

Freud and Darwinism

Jerry Bergman

Darwin had a major influence on Sigmund Freud and the development of his human behavior theory. Freud, in turn, has profoundly influenced much of the field of psychology. Classical Freudian psychology has now been widely discredited, and research has shown much of the theory behind psychoanalysis to be erroneous.

The branch of psychology that focuses on helping people, called counseling psychology, has only been in existence for a little over a century. One of the earliest branches of psychology was psychoanalysis, a theory of personality and treatment founded by Sigmund Freud, a physician. Often called Freudian psychology, it influenced the therapy world, especially the field of psychiatry, for almost a century, but today has largely been discredited.

Darwinian roots of the modern psychotherapy movement

Darwin's writings, and those of his disciples, had a major influence on the whole field of psychology.¹ Freud wrote that "the theories of Darwin ... strongly attracted me, for they held out hopes of extraordinary advance in our understanding of the world."² As a result "Freud took Darwinian biology as his foundation."³ One can easily access the enormous influence of Darwin on psychology as a whole by reviewing the writings of the founders of the modern field of psychology such as Wilhelm Wundt and William James. One of the most important leaders, Sigmund Freud, called his method of therapy *psychoanalysis*, meaning to analyze the psyche or mind. His system gave birth to, or highly influenced, nearly all counselling theories, including various psychotherapies, in existence today. This includes rational approaches as well as traditional psychotherapy approaches, not only Freudian, but other psychotherapies.⁴ The major exception includes the behaviorists. Freud had little or no effect upon behaviorism, but Darwin had an enormous influence as is very apparent in B.F. Skinner's works.⁵

Freud made it clear that "the study of evolution" was an essential part of the training to be a psychoanalyst and Darwinian theory was "essential to psychoanalysis" and "has always been present in Freud's writings, albeit never explicitly."⁶ Thus, all of those Freudian supporters who studied Freud's works were also at least indirectly influenced by Darwinism. It was "Darwin who pointed the way, and the excitement caused by Darwin's work was at its height in the [eighteen] seventies in every country in Europe."⁷

Freud's theory was also based on the ideas of his professional contemporaries, many of whom, such as Ivan Pavlov and Edward Titchener, were also influenced by Darwin's evolutionary theory.^{8,9} Vitz concludes that

"We should never lose sight of the fact that Freud was operating in a medical environment, where ... Darwinian theory" was the common model "from which one approached an understanding of the mental life."¹⁰ Darwin had such a profound influence on Freud's psychoanalytic theories that Freud wrote Darwin's *Origin of Species* was one of the most significant books ever published.¹¹

Freud's academic studies were also greatly influenced by "such world-famous scientists as ... Darwin."¹² For example, "much of Freud's philosophy and general scientific attitude", including his conclusion "that the [human] mind is ultimately physical (or, rather, physiological) came from such great scientific theorists as Darwin".¹⁰ It took Freud eight years instead of the usual five to qualify as a physician because he also perused extensive graduate work in zoology focusing on Darwinism.¹³

Freud was so involved in trying to prove Darwinism that, by his third year in college, he was spending most of his time in the zoological experimental station working under Professor Brucke. By this time he decided on a career, not in medicine as he had originally planned, but rather in research; specifically on the "problems of comparative anatomy posed by Darwin's evolutionary theory".¹⁴ For Freud, Darwin was not just Darwin, but 'the great Darwin'. Freud was such an enthusiastic follower of Darwin that he was called the "scientific heir to Darwin".¹⁵ Freud took his Ph.D. in philosophy and zoology under Professor Brentano, who Freud wrote was "a Darwinist and ... a genius".¹⁶ Freud also worked with Carl Claus, one of "Darwin's most effective and prolific propagandists in the German language".¹⁷

In his writings, Freud referred directly to Darwin and his work over 20 times, "always very positively".¹⁸ Freud was especially interested in Darwin's work in the area of psychology—for example, in his book *Expression of Emotions in Man and Animals* Darwin taught the self-preservation theory, an idea that was central to his survival of the fittest concept. The theory developed by Freud and his followers from Darwinism was based on the idea that all behavior is the result of a few basic animal drives produced by natural selection to facilitate survival.

Darwin argued that all animals have an innate self-preservation instinct (i.e. libido) that included both the struggle to survive and the drive to reproduce. The animals that survive this struggle and left more offspring were more likely to pass on their 'survival' genes, including those for



Figure 1. Sigmund Freud approaching middle age at the height of his career. In almost all of the many photos I have seen, including this one, he is holding a cigar. Freud died of suicide after suffering from a serious case of oral cancer that was likely caused by smoking.

a high sexual drive, to their progeny compared to animals that left fewer offspring. By this means, Darwinism argues, there was a selection for sexual drive strength, which caused sex to become the main drive in sexual animals. This conclusion is why the sex drive became central in Freud's theory of human behavior and is why his system is termed *psychosexual theory*, and the *application* of his theory is called *psychosexual analysis* or *psychoanalysis*.¹⁹ Freudian concepts, such as libido, id,

and/or psychosexual stages, are all derived from this conclusion of Darwinism.

Grace Adam wrote that as Darwin speculated about our evolutionary past, so too prominent psychology leaders have speculated about "which seemingly human traits might have been received intact from the dim simian past."²⁰ One of the Darwinian ideas that Freud accepted was the now discredited inheritance of acquired characteristics, including the inheritance of mental traits, an idea that had a profound influence on psychology up to the 1950s.²¹

Freud wrote that his 'scientific' theory of psychoanalysis is rejected by many persons, not because of science, but because "powerful human feelings are hurt" by psychoanalysis theory and that

"Darwin's theory of descent met with the same fate, since it tore down the barrier that had been arrogantly set up between men and beasts. I drew attention to this analogy in an earlier paper, in which I showed how the psycho-analytic view of the relation of the conscious ego to an overpowering unconscious was a severe blow to human self-love. I described this as the *psychological* blow to men's narcissism, and compared it with the *biological* blow delivered by the theory of descent and the earlier *cosmological* blow aimed at it by the discovery of Copernicus."²²

Furthermore, the evolution of life means that "... no spirits, essences, or entelechies, no superior plans or ultimate purposes are at work.

The physical energies alone cause effects—somehow. Darwin had shown that there was hope of achieving in a near future some concrete insight into the 'How' of evolution. The enthusiasts were convinced that Darwin had shown more than that—in fact had already told the full story. While the skeptics and the enthusiasts fought with each other, the active researchers were busy and happy putting together the family trees of the organisms, closing gaps, rearranging the taxonomic systems of plants and animals according to genetic relationships, discovering transformation series, finding behind the manifest diversities the homologous identities."²³

Freud's acceptance of Darwinism and atheism influenced his view of humans. In his words

"... ethics are remote from me. ... I have found little that is 'good' about human beings on the whole. In my experience most of them are trash. ... If we are to talk of ethics, I subscribe to a high ideal from which most of the human beings I have come across depart most lamentably."²⁴

The psychoanalytic technique

At the core of psychoanalysis is free-association, a technique encouraging the patient to talk about whatever comes to his or her mind. The goal is to uncover the "unconscious roots of human behavior in man's ... ineradicable animal nature."²⁵ One of the therapist's major roles is to provide an accepting environment that allows the patient to shed animal inhibitions, open up, and mentally roam without direction or censorship. To help patients free associate, they lie on a couch to encourage them to relax while the therapist sits behind the patient and takes notes. This approach is largely limited to fairly articulate patients with relatively mild symptoms: schizophrenics and most psychotic patients are rarely able to benefit from psychoanalysis.

Freud taught that innate biological drives, such as sex, ultimately determine all behavior:

"After Darwin had shaken mankind's self-esteem by proposing a theory demonstrating human kinship with other animals, Freud shattered it still further by asserting that people were far less master in their own mental house than they had always supposed."²⁶

In short he taught "the ego is largely the servant of unconscious and uncontrollable forces of the mind", an idea that no doubt hindered helping people with problems.²⁷

Freud and religion

Freud, although very influenced by both Catholic and Judaic traditions as a youth, when taught Darwin in school, he rejected theism and became an atheist.²⁸ Nonetheless, Freud openly acknowledged that "his early reading of



Figure 3. The famous couch that Freud used to psychoanalyze his patients. He sat in a chair to the left behind the patient so that his patients would not be distracted by his note taking. Freud felt the distraction would discourage them from speaking.

the Bible had a decisive influence on his intellectual and spiritual development.”²⁸

Freud declared himself an atheist in 1874 while still a medical student, influenced by Darwin who “had undertaken to place man firmly in the animal kingdom.”²⁹ One reason why Freud actively opposed religion was because he concluded that it suppressed and inhibited freedom, especially sexual freedom.³⁰ Freud postulated that basic drives, such as sex, were all programmed in humans by evolution. For this reason Freud opposed the “suppressive, inhibitory rules of conventional morality, especially antagonism to sexual pleasure, which he believed were contributory causes of neurosis.”³¹

Psychological drives, such as the oral stage, were believed to be normally expressed only during the developmental stages that correspond to Haeckel’s evolutionary developmental stages. Haeckel taught that as we develop in the womb, we pass through the fish, reptile, and mammal stages before birth. Children likewise were believed to go through developmental stages, including the oral, anal, and phallic stages, until they reach adulthood. These stages dominate during certain growth periods, and happiness as an adult was said to depend on successfully meeting the needs of each developmental stage. Frustration from failure to meet the needs of any one stage resulted in the development of psychological problems later in life.

Freud’s most famous and controversial idea was the Oedipus complex. In his book, *Totem and Taboo*, Freud argued that the Oedipus complex was the “ontogenetic recapitulation of an actual occurrence in the development of civilization” at the period of Darwin’s evolutionary stage that taught when humans lived as apes in small groups that often consisted of one powerful male and several females.³² Darwin’s 1876 work, *A Bibliographical Sketch of an Infant*,

also stimulated Freud’s work in the area of psychology, especially child psychology.³³

Freud believed that Darwin had proved that our bodies had evolved from animals, and said that our minds had also evolved from the lower animals:

“The aspect of man’s pride to be wounded by biological discoveries, those associated with the name of Darwin, was his belief in his unique status in the animate realm ... man came not simply to assume a position of domination over other animals, but ... the power of reason, the possession of an immortal soul, were his prerogatives alone. The demonstration of his essential affinity with other animals, and his descent from them, was the second great blow to man’s pride. (Incidentally, this admission had been generally made only in respect of man’s body, not his mind; it was Freud’s work that is gradually extending it to the latter.)”³⁴

As the Discovery Institute Wedge Document concluded,

“Charles Darwin, Karl Marx, and Sigmund Freud portrayed humans not as moral spiritual beings, but as animals or machines who inhabited a universe ruled by purely impersonal forces and whose behavior and very thoughts were dictated by the unbending forces of biology, chemistry, and [the] environment.”³⁵

Just as he believed that life evolved, Freud taught that religion, like every other aspect of mind including instinct, had evolved from animals, and for this reason the human mind, Freud believed, “could be accounted for without the necessity of invoking any supernatural intervention.”³⁶ In many ways psychoanalysis has replaced religion: “Psychoanalysis has often been referred to as a religion because of the intensity of the disputes within the movement that so often led to rebels leaving it and setting up rival schools or splinter groups, in a manner reminiscent of religious sects.”³⁷

Freud believed that Darwin’s theory destroyed “the belief in a spiritual force working within the organism”.³⁸ As a result, Freud believed that nothing stood “in the way of scientific method being able to explain all the mysteries of organic

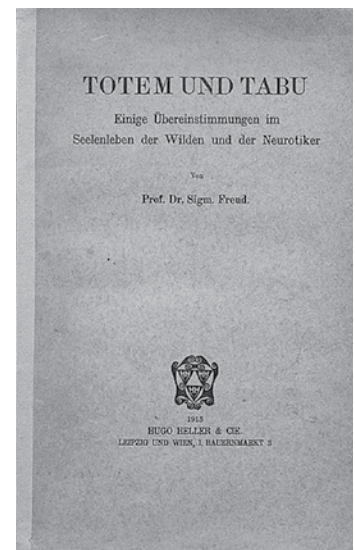


Figure 2. *Totem und Tabu*, the original edition translated into English as *Totem and Taboo*. This, one of his most controversial books, was heavily influenced by Darwinism and is now almost universally discredited.

life and of psychology.”³⁸ This foundation of psychology and psychiatry may explain why such a high percent of persons in this profession are atheists or, at least, agnostics.

Darwin wrote that the origin of all biology was once seen as the “handiwork of the Creator” but evolution has shown it is actually the result of a “cruel and relentless battle for existence, in which the less functional were selected out.”³⁹ Freud wrote that, likewise, the human personality and all human traits are also a conflict in which those persons with the fittest traits survived. This selection of traits that result from conflict in human relations “is basic in Freud’s psychoanalytic thinking, as it was in all post-Darwinian biology.”³⁹ Cooper concluded that mainstream psychiatry has, since its very beginning, been preoccupied with the natural sciences; specifically Darwinism, which has strangled the way psychiatry views human nature, the research they do, and the solutions proposed to deal with psychological problems.⁴⁰

One psychiatrist who exposed the fallacies of this approach to helping clients was Karl Menninger, founder of the Menninger Clinic. In his 1974 book, *Whatever Became of Sin*,⁴¹ Menninger recognized that the idea of being ruled by our biology, and that misbehavior was a result of inappropriately met needs that became part of the human condition as a result of evolution, was erroneous. Menninger concluded that the biblical teaching of personal responsibility for accepting the reality of sin and then endeavoring to deal with it is central to good mental health.

Criticism of orthodox psychoanalysis

Freud also faced “a flood of criticism” during his life, which Jones notes Freud responded as his hero, Darwin, did, namely by publishing “more evidence in support of his theories.”⁴² According to Jones, Freud often tried to dismiss criticism of his theories by concluding that his critics were stupid, arrogant, illogical, and conscienceless.⁴³ Jones added Freud found that the “only effective reply” to his critics was the one Darwin used, “and that is the one he consistently followed.”⁴⁴ A major problem with Freud was his reliance on Darwinism that taught all life was the result of “blind, clashing profane forces”, an idea that produced great debate about the nature of human, creatures Darwin placed “firmly in the animal kingdom.”⁴⁵

Orthodox psychoanalysis now widely discredited

Psychoanalysis has now been widely discredited by both professional psychologists and others partly because the ideas it is based on have been discredited. An example is the ‘law of ontogenesis’, the idea that we repeat our evolutionary history in the womb, traveling through the worm, fish, reptile, and mammal stages as we develop from an embryo to a fetus.²⁵ The vast literature critical of psychoanalysis published by mainline presses includes that

by Harvard graduate Harry K. Wells.⁴⁶ Wells documents that psychoanalysis was introduced in America only during the last century and has, in this short time, passed from orthodoxy, to revision, to reform, to reconstruction and, last, to demise. A major problem with psychoanalysis has always been its lack of solid scientific support and the fact that its supporters have failed to give scientific proof for the efficacy of their technique.⁴⁷ Kenyon concluded that “psychoanalysis is a constellation of suppositions without a trace of scientific evidence in their support.”⁴⁸

Orthodox Freudian therapy is now widely considered moribund or, at the least, far more time consuming and expensive than other equally or more effective therapies, and of historical interest only. Few books today are written critiquing orthodox psychoanalysis, except from an historical viewpoint because of this fact. Now critiques have spread to all of psychology. New York University psychology professor Paul Vitz documents that psychology has become a substitute religion, one that stresses what he calls ‘self worship’.⁴⁹

Conclusions

Both Marxism and psychoanalysis were based on Darwinism, and both are now widely regarded as moribund or worse. Thirty years ago psychiatry professor Joseph Wolpe concluded from a review of the research that current psychotherapeutic practices often harm the patients they are supposed to help.⁵⁰ Since then new techniques have largely replaced Freudian approaches, including drug therapy. The failure of Darwin’s progeny, including Marxism and psychoanalysis, in the end is a result of the failure of Darwinism itself as a system that accurately explains the real world. Most of Freud’s innovative ideas, such as the Oedipus complex, have largely been empirically discredited.^{51,52} Freud built his theory of the mind so completely on Darwinism that his biographer, Ernest Jones, “bestowed on Freud the title ... Darwin of the mind.”³⁶ Of note is the fact that Freud was actually a Lamarckian (i.e. he accepted the inheritance of acquired characteristics theory of Lamarck), as was Darwin, and remained so

“... from the beginning to the end of his life what one must call an obstinate adherent of this discredited Lamarckism. Over and over again he implied or explicitly stated his firm belief in it.”⁵³

This may help explain why so many of Freud’s theories are now recognized as wrong, and actually irresponsible.

Freud was driven less by science than his “liberal-individualist philosophy, itself a heritage of the Darwinian age.”⁵⁴ In the end, as Nobel Laureate Sir Peter Medawar concluded, “Freud’s theories will remain for ever one of the saddest and strangest of all landmarks in the history of the twentieth-century thought.”³⁷

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Jerry Bergman has nine academic degrees including two Ph.Ds. His major areas of study for his graduate work were in biology, chemistry, psychology, and evaluation and research. He graduated from Wayne State University in Detroit, Medical University of Ohio in Toledo, University of Toledo and Bowling Green State University. A prolific writer, Dr Bergman has taught biology, chemistry and biochemistry at Northwest State in Archbold, Ohio for over 24 years. He is now an adjunct associate professor at The University of Toledo Medical College.
