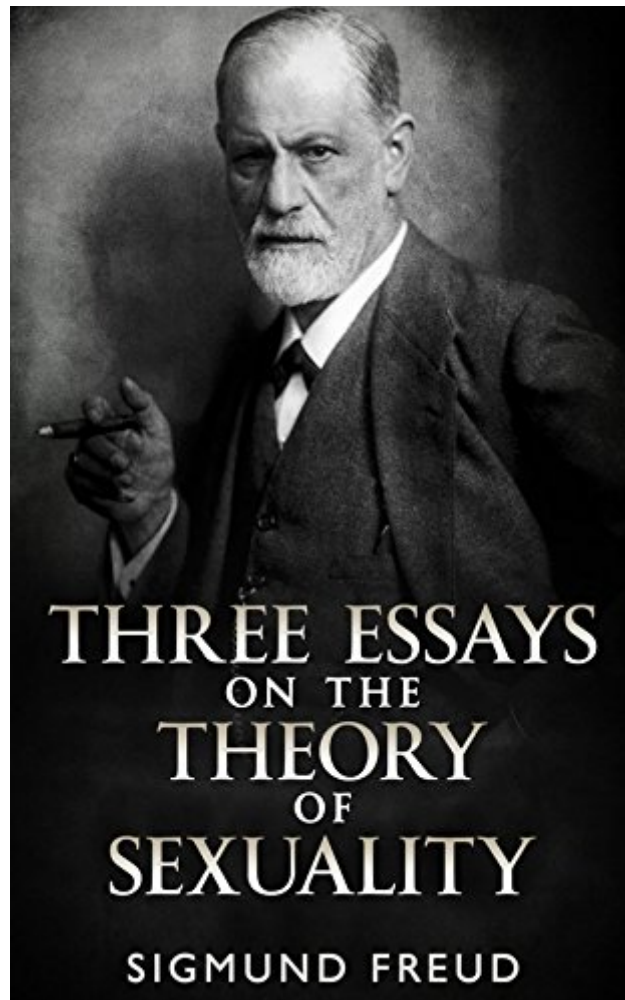




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Three Essays On The Theory Of Sexuality



Synopsis

The traditional story about the historical origins of Freudian psychoanalysis implies that the Oedipus complex was part of Freudian theory from the very beginning. However, in this first edition of *Three Essays on Sexuality*, first published in 1905 and never before translated into English, we find no reference whatsoever to the Oedipus complex. Is there a Freudian psychoanalysis that is not Oedipal? This first version of Freud's *Three Essays* articulates just such a non-Oedipal psychoanalysis. As such, it still has a definite 'emancipatory' potential; Freudian psychoanalysis is not Oedipal in its very nature. It is only from 1909 onwards that psychoanalysis tends to become a sophisticated defence of what Freud first called the 'popular opinion' about sexuality. It was precisely this 'popular opinion' that psychoanalysis originally was meant to deconstruct. Is there a Freudian escape - that is an escape that remains not so much within Freudian orthodoxy, but at least within its inspiration - from this impasse? If Freud has respected more systematically his own original thesis, could it be that the Oedipus complex wouldn't be the shibboleth of psychoanalysis? Not only is this first edition less Oedipal than is generally believed, but it also contains the elements for thinking a 'non-Oedipal' psychoanalysis; a Freud against Oedipus.

Book Information

File Size: 2542 KB

Print Length: 134 pages

Publisher: David De Angelis (August 24, 2017)

Publication Date: August 24, 2017

Sold by: Amazon Digital Services LLC

Language: English

ASIN: B0754ZS79H

Text-to-Speech: Enabled

X-Ray: Not Enabled

Word Wise: Enabled

Lending: Not Enabled

Enhanced Typesetting: Not Enabled

Best Sellers Rank: #86,080 Paid in Kindle Store (See Top 100 Paid in Kindle Store) #15

in Kindle Store > Kindle eBooks > Health, Fitness & Dieting > Counseling & Psychology >

Psychoanalysis #95 in Books > Medical Books > Psychology > Movements > Psychoanalysis

Customer Reviews

The content of this book is excellent. The analysis included is very useful. My primary problem is with the kindle edition of the book. The kindle edition does not include page numbers or a usable table of contents. I am using this book for a college class and I need to be able to cite passages by page number. (I understand that official guidelines have been established for ebooks but some professors are old fashioned.) The lack of page numbers also makes it difficult when the professor assigns readings by the page number only and not the section or chapter title. I have used a competing marketplace's preview of the book to get a rough idea of the page numbers, but I eventually ended up buying the book from there as well.

Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality is an important work for a number of reasons. Anyone in possession of even a passing familiarity with Freud will certainly be aware of the importance Freud places on the sexual instinct in his psychology. Freud's theories on human sexuality are often criticized for being reductionistic (for reducing love to sex) but as Freud himself says in his Preface to the fourth edition of this work, "anyone who looks down with contempt upon psycho-analysis from a superior vantage-point should remember how closely the enlarged sexuality of psycho-analysis coincides with the Eros of the divine Plato" (pg. xxx). Three Essays is one of Freud's most sustained analyses of this important aspect of his thought and is valuable for that reason alone. No one who is interested in Freudian psychology in general, Freud's theories on the sexual instinct in particular, or in human sexuality in general can afford to miss this book. I also think this work is an important step (or can become one) towards dispelling some of the myths about sexuality (like the myth that heterosexuality is "natural" and homosexuality is "unnatural"). It is true that Freud still uses the term perversion when discussing homosexuality (which he calls inversion) but his analysis also tends to undermine the view that heterosexuality is in some sense more natural than homosexuality in a number of ways (or I should say Freud's analysis undermines the metaphysics of the sexual instinct that underlies such a view). The sexual instinct, for Freud, is complex and is something constructed in the concrete development of the individual; in other words, even the "normal" sexual instinct is unnatural to the degree that it is constructed and not innate or based on immutable laws of nature. It is a river made up of a number of separate tributaries. This means there is no difference, metaphysically speaking, between heterosexuality and homosexuality. And finally, for anyone who is interested (as I am) in phenomenology, Freud's essays in this volume can serve as a foundation for

a phenomenology of sexual life, though it is necessary to update to some degree the mechanistic physiology that Freud couches his theories in. For this purpose I would recommend reading *The Organism* by Kurt Goldstein and *The Structures of Behavior* by Maurice Merleau-Ponty. The first part of my review will briefly outline Freud's main theses in this book. The second part will be a few of my own thoughts about how Freud's theories contribute towards a phenomenology of sexual life and should only be read by those who are interested in this topic.

I. There are, in Freud's opinion, some common misconceptions about the sexual instinct. It is assumed to be absent in children, to set in at the time of puberty, to be directed solely towards the opposite sex, and its aim is supposed to be sexual union (pg. 1). This is the accepted picture of the sexual instinct in terms of common understanding. Freud believes this is a considerable falsification. Freud will challenge nearly every one of these premises. First, he believes that the sexual instinct is present in children though children do in general go through a period in which it is suppressed (the latency period) only to have it reawaken during puberty. Freud believes a great deal can be learned by studying the sexual instinct as it appears in children (before it has undergone the transformations wrought by society). Freud writes, "A thorough study of the sexual manifestations of childhood would probably reveal the essential characters of the sexual instinct and would show us the course of its development and the way in which it is put together from various sources" (pg. 39). Some characteristics of childhood sexuality are that it often tends to be auto-erotic, it is not limited to what later become the dominant erotogenic zones, and its goal is pleasure, or a repetition of the feeling of satisfaction derived from sexual stimulation of an erotogenic zone (sexual pleasure is also not as strictly differentiated from other kinds of pleasure, such as the pleasure of eating, in children as it often is in adults). So much for the first premise of the ordinary view of the sexual instinct.

In regard to the second premise there is definitely a change that takes place in the sexual instinct during puberty. The change, however, does not consist in the awakening of a previously absent instinct. Puberty is not the beginning of the sexual instinct but it is the point at which it tends to shift from auto-eroticism towards object choice. This is the period when the affectionate feelings that were directed towards parents and family (which Freud believes are the remnants of infantile sexuality) and the pleasures achieved through stimulation of the erotogenic zones converge and attempt to find their satisfaction in a single object. A number of other changes take place during puberty but that is enough of a summary.

In regard to the third premise, Freud does not believe that the sexual instinct is defined by a unity in terms of its object. There are many variations in terms of object (homosexuality being the most common). Freud discusses briefly the question as to whether the choice of object is innate or acquired and decides that the question should not be posed in terms of such an exclusive choice (pg. 6). Freud's views on

this topic should, obviously, not be viewed as the final word on this important subject (the work was published in 1905), but Freud does not seem to believe that the nature of the sexual object is what is truly central to the sexual instinct. Freud writes, "Under a great number of conditions and in surprisingly numerous individuals, the nature and importance of the sexual object recedes into the background. What is essential and constant in the sexual instinct is something else" (pg. 15). There is something constant in the sexual instinct which justifies us in classifying various object choices as still belonging within the same realm of human sexuality, and as different manifestations of the same sexual instinct. This constant factor is what Freud is on the trail of in this work. What justifies us in calling activities with different objects and different aims as "sexual"? Freud also challenges the final premise, the notion that there is a single sexual aim which the sexual instinct seeks to fulfill. The aim of the sexual instinct is not defined univocally as sexual union but can be as varied as choice of objects. I should point out that Freud uses the term "perversion" to designate any deviation from the "normal" object or aim of the sexual instinct, but I do not believe this term should be taken as implying any kind of negative value judgment on Freud's part. Freud was a scientist and his goal is not to judge various manifestations of the sexual instinct from a moral standpoint but to understand them. It is undeniable that the sexual instinct manifests itself in extremely variable forms, and this is true no matter what your moral stance is in regard to various manifestations of human sexuality. This is the undeniable fact that Freud seeks to understand. How is it that the sexual instinct comes to manifest itself in so many different forms? Freud attempts to answer that question by tracing the genesis of the sexual instinct in childhood up through puberty.^{II} There are a couple of things I would like to say in regard to Freud's relevance for phenomenology. I am not going to labor this point but I would like to make a couple of points. First, it is clear reading Freud's work that the sexual instinct has an intentionality all of its own. It is not some blind mechanism seeking discharge in whatever way happens to lie open to it. The sexual instinct has preferred objects and preferred aims. Heidegger, in one of his lecture courses on religion made the claim that Augustine in his analysis of the heart's restless search for God penetrated much more deeply into the self-world and factic life of Dasein than Descartes did with his cogito ergo sum. I would say the same about Freud. His analysis of the sexual instinct penetrates far more deeply into the factic (and embodied) existence of human life and experience than any analysis of conscious or theoretical cognition ever could, and he reveals that the body has a life of its own, as well as an intelligence of its own, and its own aims that are not at all (or not always) under the control of the conscious mind. This is one of the truly enduring achievements of Freud's work. Many of his ideas are couched in terms of a mechanistic physiology that I think is obsolete, or at least one that phenomenologists

tend to challenge. But this aspect of Freud's work is not essential to his meaning. Freud's work is always interesting for anyone interested in an ontology of the subject. I do not believe the subject can be adequately understood based on Descartes's cogito or as a pure subject of cognition. Freud's work penetrates much more deeply into the ontology of the self, its drives, and its compulsions. Freud also sees a conflict between the self and civilization the consequences of which "can be followed far into the structures of our existences" (pg. 108). In my opinion this is a place where Freud's own work points beyond his own mechanistic understanding of the human body. The human being is a being that is shaped to its very core by societal influences. There is no strict dualism between the natural and the artificial. This to me seems to be one of the major implications of this work, that even something as "natural" as the sexual instinct is utterly plastic and malleable (this is why I say Freud's work undermines the metaphysics of the sexual instinct which provide the basis for negative attitudes towards homosexuality). For all these reasons I believe Freud's work is very important for those working in the field of phenomenology. I should also point out that Freud's work can be considered a challenge to phenomenology as well in many respects (which is also good for people working in phenomenology in my opinion). I won't go into this aspect of Freud's work in detail but it is definitely present. I would recommend this work to anyone interested in psychology, in Freudian psychology, in human sexuality or in the phenomenology of embodied existence. [As one final note: another reviewer has warned readers against the Basic Books edition of this work and suggested attempting to find the earlier James Strachey translation. I would just like to point out that the Basic Books edition is the James Strachey translation. Nancy Chodorow did indeed write the foreword but as far as I can tell she did not have anything else to do with the editing of this volume. So I would not let that review dissuade you from purchasing the Basic Books edition]

Fantastic translation with complete footnotes that span the many editions Freud kept editing for 25 years. Exciting introduction essay by Steve Marcus that points out how Freud's message still points to the future of psychoanalysis.

This book was required for a philosophy class I took to acquire my Bachelor's degree.

Freud's work should be read more as classical literature than as a collection of actual scientific essays. That being said, the Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality was an entertaining and interesting read.

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I purchased this book specifically for a project I was working on in a Master's level history course. It was a wonderful primary source and met my needs well.

I purchased this book for a for a graduate course. It was a comprehensive collection of essays and affordably priced. However, I had no interest in keeping it and resold when no longer needed.

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