

# ***Freud: The Dynamics and Development of Personality***

According to Freud, the nature of our repressed wishes and desires is erotic. This emphasis on sexuality is an aspect of Freud's work that many people find problematic. To understand this requires one to understand how Freud redefined the term sexuality and how he used it in his work. Still, Freud's theoretical position on the role of sexuality and his insistence on the human being's sexual nature is threatening to some people.

## ***The Importance of Sexuality***

In his early work, Freud viewed sexuality as a bodily process that could be totally understood under a model of tension reduction. The goal of human behavior was simply to reduce the tension created by the accumulation of too much energy and to restore a state of balance. Sexual desires could be compared to a wish to remove an itch. However, as his work developed, Freud began to emphasize the psychological character of mental processes and sexuality. His use of the word **libido** to refer to the emotional and psychic energy derived from the biological drive of sexuality testifies to this shift in his thought.

Freud's desire to emphasize the psychological character of mental processes is also seen in the development of his concept of **drive**. The German word he used was *Trieb*, which has been variously translated as "instinct" or "drive." Since "instinct" refers to an inborn automatic pattern of activity characteristic of animals rather than humans, translation of the word as "drive," or "impulse" (Bettelheim, 1982), seems more appropriate to Freud's intent. Freud used *Trieb* to refer to a psychological or mental representation of an inner bodily source of excitement, a form of energy that cannot be reduced to either a bodily aspect or a mental one because it combines elements of both.

In his concept of drive, Freud abandoned an earlier attempt to reduce psychological processes to physiological ones and also began to resolve a problem inherited from Cartesian philosophy. In the belief that a person is more than a machine, the French philosopher René Descartes (1596-1650) had divided all reality into two separate categories: mind and matter. Matter included all material substances, inorganic and animate, including human bodies. These things, Descartes suggested, could be understood under scientific laws. Mind which included all conscious states (thinking, willing, feeling, and so forth) was a second kind of substance that Descartes believed could not be explained by scientific laws. For the first time in history, a sharp distinction between mind and matter was made the basis of a systematic philosophy. Descartes's philosophy led people in the West to proposed the center of the person in the mind rather than in the entire organism. Freud recognized that a comprehensive view of personality must see body and mind as a unity and his holistic approach began to help repair the Cartesian split.

A drive is characterized by four features: *source*, the bodily stimulus or need; *impetus*, the amount of

energy or intensity of the need; *aim*, its goal and purpose (to reduce the excitation); and *object*, the person or object in the environment through which the aim may be satisfied. If Freud had characterized drives simply by source and impetus, he could have continued to think of the sexual drive as just a bodily process. He chose to include also aim and object, which forced him to view sexuality differently and to emphasize its psychological and intentional character. Freud used the German verb *besetzen* (translated as *cathect*) to refer to investing libidinal energy in a mental representation of an object that will satisfy a desire; a person cathects an object that he or she wants. The importance of one's sexual life as a bodily process begins to diminish in favor of one's response to it. For this reason, Freud used the term *psychosexuality* to indicate the totality of the elements included in the sexual drive.

Freud suggested that there are two basic groups of impulsive drives. **Life impulses** or drives are those that maintain life processes and ensure reproduction of the species. The key to these forces is the sexual drive, whose energy force is "libido." **Death impulses** or drives are the source of aggressiveness and reflect the ultimate resolution of all of life's tension in death. Although Freud emphasized the importance of the death drive, his discussion of the development of personality centers around the sexual drive.

What is the purpose of sexuality? The traditional answer was reproduction. The medieval theologian Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) argued in *Summa Theologica* that according to natural law the primary purpose of sexuality was reproduction of the species. Other purposes of sexual activity were secondary. The pleasure that attended sexual activity was permissible, and even encouraged by St. Thomas, but he recommended that it should be submissive to and never prevent the primary purpose of reproduction. If we think that the primary purpose of sexuality is reproduction, what other thoughts about sexuality will logically follow? Sexual behaviors that do not lead to reproduction, such as homosexuality and masturbation, were disapproved of or regarded as perverse.

The nineteenth century culture in Vienna, from which Freud's theories emerged, reflected such an attitude. It is difficult for us to appreciate the extent to which sexual impulses and desires were then forcibly repressed, especially by the middle and upper classes. The sexual act was generally viewed as beastly and undignified, but it was tolerated as an outlet for a

natural shortcoming of men and for purposes of reproduction. Women were supposed to be above sexual impulses, and children were thought incapable of them.

There was considerable anxiety over what were thought to be inappropriate sexual activities and perversions. Rigid taboos were put upon masturbation and limits were set on the expression of sexuality in adult life. The body's excretory functions were taken care of with embarrassment and prudery was practiced to fanatical extremes.

At the same time Vienna was undergoing a cultural renaissance in philosophy, music, and literature. The intelligentsia was seeking the realities that lay behind the façade of the decaying Austrian empire. One such reality was sex. To a large extent, Freud shared society's puritan attitude; nevertheless, he also relentlessly searched for the reality behind the mask.

Freud suggested that the primary purpose of sexual behavior is pleasure, opening the door to a host of new ideas. Activities that do not focus on the genitals may be seen as key expressions of sexuality to the extent to which they produce pleasure. The young child, who invariably seeks pleasure in the body, may be seen as having a rich sexual life. Activities such as sucking the thumb, previously seen as separate from sexuality, may be viewed as sexual. Freud, in effect, turned the traditional concept upside down. This reversal permitted him to account for behaviors that were previously inexplicable, such as sexual variations and infantile sexuality. Freud's redefinition of sexuality was twofold. First, he divorced sex from its previous close restriction to the genitals and reproductive activity. Second, he enlarged the concept of sexuality to include activities such as thumb sucking and sublimation that previously were not thought of as sexual.

In Freudian terms, the child, who actively seeks pleasure from many areas of the body, is *polymorphous perverse*; that is, children's activities differ in many respects from reproductive sexual activity. The sexual activity of children is essentially *autoerotic*; they seek pleasure from their own bodies rather than from the body of another person. They find pleasure in sucking their thumbs, exploring their genitals, and so forth. Only in the course of a long history of development do children progress toward reproductive activities.

—*Personality Theories, An Introduction*

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