

FREUD: A GUIDE FOR THE PERPLEXED

Reviewed by David W. Hill

University of York

Freud: A Guide for the Perplexed. Céline Surprenant, London: Continuum, 2008, pp. viii + 184. £12.99 (paperback).

Why Freud? Though few could doubt the influence of Sigmund Freud for twentieth century thought, his work is now frequently dismissed in both academic and lay circles as outmoded quackery, overly reliant on nineteenth century scientific concepts. Céline Surprenant begins her introductory text by acknowledging that the extensive back catalogue of this famous psychoanalyst is received in ‘a general climate of objections’ (p.3). With this in mind she sets off with two tasks in hand: first, to introduce the oft perplexing work of Freud, showing the genesis of his thought and clearing up the over-simplifications that have led to popular derision; and second, to disentangle Freud’s thought from the scientific concepts of the nineteenth century – this latter a philosophical approach. By highlighting the discrepancy or contrast between phenomena and explanation in Freud’s work, Surprenant aims to validate the lingering feeling that something can be retrieved.

In Chapter One, Surprenant focuses on the foundations of the psychoanalytic cure, giving a detailed history of its development and how this related to the development of Freud’s own thought. By doing so she examines the contrast between ‘things themselves’ and ‘explanations’. We see that the observation of symptoms of neurosis provides insight into the unconscious functioning of the mind. The encounter with the concrete (the symptoms) leads to the abstract construction (the explanation) and from here the symptoms can be cured. That physical symptoms might have psychical causes no longer shocks but Surprenant does well to show the historical context of Freud’s work here; the idea that real or phantastic events might linger in the unconscious, or that there could even be something located in the mind that one was not conscious of, was truly groundbreaking. Throughout this chapter, Surprenant is at pains to stress that therapy – ‘the cure’ – and theory are interdependent for Freud. If a practice were merely therapeutic, she writes, then we would learn nothing about the unconscious; if it were merely theoretical then it

would be isolated from clinical reality. Instead, Surprenant gives a concise account of the two-dimensional picture found in Freud, where theory and practice 'flow together' (p.37).

In Chapter Two, Surprenant explores the layers of Freud's research in order to cast further light on the contrast between 'things themselves' and 'explanations.' Here the focus is on the theory of defence, repression and sexuality – the underlying mechanisms of the mind that transform experience into symptom. Of most philosophical import here is undoubtedly the process of repression whereby one avoids ideas or impulses that cause displeasure by keeping them at a distance from the conscious. Surprenant is quick to make the link here between mental illness and morality. The ideas that one represses are those that one finds disgusting. As such, repression is the failure to cope with the thought of immorality. Neurotic symptoms are caused by a failure in defence of such ideas; these 'incompatible ideas' (p.49) persist in the unconscious, manifesting themselves through the symptoms. Surprenant extends this discussion of morality and neurosis to Freud's work on the sexual drives. Though the sexual drive or libido is plastic its continued extension is limited by feelings of shame, disgust and such like. This civilising factor prevents unacceptable choices of sexual objects, such as one's parents. Unfortunately, Surprenant never fully elaborates on the relation between such repressed impulses and morality, though she does helpfully direct the reader to other work on this topic.

In Chapter Three, Surprenant explains Freud's theory of dream interpretation and shows how this marks the transition from his earlier work to the development of psychoanalysis. The good expository work Surprenant undertakes in the preceding chapters lays the foundation for understanding the more difficult ideas found here. We see that dreams are the fulfilment of repressed wishes and as such give the best access to the repressed unconscious: dreams bring to the dreamer what they know without knowing. As throughout, Surprenant takes care to show how Freud's theory works on two levels, whereby dream interpretation aims not only to discover the repressed wish that is disguised within the dream but also to illuminate the functioning of the mind. Most interesting here is again the link with morality (though again it would have been interesting to see this discussed in more detail). The latent content of the dream is that which is repressed as an incompatible idea. Children's dreams are transparent (i.e. their wishes are manifest in their dreams) because their wishes are not yet subject to this civilising constraint and therefore not repressed. We see here the role of the dream in the struggle to censor immoral impulses.

In Chapter Four, Surprenant explores Freud's theory of the drives – his most 'cumbersome' work (p.107) – and details the familiar model of the ego, super-ego, and the id. Freud himself admitted that he did not very well understand the concept of the drive so Surprenant does well to explicate his theory in a clear and concise manner. We see that the drive ties psychical life to something other than itself; it is an exteriority *within* the psyche. As such, the drive troubles the opposition of inside and outside. Surprenant leaves this line of thought here, but it would have been interesting to see how this relates to the work of those continental philosophers that task themselves with the dismantling of binary oppositions – Jacques Derrida chief among them. Surprenant does, however, go on to give a good account of the connection between the drives and the process of civilisation. The drive, she explains, exerts a pressure, a demand that aims for satisfaction – the removal of whatever state of stimulation the drive provokes. Since, as internal exteriority, one cannot take flight from one's drives, we see that learning to control them is the very cornerstone of civilisation.

In Chapter Five, Surprenant covers metapsychology and the economic point of view. This is a slightly disappointing conclusion to what is up until this point a consistently good study in Freud. Surprenant seems not to have given herself enough room to discuss this in the requisite detail and the chapter does not share the clarity of the rest of the book. The discussion of how Freud's work relates to ethics, that we are told throughout the book will be found here, never fully materialises. This is a shame as had it done then it would have illuminated the interesting yet often too short discussions of morality and the civilising factor that appear elsewhere. There is, however, an interesting discussion of the social functioning of jokes which complements the earlier discussion of the asocial functioning of dreams.

For those looking for a more philosophical account of Freud's work or an account that shows the relation between Freud's work and that of key twentieth century philosophers, this book will disappoint. Yet there can be no doubt that this book succeeds in its author's aims: it is not only a fine introduction to the work of Freud but it adds weight to that lingering feeling that something in this work can be retrieved. It then points the reader in the right direction for just such a task.