

Why Read Freud?

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Loyola College

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Father Ridley, Vice President Haddad, Dean Buckley, members of the faculty and staff, parents, and, especially, students of Loyola College,

It is a special pleasure to receive this award, dedicated to the memory of Bernard Nachbahr, a professor of Philosophy here at Loyola who I had the privilege of knowing and who I, like so many others, came so much to love and respect. Bernard was a rare spirit, a man of infectious enthusiasm whose love of ideas was infused with a passion for social justice and whose personal character was graced by uncommon warmth and humility. I am deeply honored to be associated with his name.

Like the other recipients of this award before me, in whose company I also feel honored now to take a place, I am asked to speak of the life of the mind. The challenge of this task is compensated a little by the satisfaction that, given this award in view of my own contributions to the life of the mind, I feel a little more assured that perhaps I have one. Of course, you know that philosophers are always wondering whether they have minds, and puzzling a good deal over the question of what a mind is anyway, or what it is good for.

Actually, I am only half joking. I receive this award today because a handful of my colleagues took the time and care to read some of what I have written over the past years and they thought it had at least something valuable to say. And that, let me tell you, is a deeply gratifying experience. To be a scholar—to spend those many, many hours by yourself trying to read, to think, and especially to find your own voice to say something significant that hasn't been said before—all this can be a lonely enterprise, in which at times one can easily wonder if one's own thoughts still make sense, to wonder, that is, if perhaps you've lost your mind. To those of my colleagues who think I haven't, I say, very sincerely, thank you.

What, then, of the life of the mind? A challenging topic indeed! Yet one that lends itself well to my own area of scholarly research in philosophical psychology, particularly in the tradition of Freudian

psychoanalysis. So I will speak to you today of Freud. But of Freud? It might strike you as odd for a Catholic school to confer an important academic prize on a Freud scholar. As everyone knows, Freud was a ferocious, one might even say, a "devout" atheist. The adjective seems deeply appropriate: Freud attacked religious belief with all the agonized passion and soul-searching of an old testament prophet. Good grief, you might say, they teach Freud at Loyola? They've let the fox into the hen house!

Yes, we do teach Freud. Alongside religious philosophers from Augustine and Aquinas to Spinoza and Levinas, we also seek to acquaint students with many of the most notorious enemies of Christianity: Marx, Nietzsche, Russell, Sartre, to name a few. If this circumstance seems odd or even outrageous to you, it may seem even more so when you consider that in the United States, where departments of philosophy are largely dominated by a relatively technical, science- and logic-oriented style of thinking developed in the twentieth century, the grand old tradition of European philosophy, going back to the ancient Greeks and stretching forward to the most renegade and revolutionary voices of modernity, has been kept alive largely by Catholic colleges and universities. I think it safe to say that it is precisely in Catholic schools that you're most likely to find courses that include the greatest percentage of wild pagans and fiery atheists.

This situation might seem very odd indeed. But I prefer to think that it reflects one of the most noble and valuable aspects of the Jesuit intellectual tradition. That tradition insists that the path to genuine wisdom is enhanced not diminished by the encounter with a plurality of voices, even those that challenge our most basic assumptions. The authentically Jesuit spirit, far from seeking to insulate faith from exposure to challenging ideas, eagerly delves into every field of knowledge, confident that all unbiased inquiry ultimately nourishes the life of the mind and enriches the health of the soul. It is in this way that I have understood, and very much respected, the intellectual journey taken by my own mentor and dissertation adviser, William Richardson, a Jesuit priest who first became famous for an internationally acclaimed book about the great German existentialist, Martin Heidegger, and who then went on, in the middle of his career, to complete training in New York and Paris to become a psychoanalyst.

But to the more pertinent question: What can Freud still offer us about the life of the mind? As you may know, Freud's conception of the unconscious has been variously accused of being unscientific,

ineffective, misogynist, or simply irrelevant to contemporary concerns. Indeed, Freud is now counted by many people as something of a thought criminal. His theories not only offend religious belief but often run sharply counter to common sense, violate our preferred images of ourselves, and refuse to observe the politically correct fashions of the moment. Almost two decades ago, a cover story in *Time* magazine asked "Is Freud Dead?" and appeared to answer its own question by featuring a portrait of Freud, his head exploding in colored fragments. Am I wasting your time to speak to you of Freud?

This is neither the time nor the place to enter the particulars of the debates that now swirl around Freud and his theories. But perhaps it will be of some use to try to cut beneath the more inflammatory points of Freud critique in an effort to illuminate the core assumptions that motivated his thinking. There is, it seems to me, a very great deal in those fundamental assumptions that remains of unique value, especially for the study of the humanities. For the student entering upon the adventure of learning, an adventure like that offered in this college by the Core curriculum, one could do worse than to take Freud as a guide.

One could do worse, for example, than to follow Freud in seeking above all else to know oneself. Psychoanalysis remains unique among the range of psychotherapeutic practices in centering the long process of training upon an exercise in self-knowledge. To become a psychoanalyst requires many years of being in analysis oneself, a recognition that the path toward greater understanding of others is opened up by deeper self-understanding. In this respect, Freud was actually profoundly old-fashioned. In an age increasingly dominated by the dream of push-button control, the long and messy soul-struggle of analysis keeps alive the ancient Delphic injunction to know thyself.

And what exactly is it that Freud would have us know? First of all, something from the past. Freud's project of self-knowing, like the effort of Marcel Proust in his monumental book, is a search for lost time. Psychoanalysis is predicated upon a return to one's own childhood. This orientation toward the past is the basis of the old joke about the difference between Marx and Freud. Marxist revolution, it is said, takes two steps forward, one step back. Freudian analysis, on the other hand, attempts one step forward by taking two steps back.

To the extent that Freud locates the present life of the mind in its own past, Freud exemplifies one of the key distinguishing aspects of the humanities. For the humanities, too, are a project of knowledge that

feeds on the past. The texts of the humanities, unlike those in the sciences, are never wholly out of date. In the sciences, an old book is of merely antiquarian interest, but texts of literature, religion, and philosophy are perennially relevant, they are forever potential sources of revelation. Such texts are not just inexhaustible but are made richer for every revisitation. This task of recovery of the past, in psychoanalysis as in the humanities in general, is sublimely evoked by the famous lines of Eliot: "the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and to know the place for the first time."

What is it that psychoanalysis finds in the mists of the past? Surely no mere exercise of nostalgia. Analysis seeks not to replay the good times, but to recontact the moments of injury, deprivation, and forfeiture. It discovers in love's longing a story of loss. It seeks to contact what remains hidden in the shadows of our earliest experiences of disappointment and bereavement. In this way, analysis is a labor of mourning, an attempt to draw close to the reality of death in all its forms and to be touched by it. Freud's concern is thus ultimately less about sexuality than about mortality. The sensibility of the psychoanalytic project, keenly attuned to the register of what is lacking, missing, or erased, is well spoken for by the words of the great German philosopher Hegel: "the life of the mind," said Hegel, "is not one that shuns death, and keeps clear of destruction; it endures death and in death maintains its being. It only wins to its truth when it finds itself utterly torn asunder. It is this mighty power, not by being a positive which turns away from the negative, . . . on the contrary, mind is this power only by looking the negative in the face, and dwelling with it."

And what, we ask a last time, does Freud seek to discover in this encounter with death and loss? It is here that we find his most distinctive contribution. For Freud is convinced of the necessity, not only of revisiting the site of what has been lost, but of repossessing what has been lost in our response to loss. Freud invites us to return to the moment of trial or trauma, not simply to reexperience the moment of dereliction, but to repossess what we have given up in the effort to overcome the brutality of loss. This effort of overcoming typically leaves behind a defensive formation, a kind of hard and resistant kernel, the body of what Freud called "symptom." Like a pearl formed around the point where sharp grit has penetrated the oyster's soft innards, the symptom both marks the spot of intrusion and protects against further injury. The symptom is the means we have of living on through pain and loss.

But there is a price to be paid. For the symptom carries with it a stultifying and ultimately crippling effect. Like an overgrowth of hard scar tissue that binds and pulls with every new attempt at motion, the symptom leaves the mind cramped and contorted. The result is that we become twice bereft, once by the blows of fortune, and again by our own effort at self-protection. These effects occur in the field between ourselves and others. It is always fundamentally the other that is lost to us, the other and the other's love. And our efforts to suture the loss of that love leave us diminished in our relation to the other, unable to engage the full potentialities of love refound. It is at that point, in the back and forth of speech between myself and an other, that Freud locates the possibility of repair: the talking cure of the analytic relationship.

I am afraid that this compressed account must seem somewhat schematic and abstract. Perhaps we can glimpse something of its relevance, and something of the challenge it poses for the life of the mind, in the example of our recent, collective trauma: the catastrophe of last September. Over the course of the past year, we have all struggled to come to terms with that devastating loss. In ways that recall the words of Hegel about the mind that endures death and looks the negative in the face, we have and continue to memorialize that disaster. We return repeatedly to the thoughts and images of that terrible day, goaded on by an obscure sense of necessity. And we strive to erect monuments that will help to mark the sites of loss— in New York, Washington, Pennsylvania, and in our minds. We erect them as aids to memory, works of grief, tokens of respect.

All this is fitting and proper. We are responding to tragic dereliction in the most natural of human ways, following the impulse of entombment, that is, the need to set stones, permanently and securely, in the gap left by death. In such monuments, it is as if we are trying to make something stay, to struggle in the swirl of the turning world that snatches from us the objects of our love to find some point of stability, to establish some lasting thing that will not and can not be taken away. Is it any surprise that we do something similar even with words? "9-11"--this wording of the date has become a shorthand for all the tragic enormity of the attacks. "9-11"---has not this phrase itself assumed some of the character of stone--hard and polished, like a kind of imperishable kernel? "9-11"—it has become in itself a kind of verbal monument. We cling gratefully to its steely smoothness, in one sense a sure handle with which to grab hold of something otherwise too big to manage, in another sense a buffer that allows us to keep so great a

pain at a little safer distance.

All of this, as I say, is as it should and must be. And yet, Freud warns, at some point in the process of mourning and healing we must also be wary of the ways in which our pain may have calcified into the blockages of the symptom. Where are these points and how are we to recognize them? Surely there are many. Locating them and coming to terms with them is work for analysis—though analysis made more difficult for the fact that it cannot be conducted in the usual manner. But when we now look around, can we not begin to sense the work of the symptom, the hardening of a defensive crust?

Consider, for example, some of the other words that now stud our daily public discourse: “terrorism” “war on terror” “evil.” Is it possible that this new lexicon, however much it has been understandably called up by events, may nevertheless be functioning symptomatically in the Freudian sense? These words are now bandied about as if we knew exactly what they are talking about. Yet can we not suspect that this sense of certainty is partly an illusion? Can we not begin to wonder if, at the same time that they call us to a new awareness, they also function to truncate and limit awareness? “Terrorism”—Are we not tempted to focus exclusively on the spectacular, and spectacularly horrifying, effects of terrorism, while forgetting to think about its causes? “War on Terror”—Are we not in danger of being especially keen-eyed when looking out at the potentially hostile world around us while at the same time remaining blind to the ways in which the rest of the world sees us? “Evil”—Is it really possible to say that there are people, whole countries even, that are simply good, or simply evil? Are not countries, like souls, always a thorny mix of good and evil?

If I am right to suspect that there is a symptomatic dimension of our response to the horror of last September, it is a perfect example of Freud’s idea. For the trickiest aspect of the symptom, Freud discovered, is that its illusory and distorting effects are built around a core of reality. And in this case, who could deny the reality, indeed the enormity of the reality? Yet the question remains: has the reality, however horrendous—no, precisely because it was and is so horrendous—has the reality thrust us into the state of stunned and distorted consciousness, the product of symptomatic self-protection that Freud has taught us to recognize?

But where does all of this leave us? The stakes are so high. Some action, it seems, must be taken. What would Freud recommend? He

would, I suspect, advise application on the level of the whole community of what he called the fundamental rule of analysis: the simple rule that enjoins the patient to say whatever comes to mind, however apparently irrelevant, repulsive, or even nonsensical it might at first appear. He would recommend, that is, the social equivalent of the talking cure, a cure by discourse. And what form would such a cure by discourse take? At the very least, it would mean a program of unflinchingly open exchange that would contrast quite markedly with the closed and inhibited character of our public mood over the past year. It would require that we take care to make room for the broadest possible spectrum of opinions, that we refuse to allow conformity to pass for loyalty. And at the extreme, it would require something much more harrowing: that we pause to listen to the voice of that other who may appear to us to be the most extremely repugnant, the most completely illegitimate, that other who is now most truly other, the voice of the enemy.

Of course, even to contemplate such a listening to the enemy makes our heads spin with a welter of outraged objections. Must not such a listening to our attackers reward their murderousness? Hasn't their recourse to such hideous violence disqualified them from the right to be heard? Wouldn't such a deference to the enemy, even to listen to what they have to say, to attempt to adopt the perspective from which they see things, constitute a betrayal of loyalty to those who have suffered and died? Such a prospect arouses in us the most visceral repugnance. And yet it is precisely here, I would argue, that we face the real challenge laid down by the Freudian encounter with the unconscious. The voice of the unconscious is precisely what we least want to hear, what most scandalizes us, what most wounds us in the very place that we have already been wounded.

Applied to our present situation, the Freudian lesson is indeed a difficult one. It leads us to be circumspect about the very unity to which we now cling, that patriotic solidarity as Americans that seems the only beneficial outcome of our national trauma. And it teaches us to suspect that the impulse to separate absolutely from the other and to construe that other as abject and inhuman, belongs in itself to the dynamics of the symptom. Does overcoming that separation legitimize the position of the hated other? Are we asked to accept that the atrocities of September 11th were somehow justified? Are we to excuse our attackers and blame ourselves? Of course not. What, then, is the point? The Freudian lesson is perhaps difficult above all for the way in which, precisely at the time when we most desperately want

simplicity, the moment when we most need to reject ambiguity and equivocation, it forces us to re-embrace complexity. It is not for nothing, after all, that "complex" is the watchword of Freud's theory of the unconscious. Freud leaves us with this challenge: that the recovery of our humanity consists in discovering the knot of a painful and recalcitrant complexity. Moreover, the ultimate complexity concerns the way in which we are not separate from the other, but intimately bound together, although in ways that remain deeply and stubbornly hidden from us. From a Freudian point of view, the 11th of September must teach us that the complex we now face is a global one. To know ourselves, we must also know that global other.

Therein lies the most general lesson of Freud's teaching for the life of the mind: that humanity is not a state of being but a task to be accomplished, a task that consists in the hard work of finding the knotted complex in which we are, all of us, held captive. Yet in thus directing us toward what is complex, Freud maintains a profound faith in the healing power of discourse, the healing power not just of truth but of a shared search for truth. And in this, the teaching of Freud, for all its strangeness and challenge, recalls another, equally strange and challenging teaching, the one that enjoins us to love one