In the last decades psychoanalysis has tended to recast itself as a hermeneutic discipline geared at the retelling of human lives, and Freud is recast as a great writer in the humanist tradition rather than as the scientist as which he saw himself. Although this reconceptualization has good reasons, it tends to obscure the fact that Freud primarily saw himself as a theorist of human nature. One of Freud’s deepest convictions was that psychopathology needs to be explained on the basis of evolutionary biology. This paper argues that this may have been one of Freud’s greatest ideas. The reason it has been “repressed” by psychoanalysis is that Freud based it on Lamarckian principles. The current flourishing of evolutionary psychology and psychiatry may well turn Freud into one of the precursors of the psychology of the future.

*Keywords*: Freud, psychoanalysis, evolutionary psychology, hermeneutics

Let us imagine an intellectual historian at the beginning of the 22nd century. Here is my hunch of what he (or she) might write about Freud:

Sigmund Freud is now considered one of the great forerunners of what has turned out to be the most successful paradigm in the understanding of the human mind. In retrospect it is remarkable that, at the beginning of the 20th century, when the understanding of human physiology was, to say the least, rudimentary, and the knowledge of human genetics pretty much nonexistent, Freud already saw that the future of psychology and psychiatry would reside in tracing the functioning of the human mind and its disorders back to earlier evolutionary strata.

Of course Freud got the details completely wrong: his view of human evolution was based on Lamarckian principles. His mythological reconstructions of the origins of the Oedipus complex (in a quaint piece called “Totem and Taboo” [1913]) are interesting in that they show us how far away 19th century biology is from the historical present.

Concepts like the Oedipus complex have disappeared completely. Yet experimental manipulations of the relevant gene have shown that there is indeed something like what Freud called the superego. We also know that when this gene is not regulated, paranoid symptoms
arise. This psychiatric phenomenon is now a thing of the past, because we can balance faulty regulation by injection of the regulatory gene.

Yet Freud needs to be credited for his speculative genius: On the basis of faulty biology, he dared assume that there needed to be an evolutionary basis for psychiatric illnesses. It is also quite fascinating to see that toward the end of his life he thought that the therapeutic value of the method he initiated was very limited, and instead was looking forward to the breakthroughs in biology that would corroborate his theoretical speculations.

It is one of those interesting quirks of intellectual history that the movement that carried his name completely discarded what now counts as his greatest discovery. Psychoanalysis now only survives as a sectarian movement of anthropological interest. The reason is that its practitioners did not see in the late 1990s that the future was not to be found in what used to be called psychotherapy (a basically shamanistic practice based on mythological narratives), rather than the deciphering of the genetic and neurological structure of the brain.

Given that evolutionary psychology is becoming one of the most promising paradigms in the human sciences, this may very well turn Freud into one of the great predictors and precursors of the future of psychology and psychiatry. I will provide a brief account of how and why this aspect of Freud’s thought has largely been forgotten (repressed?) in psychoanalysis.

I will then argue that the current tendency to recast Freud as a major writer and humanist rather than a grand theorist is, to some extent, historically misleading, and diminishes his stature in intellectual history. Instead of seeing Freud as a courageous speculative scientist, his explanatory system is recast as a set of narratives, metaphors and tropes. In this way we may avoid seeing how much Freud was (as every thinker is) a child of his times, but we also fail to see his place in intellectual history.

**Freud’s Evolutionary Program**

Intellectual history, as our (fictitious) intellectual historian points out, tends to work in the strangest and quirkiest paths. Just one example: Mathematical physics evolved on the basis of Platonist and Neo-Platonist philosophy (Randall, 1960). From today’s point of view, it may be difficult to connect quantum physics to Platonists flights of fancy that guided the founders of what was called “geometrical philosophy” in the 17th century.

Copernicus’ deepest conviction was that God could not have created the universe other than on the basis of the most perfect of forms (according to Platonism), the circle. It was this conviction rather than any empirical evidence that led him to the formulation of the heliocentric system. Kepler’s conviction was that God most certainly had produced the world according to the most beautiful mathematical harmonies. He went from failed attempt to failed attempt until formulating the formulae now known as Kepler’s laws, that in turn provided Newton with the basis for his mechanics.

Mathematical physics has long lost any connection to what nowadays seem strange flights of fancy, but were common philosophical assumptions at the time. Presently only intellectual historians even know of the intricate connection between Platonist philosophy and the emergence of the most successful science of the present. Nevertheless, there is today no doubt about the crucial historical importance of Platonism in the early days of mathematical physics. Plato’s idea that the essence of reality consisted in mathematical forms was crucial for physicists and astronomers like Copernicus, Kepler, Galileo, and Descartes.
Freud’s 150th anniversary is a good occasion to reflect on the vicissitudes of his ideas from a wider vantage point. I would like to look at one of Freud’s favorite ideas that, in the course of psychoanalysis, has almost completely been forgotten or rejected: Freud ardently believed in 2 ideas: First, that all mental illnesses can be traced to relics of our phylogenetic past. Second, that science would, one day, uncover the material (i.e., chemical and neurophysiological) basis of human behavior.

Frank Sulloway’s magisterial _Freud, the Biologist of the Mind_ (1979) has traced the biological foundations of Freud’s theorizing in the late 1890s which led to the cornerstones of psychoanalytic theory. Sulloway’s main theses are as follows: As opposed to “internalist” reconstruction of Freud’s thinking of this period, neither his self-analysis nor some neurotic predilections guided Freud’s major theoretical turnaround of 1897. Sulloway shows in painstaking detail some major theoretical difficulties that prevented Freud from finishing his _Project for a Scientific Psychology_ (1895/1953). But for Freud the possibility of a biological foundation of psychoanalysis was a _conditio sine qua non_ for the viability of his theory.

In Sulloway’s reconstruction of Freud’s thinking in the mid 1890s, evolutionary thinking became the solution for an otherwise intractable problem. In the _Project for a Scientific Psychology_, Freud tried to provide a neurological model for repression. He never finished the _Project_, primarily because he encountered an enormous difficulty. Every model he came up with ended in a logical conundrum: If the brain put a repression barrier (“countercathexis”) in the right spot, how could the brain know in advance that the content located on the neurons “later” in the system was unpleasurable?

Sulloway’s second thesis is that Freud’s switch from the seduction theory of hysteria to the theory of internal conflict was guided by one central idea. Freud hit upon a fascinating solution of the question how the brain “knows” where to erect repression barriers: Individual contents that needed to be repressed are incidental. Repression needs to occur biologically because humans complete their sexual development after birth. We go through the oral, anal, and phallic stages outside the womb, and hence psychosexual development is peculiarly vulnerable to developmental fixations.

There are many other instances in which early phylogenetic structures become “repressed” during embryogenesis: Think of our diminished tailbone, of whose existence we are painfully reminded when falling onto our backside.

Through painstaking research Sulloway solves one of the riddles of Freud’s intellectual development: Freud never gave empirical arguments for the particularities of his psychosexual theory. Sulloway documents in detail that Freud did not believe that any such empirical argument was necessary, as he could ground it in some of the prevalent biological theories of his time. He had no doubt that evolutionary biology supported it. Freud assumed that early forms of sexuality are phylogenetic structures that need to be biologically repressed. Organisms had evolved from 1 opening to 2 and then 3, and he believed that oral, anal, and phallic sexuality were the ontogenetic sediment of this phylogenetic series.

Hence Freud came up with the idea of primary repression. The brain was genetically programmed to repress early forms of sexuality in the same way as the body is programmed to “repress” our ancestors’ tails. Freud assumed that human embryogenesis only ends after birth (he often refers to the “premature birth of humans”). Sexuality is the main function that fails to mature inside the uterus and is therefore particularly prone to get stuck or deviated in its development.
Later on Freud began to trace all major forms of psychopathology to presumed evolutionary periods. His thinking was Lamarckistic, and his timetables very different from those accepted in later Darwinist thought. He, for example, believed that obsessional neuroses reflected inhibitory mechanisms that humans developed during the last ice-age because humans needed to refrain from sexual reproduction during a time of limited food supply.

Freud’s major collaborator in this project was Ferenczi, who contributed many ideas to it. Freud endorsed Ferenczi’s speculations enthusiastically, and contributed to it throughout his writings. In particular, it is interesting to see Totem and Taboo (1913/1955) in a new light; generally this book is seen as Freud’s attempt to show that psychoanalysis could compete with Jung in explaining religious and anthropological phenomena. Sulloway shows that Totem and Taboo in fact served a theoretical purpose of the 1st order: Freud wanted to show that the Oedipus complex was phylogenetically ingrained. The story of the patricide by the primal horde was to explain both oedipal rivalry and the foundation of neurotic guilt.

Interestingly enough Sulloway’s book was published before the discovery of Freud’s unpublished manuscript from 1915 in 1985: In it Freud attempts a systematic outline of all transference neuroses by correlating each of them with a particular phylogenetic period of human development. Today it is difficult to imagine that the final victory of Darwinism only occurred in the late 1920s when Freud was already in his 70s. When Ernest Jones asked him to avoid Lamarckian speculations in his Civilization and its Discontents (1930/1961), Freud curtly answered that he could not understand how you could do biology without Lamarck. In any case Freud never gave up on his program of psychoanalysis as evolutionary psychiatry, even though in the 1920s the decisive victory of Darwinism over Lamarckism had made his particular version of it obsolete.

It needs to be emphasized that Sulloway is not only not discrediting Freud, but actually argues that Freud was much more rational than he may seem when read out of historical context. Some of Freud’s stranger ideas (from today’s point of view) are actually quite compelling on the background of accepted science of his day. Like Copernicus, Kepler, and every major thinker, Freud was historical situated and based his thinking on prevalent theories of his time.

Why did psychoanalysis discard Freud’s evolutionary program? Most of all, because Freud’s formulation of it was completely tied to Lamarckian biology. He believed that particular experiences tied, for example, to climatic changes, were stored in our genetic pool.

His timetables were completely wrong from the point of view of Darwinist evolutionary thinking: He thought of evolution in terms of tens of thousands of years, which, for him was possible, as the line of transmission was envisaged in Lamarckian terms.

Psychoanalysis therefore began to “repress” Freud’s evolutionary thinking. It seemed that the only way to rescue the master from obsolescence was to respectfully look aside whenever Lamarckian passages occurred—in analogy that one tries to disregard the weaknesses of an elder statesman who used to be great, but is now old and dysfunctional. Instead many of his (seemingly) problematic concepts were now interpreted as metaphors rather than as concepts to be taken seriously.

Sulloway has shown, to my mind convincingly, that this leads to a systematic misreading of Freud’s ideas. More importantly, Sulloway’s Freud is highly rational. Freud’s knowledge of the science of his day was enormous, and Sulloway shows in detail, how many of Freud’s ideas that seem irrational, idiosyncratically determined or of neurotic origin, make complete sense on the background of the biology of his times.
Freud as a Precursor of Evolutionary Psychology


And this brings us back to Freud’s evolutionary project. Evolutionary psychology and the neurosciences are doing exactly what Freud believed to be the psychology of the future: They are deciphering the phylogenetic strata of the mind and the behavioral programs that are genetically ingrained in our hardware.

It seems that Freud’s evolutionary program was on the right track. Like the founders of mathematical physics, he based his program on assumptions that have long since been discarded. But his basic vision is currently being realized in Darwinian terms.

Today, evolutionary psychologists and psychiatrists are tracing mental illnesses to genetically hard-wired patterns that had adaptive value. Even Freud’s seemingly strange idea that mental illnesses are reflections of early evolutionary mechanisms is gaining support: There are good theoretical approaches to show the evolutionary value of mechanisms like depression and anxiety, and it seems that even Freud’s idea that there is a biological disposition toward certain illness (his problem of the “choice of neuroses”) is rapidly gaining ground (Buss, 1993; Nesse & Williams, 1995).

It is even more fascinating to watch highly “Freudian” ideas resurge into mainstream science. Freud always believed that the “conditions of loving” are determined at a very early age, and he explained this by the idea of libidinal fixation to our first objects.

One rather successful research program in evolutionary psychology is trying to prove a rather similar hypothesis along a very different track. There is growing evidence that men’s criteria for falling in love are determined at a very early age by the facial proportions of their mothers and sisters. It is assumed that early childhood constitutes a critical period in establishing with whom we can fall in love. Darwinian thought attempts to show that this genetically hardwired pattern makes evolutionary sense: By linking our “conditions of love” to similarity of basic features of close family, evolution makes sure that we do not stray too far in diversifying the human gene-pool (Buss, 1993).

But the methodology by which these models are developed and potentially tested is very different from the psychoanalytic database of listening to individual patients. Huge amounts of data from anthropology, biology, social psychology, and the neurosciences are being used and integrated in these novel approaches. Interdisciplinary integration is the game of the day. And psychoanalysis, which mostly limits its database on clinical interactions, has largely lost touch with today’s most promising venues toward the understanding of human nature.

The Marginalization of Psychoanalysis

Freud was an intellectual conquistador; he had a knack for grand speculation that was disciplined by his enormous knowledge both in the sciences and the humanities. Some of his earliest students like Ferenczi and Jung were of rather similar casts of mind. They were
refreshingly immodest in their theoretical ambitions and tried to provide grand theories about human development and the human condition.

But it was precisely the combination of their speculative genius with their insouciance about empirical verification that led the wider scientific community to attack and discredit psychoanalysis.

Psychoanalysis was more capable of disregarding such criticisms during the 1950s and 1960s, when it was the dominating paradigm in American psychiatry. Psychoanalysis was the leading treatment method; insurances paid for it, and as Hale (1995) has shown, it was the conceptual framework through which the educated classes interpreted themselves, their lives and their loves.

At that time Freud’s evolutionary program was completely repressed: Most readings of Freud simply skipped the problematic passages or saw them as lovable quirks of what was otherwise a seminal mind. And, so it was assumed, psychoanalytic theory could do very well without the underpinnings of Freud’s more speculative flights of fancy.

The 1970s and 1980s brought this golden age of psychoanalysis to an abrupt end. As I have recounted this story in detail elsewhere (Strenger, 1991, 2002, Introduction), I will only mention the milestones:

The 1970s brought the first statistical meta-analytic studies that showed that no psychotherapeutic method had a distinct advantage over others. Hence psychoanalysis could no longer claim that it was the major psychotherapeutic method.

The 1970s also brought (questionable) research results that claimed that short-term psychotherapy was as effective as long-term psychoanalysis. This result was eagerly embraced by insurance companies which gradually stopped paying for psychoanalysis.

The 1980s and 1990s heralded important breakthroughs in psychopharmacology. Depression, phobias of all sorts, anxiety disorders, and obsessive compulsive disorder seemed to yield to a variety of new drugs, in particular to the selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors that gradually became the big hit of biological psychiatry.

In addition new research tools ranging from the functional magnetic resonance imaging to the search for genetic markers of various psychiatric conditions swung the pendulum of psychiatric science (along with the concurrent research grants and the all-important academic appointments) in the biological direction.

Psychoanalysis, as Hale (1995) showed, began what seems an unstoppable retreat from the positions of power in the psychiatric establishment. Along with this, the educated public began losing interest in psychoanalysis.

Some of this has to do with deep cultural changes, as I have tried to document recently (Strenger, 2004). But most of all, I suspect, psychoanalysis has ceased contributing to the positive knowledge about human nature. By “positive knowledge” I mean factual information and theoretical models based on it about how human beings develop, function, and what constitutes the basic makeup of our minds.

The Retreat into Hermeneutics

When psychoanalysis lost its powerbase both in general culture and in the psychiatric establishment, it could no longer disregard the critiques that claimed that its theories lacked empirical foundation. Roy Schafer (1976) and George Klein (1976) must be
credited with an early realization that psychoanalysis needed to be reinterpreted because it did not stand up to the demands of the natural science model which has the monopoly of determining causal claims in Western culture.

In the 1980s it became fashionable to defend psychoanalysis from the growing tide of criticisms by arguing that it is a hermeneutic discipline. Space does not permit to recount this epistemic retreat in full, but I have done so in detail elsewhere (Strenger, 1991, chapters 2–4).

Basically the strategy of authors like Habermas, Ricoeur, George Klein, and Roy Schafer was to argue that psychoanalysis did not deal with causal explanations at all. The true business of psychoanalysis was the retelling of human lives. The psychoanalyst, in this model, listens to the patient’s broken story of herself and helps to cocreate a new version of her life-story which restores meaning and a sense of agency.

This reframing of psychoanalysis as hermeneutic-humanistic discipline was meant to divest psychoanalysis from the need to prove empirico-causal claims about etiology of psychopathological conditions and about human development. It was also meant to provide psychoanalysis with a new space of freedom, a pluralistic universe that allowed for many ways of narrating human lives.

Along with many sisters and brethren of the profession, I hoped that recasting psychoanalysis as a humanistic discipline would safeguard it from the epistemological critiques raised against it. But, paradoxically, the increased responsibility and the willingness to refrain from irresponsible generalizations about human nature that cannot be supported by the database of clinical practice has made psychoanalysis retreat into the margins of intellectual and cultural history.

I have participated in this trend quite actively. I did so because I thought (and still think) that psychoanalysis simply does not deal with data that can support anything wider than studying the way meanings structure the experiential world, as Lacan argued a long time ago, and Robert Stolorow has powerfully restated recently. I see many ethical, clinical, and cultural advantages in abandoning the grand theoretical ambitions of the beginnings of psychoanalysis because pluralistic self-consciousness is a way of avoiding some of the dogmatic aspects of psychoanalytic institutions and, in many cases, of psychoanalytic treatment.

I have a lot of sympathy for Adam Phillips’s (1995) definition of psychoanalysis as a form of conversation. He goes hermeneutic all the way, so to speak. In doing so he opts against what he calls “The Enlightenment Freud” and for the “Post-Enlightenment Freud.” This goes along with his professed preference for “comedians, lovers and poets” over scientists. Psychoanalysis then becomes a purely humanistic enterprise. I have myself contributed to this model for a psychoanalytic culture that is purely humanistic and celebrates individual and cultural difference (Strenger, 2002). But I think that Freud’s 150th anniversary is a fitting moment to reflect on the price of the hermeneutic retreat.

The Price of the Hermeneutic Retreat

The hermeneutic retreat is generally accompanied by discussions of “Freud’s scientistic self-misunderstanding” (Habermas, 1971). The argument is that Freud was really part of the humanities but thought of himself as a natural scientist. Rereading Freud as a humanistic writer, the argument continues, allows us to recognize his true stature and greatness.

In fact Freud (often in a Lacanian version) is nowadays mostly read in the humanities,
and the readership of those texts is limited to those who like esoteric discussions that no longer command the interest of either the mental health establishment or the general public. It is maybe symptomatic of the times that the (long overdue) new translation of Freud into English under Adam Phillips’ editorship treats him as a writer rather than as a scientific theorist. His works are now republished in readable English, without heavy editorial apparatuses, and put more emphasis on the pleasures of reading Freud than on issues of theoretical coherence.

In this paper I attempt a different way of celebrating Freud’s greatness. I have always taken pleasure in reading Freud (and have been lucky enough to do so in German, my native language), and thus have sympathy for Phillips’ reconception of Freud as a great writer. Nevertheless I believe that we are not doing Freud a favor by turning his bold speculations into metaphors, narratives, and tropes (to use just some of the lingo of the humanities). This would do Freud as much justice as it would do Copernicus justice to see his achievement as a beautiful metaphorization of the universe rather than a grand attempt to create a new cosmology. And, despite the protestation of those of us invested in the humanities, the great changes in Western Culture have always been driven by science and technology, and not by great literature, as much as many of us may appreciate it.

One way of restoring Freud’s grandness as one of the great speculative minds of Western intellectual and cultural history is to reflect on the price psychoanalysis is paying for the hermeneuticist retreat. As I mentioned before, psychoanalysis has not only lost its foothold in the psychiatric establishment, but it has also lost the attention of the general, educated public.

The internal discourse of psychoanalysis has tended to focus on the intricacies of the clinical exchange, and the (in themselves important) discovery of mutuality and dialogue in the psychoanalytic situation. The analyst’s subjective experience and its impact on the patient has become the center of much psychoanalytic writing. These topics, by and large, only command the attention of the practicing psychoanalyst, and are of very little interest for general readers who want to understand more about their lives. Correspondingly none of it generates any wider cultural impact.

I believe that the reason is simple: Psychoanalysis certainly has become epistemologically more responsible by reframing itself as a hermeneutic discipline. But it has also made itself a lot less interesting. While psychoanalysis celebrated the move from drive theories to object relations theory, integrated humanistic psychology into its framework through Kohut’s work, and later moved on to understand the intricacies of the mutuality of the clinical dialogue, it simply lost the attention of the wider educated public.

In order to have cultural impact, a discipline needs to produce relevant knowledge about the human condition. It needs to provide humanity with new ways of seeing itself in the order of nature. And, alas, psychoanalysis has very little to say about human nature nowadays.

Certainly there are interesting and important attempts to bridge between psychoanalysis and empirical research from other domains. The intense flirt of psychoanalysis with attachment theory is the best example, which has led to some impressive results (e.g., Fonagy, Gergely, Jurist, & Target, 2002). But these integrations between attachment theory and psychoanalysis are only of interest to those who wish to preserve and yet transform psychoanalysis, and do not provide the type of deep insight into human nature generated by current evolutionary psychology.

The facts speak for themselves. The action is in the interface of the cognitive neurosciences and evolutionary biology, or briefly, evolutionary psychology. The grand integrators who provide us with deep insights into who we are come from this discipline.
Sales, which are a good indicator of the general public’s interest, immeasurably favor Dawkins, Damasio, Dennett, Diamond, Edelman, Pinssker, and Wright over psychoanalysis. It would be too easy to respond to this fact by saying that the general public does not appreciate complexity. All of these authors present highly specialized research results and integrate them into very complex theoretical frameworks. But these theoretical frameworks, despite their complexity, present the reader with insights into human nature that the educated public takes to be worth the effort, while current psychoanalysis is mostly read by psychoanalysts only.

Major university presses, like Harvard, Yale, and Chicago who used to publish psychoanalysis, no longer do so. The presses that continue to publish psychoanalysis have grown fewer, and at this point books in psychoanalysis are considered to be doing fine if they sell 700, and as bestsellers if they reach 2,000 copies. This phenomenon is not restricted to the United States: In conversations I have had with German publishers I was told, with some regret, that psychoanalysis no longer has a market there.

In Latin countries psychoanalysis still has a slightly wider appeal—and, interestingly enough, there is a growing market for it in the country where I live, Israel. But the general trend is all too apparent: Psychoanalysis has lost its place as the language in which the educated classes interpret their lives, loves, hopes, and dreads. It is, in fact, depressing to look through the archives of venerable publications that reflect the interests of the educated classes like The New York Times Review of Books or The Times Literary Supplement since 1990: Psychoanalytic titles hardly appear there anymore.

Hence, without denying ourselves the sheer pleasure of reading Freud, the great writer, we should remind ourselves that Freud’s true greatness resided in his willingness to reach for the stars. Freud was not primarily a great essay-writer (even though he was one of the greatest in this genre); he created nothing less than a grand theory of human nature that provided the educated classes of the Western world with a language for self-understanding that lasted for the better part of the 20th century. In addition, as our fictitious intellectual historian of the future might one day say, Freud will probably turn out to be one of those thinkers who, even though basing himself on wrong assumptions, had that uncanny ability of great minds to see where the science of human nature would one day evolve.

References


