity and most forms of sexual identity disturbance -- are largely matters of developmental experience, primarily between the child and his or her parents. Thus, the valuable and distinctly psychoanalytic theory of bisexuality is part of the wider theory of the development of personal identity, the "biological" legacy -- Fliess's version of "bisexuality" -- is a distracting anachronism.

How does this bear on Sulloway's attempt to demonstrate the

influence of Fliess on Freud? There are pieces of old "biological" explanation scattered about Freud's writings, deriving from Fliess and other sources. They are mostly invalid and almost always asides to the main flow of Freud's work. Within this main flow are his theories of unconscious sexual conflict and bisexual identification, theories that have been so greatly transformed from their original sources that they must be seen as new contributions.

Sulloway's treatment of these issues, crucial to his case for the cryptobiological nature of psychoanalytic theory, is a bit slippery. In his early chapters on sources of historical influence, he seems to be making a strong case for a direct link between Freud and these sources: Fliess, the Sexologists and the Darwinian heritage. But then the case begins to weaken; he speaks of "Freud's transformation of the Fliessian id" and his chapter on Darwin does little more than show the historical prominence of developmental-evolutionary ideas. By the time he arrives at the birth of psychoanalytic theory proper -- Freud's work after 1900 -- he simply summarizes The Interpretation of Dreams and The Psychopathology of Everyday Life. Indeed, his discussion of these books shows that the biological legacy has been transformed into a new psychological-psychoanalytic theory. The biological influence, at this point in his discussion, mainly refers to the general intellectual-historical climate that prevailed during the period when psychoanalysis was born, its specific influence and importance -- and with it Sulloway's claim for the cryptobiological nature of psychoanalytic theory -- has drifted away in the eddies

of historical scholarship.

Sulloway then comes back to the strong version of his claim, however. In chapter 10 -- a crucial one for his case -- he returns to the "three psychoanalytic problems", set out earlier, and argues that evolutionary biology and only evolutionary biology can resolve them. This is at once the most original, most controversial and most vulnerable part of his argument.

III

Sulloway argues that three questions preoccupied Freud from his earliest work to the very end of his career and that his answers to them, both early and late, were drawn from evolutionary-biological sources. Insofar as this claim is true, Freud is a cryptobiologist and psychoanalytic theory is, in some basic sense, a psychobiology. The three questions are: 1) What is the nature of repression and morality? 2) Why does sex and sex alone undergo pathological regression? And, 3) Why is one particular neurosis chosen rather than another? Those familiar with Freud's writings will recognize that these questions were important for him, though it remains to be seen if, in the form posed, they are the best questions to ask. Sulloway makes the distinction between "proximate-causal" and "ultimate-causal" theory and argues that Freud relied on biology for the ultimate-causal answers to these questions. Proximate explanations are familiar enough in psychoanalysis: they are exemplified whenever one traces a current conflict, repression, symptom or defense to its origin in childhood experience. An ultimate-causal explanation treats these same phenomena on a larger stage.

What are the ultimate-causal answers to the three questions that, according to Sulloway, demonstrate the cryptobiological nature of psychoanalytic theory? Let me take the first two questions -- the nature of repression and why sex? -- together since the answers are related. Drawing from the evolutionary and anthropological speculations available in the late nineteenth century, Freud entertained various speculations about the origins of the human species and human society. He thought there was a time when prehuman creatures were close to the earth and felt no sense of disgust over dirt or excrement. As the species evolved, its members acquired a sense of disgust and this acquisition became an anlage of morality. In other words, at some point in the history of the species there occurred what he called an "organic repression" associated with the loss of pleasure in the sense of smell and the acquisition of an upright posture. Putting this idea together with two other "biological" sources from the nineteenth century -- Lamarck's theory of the inheritance of ideas and Haeckel's "law" that ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny -- that the developmental history of the individual repeats the evolutionary history of the species -- led to his ultimate-causal explanation of the nature of repression, the anlage of morality and the specific repression of sex. That is, in any particular person there is a biological impulsion to repeat the history of the species and to repress sexual pleasure associated with the sense of smell. This "organic repression" comes together with childhood experiences around sexuality -- the proximate causal explanations -- to form a

full account of anyone's actual repression of sexual pleasure.

A related "ultimate-casual" answer to the first two questions is drawn from Freud's speculative account of the origin of human society, conscience and morality in Totem & Taboo. Drawing on suggestions from Darwin and nineteenth century anthropology, Freud guessed that humans originally lived in "primal hordes" ruled by a powerful castrating father who kept the women to himself. At some point, the brothers band together, kill the father and gain access to the women: they literally enact the oedipal fantasies that Freud found in his patients. But the murder leads to remorse and the origin of guilt -- so important for morality. The brothers erect taboos against parricide and incest, again, starting points for morality, and commemorate the whole sequence in totemic feasts where sacred animals, symbolizing the father's power, are killed and eaten. Freud assumed that this whole sequence was repeated many times in the prehistory of the species and, according to the Lamarckian theory of the inheritance of repeated experience, remained as an "organic inheritance" in contemporary persons. Since any individual's history was assumed to recapitulate the history of the species -- Haeckel's "law" again -- a person's oedipus complex was assumed to be driven by these archaic, "organic" forces. For example, a boy need not be actually threatened in order to fear his father as a potential castrator: "phylogenetic memories" of the primal father will suffice to arouse anxiety.

The third question, the choice of neurosis, is the least well-worked out. The cryptobiological answer here revolves around

Freud's attempts to link specific instinctual impulses with specific kinds of neurosis. There is a general deemphasis of actual childhood experience -- something that is characteristic of all these ultimate-causal explanations by the way -- or the assumption that the experiences of neurotics and normals are not significantly different. Thus, anxiety hysteria was thought to connect with one sort of instinctual impulse and paranoia with another. Freud had various schemes in which he attempted to provide this kind of "biological basis" for the psychiatric diagnostic groups of his day, though he did very little with these hypotheses after 1900.

Now, what can be said about these theories that Sulloway sees as the cryptobiological heart of psychoanalysis? First, it is worth stressing that all these ideas can be found in Freud's writings. Sulloway is correct to point out that they exist in both early and late works and he performs a valuable service in tracing their course. But how central are they to psychoanalytic theory as a whole? One must ask whether these "biological" speculations are integrated in a meaningful way with other components of the theory. How valid are they? What sort of data or observations can be cited in their support? What would psychoanalysis be like without them?

I am sure that by now the reader, if he is familiar with Freud, will have been struck by the fact that what Sulloway has drawn together as the cryptobiological core of psychoanalysis is at once the most speculative, most peripheral and least substantiated

side of Freud's work. Significantly, these are the parts of Freud that are most remote from direct psychoanalytic observations, that, most depend on guesswork pieced together from the ideas of others in biology, archaeology, and anthropology. What is more, the ideas and theories, borrowed from these other sources, are, for the most part, outmoded and wrong. No contemporary biologist accepts the Lamarckian theory of the inheritance of acquired characteristics; Haeckel's "law" is not a law, individual's do not repeat the history of their species in any exact or literal sense. The best contemporary work on primitive societies (see Lee & DeVore, 1968) does not support the picture of early man sketched in Totem & Taboo; indeed that picture of patriarchy, sexual rivalry, murder and guilt is much closer to the fantasy life of modern man than the actual life of our hunter-gatherer ancestors. In his fervor over the psychobiological side of Freud, Sulloway seems little troubled by the fact that most of this "biological" - psychoanalytic theory is both outdated and invalid.

Other difficulties arise from Sulloway's lack of familiarity with actual psychoanalytic observations and experience. In his focus on such explanatory hypotheses as "organic repression" and "phylogenetic memories" -- and in many other ways throughout his book -- Sulloway minimizes the role of actual childhood experience in the causation of neurotic conflict. He repeatedly refers to Freud's shift from the seduction to the fantasy theory of hysterical symptoms and seems to assume that that is how things were left: that, since these symptoms

could not be consistently traced to sexual trauma, actual experiences in childhood were not very important. And, it is true that the sort of biological speculations he focuses on can be seen as Freud's attempt to supply other -- extra individual -- sorts of explanation. But there is quite a different line of explanation alive in Freud, a line that is abundantly supported by later psychoanalytic experience. The early theory about the causal role of sexual seductions was not so much wrong as it was too narrow. It gave too limited a definition of childhood trauma and did not specify an interaction between the child, with his particular sensitivities, talents, and fantasies, and the experience he was exposed to. From a wider perspective we find a range of childhood events -- deaths, losses and early separations; parental insensitivities; cruel and brutal treatment; premature sexual stimulation; overly harsh sexual repression; and many more, all impinging on a particular child at a particular stage in development as causes of neurotic conflicts. When one is able to reconstruct a sufficiently full account of these sorts of experiences -- as one sometimes can in deep psychoanalysis -- it becomes clear how a particular form of repression or defense developed, why sex -- or other sorts of experience -- were subject to repression, and how this neurosis was "chosen." "Organic repression", "phylogenetic memories" or other "biological" explanations add nothing to such an account; indeed they detract from it.

The biological explanations that Sulloway focuses on, together with other related ideas, cannot be integrated in a

satisfactory way with the main stream of psychoanalytic theory, a stream that is derived from, modified, and enriched by continued contact with actual psychoanalytic work. What would psychoanalytic theory be like if all these speculative ideas -- organic repression, phylogenetic memories of the primal horde and the castrating father, Lamarckian inheritance, actual neurosis, primary repression, the regressive nature of libido -- were dropped? None the worse, I think and probably better off. What Sulloway terms the three fundamental questions can all be answered more satisfactorily within the mainstream of psychoanalysis though the answers, as is typical in science, involve a reformulation of the questions.

In the concluding chapters, where he is attempting to show that Freud was not as isolated during the early years as he claimed, Sulloway quotes a famous passage from On the History of the Psychoanalytic Movement in which Freud says that "I was one of those who'disturbed the sleep of the world' . . . and that I could not reckon upon objectivity and tolerance." Just as he attempts, with historical research, to modify the account of Freud's isolation, his case for the cryptobiological nature of psychoanalytic theory minimizes the threatening aspect of Freud's discoveries. But Freud's ideas did "disturb the sleep of the world." The essence of psychoanalysis lies in the exploration of the unconscious, in oneself as well as in others. What one discovers in this process of exploration is all that people find most difficult to face about themselves, their lives, their families and their societies. The exploration of this side

of our existence has as much power to disturb today as it did in 1900. The attempt to define psychoanalysis as a cryptobiology shifts the focus away from all this, for it is much more comforting to contemplate phylogenetic memories than the painful experiences of one's own childhood; it is easier to deal with organic repression than personal repression; or to think about conflict in a mythical primal horde than the loves and hates in one's own family. Sulloway's reading of Freud is part of that ever present tendency to push the most valuable yet most threatening insights of psychoanalysis onto safe conventional ground.

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