



Freud's Burden of Debt to Nietzsche and Schopenhauer

by Eva Cybulska

Abstract

This paper addresses the questions raised by the evidence presented that many cardinal psychoanalytic notions bear a strong resemblance to the ideas of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche. In the process, the author considers not only that the 19th century Zeitgeist, given its preoccupation with the unconscious, created a fertile ground for the birth of psychoanalysis, but the influence on the Weltanschauung of Freud, Schopenhauer and Nietzsche of their common German cultural heritage, their shared admiration for Shakespeare and love of Hellenic culture, and the meteoric rise of science. Although influence may not be sharply separated from confluence, the parallels between Freud's concepts and those of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche are too specific to be coincidental. And yet, Freud vehemently denied ever having read these philosophers' works until "very late in life". It is suggested that an unconscious sense of guilt may have induced that denial.

This study adopts a cross-sectional approach that juxtaposes Freud's cardinal concepts with the ideas of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche. Its tripartite structure has the advantage of observing similarities and differences not only between Freud and the two philosophers, but also between Nietzsche and Schopenhauer. The focal concepts include: the unconscious; ego, id and superego; libido; drives; repression; sublimation; dreams; catharsis; free association; primary and secondary process thinking; Oedipus complex; repetition compulsion; the pleasure principle; mourning and melancholia; a criminal from a sense of guilt; and the death instinct.

Shared Cultural Background

Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) was four years old at the time of Schopenhauer's death, and 44 when Nietzsche died. He published *The Interpretation of Dreams*, his major foray into psychoanalysis, when he was 44. At that age, Nietzsche had stopped writing altogether due to his mental collapse, and Schopenhauer's masterpiece, *World as Will and Representation*, had long been published. There were powerful cultural influences on the *Weltanschauung* of Schopenhauer, Nietzsche and Freud, as all three were subject to a *Zeitgeist* imbued with the psychology of the unconscious, the demise of religion, and the meteoric rise of science. They shared a passionate interest in literature, philosophy and the

natural sciences, albeit to a variable degree. All three thinkers had a deep reverence for the ancient Greco-Roman world, although only Nietzsche was a classical scholar *par excellence*. It was Freud, however, who transported Sophoclean tragedy into psychology, rendering the "Oedipus complex" universal currency.

Poetry was of great interest to all three men. Schopenhauer (1851/1974), who read Shakespeare in English, commented: "Schiller had run his eye over the *Critique of Pure Reason* and had been impressed thereby; but Shakespeare had run his eye simply over the world" (II, p. 67). In Nietzsche's view, Byron and Shakespeare were the only two Englishmen worthy of veneration, and he felt a personal affinity with Hamlet

and Manfred. Characteristically, Freud (1925/1959a) saw Hamlet in Oedipal light: "It could scarcely be chance that this neurotic creation of a poet should come to grief like the numberless fellows in the real world, over the Oedipus complex" (p. 63). Goethe appealed greatly to all three thinkers; they aspired to emulate his literary style, and on occasion compared themselves with the Master. The bard became the personal friend and mentor of Schopenhauer, whilst Nietzsche derived the inspiration for the idea of the *Übermensch* from *Faust*. Goethe's poem *On Nature* motivated Freud's choice of vocation (Wittels, 1931), and in 1930 he was honoured with the Goethe Prize for Literature.

Philosophy deeply influenced not only Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, but, despite his protestations, also Freud. Schopenhauer was simultaneously both a fervent admirer and a critic of Plato and of Kant. In the spirit of "attacking only victorious causes", Nietzsche engaged in an unyielding *agon* with Plato, Kant and Schopenhauer. As a young man, Freud was strongly attracted to philosophy and speculative thought. In 1896, he confessed to his friend, Wilhelm Fliess: "I secretly nurse the hope of arriving by the same route [medicine] at my original objective, philosophy. For that was my original objective, before I knew what I was intended to do in the world" (Freud, 1954, p. 141). Freud not only attended lectures by Brentano and read Plato, Kant, Feuerbach and Marx, but he translated John Stuart Mill into German. Ricoeur (1965/1970) has drawn a comparison between Hegel's phenomenology of spirit and Freud's phenomenology of consciousness, and saw in Freud "an inverted image of Hegel" (p. 461).

Freud craved for a truly monumental discovery that could bring him undisputed fame. He considered himself a scientist in the manner of Darwin, and his inability to advance academically in the field of neurology and anatomy must have been a great disappointment to him. Nietzsche's official anti-Darwin stance may well have been disguised admiration, as Darwin's biological ideas strongly influenced his theory of instincts. Another important influence on both Nietzsche and Freud was Ernst Haeckel, a German Darwinist and a proponent of *recapitulation theory*, which holds that any living being in its development repeats the stages of its ancestors, as expressed in the formula "ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny".

Ellenberger (1970/1994, p. 273) points to the link between Freud's psychological ideas and earlier discoveries in physics, particularly Robert Mayer's principle of energy conservation. This theory supplied Nietzsche with a possible "scientific" explanation for his experiential idea of "eternal return" (Cybulska, 2013). Fechner's "principle of stability" (stating that

mental activity is directed toward achieving stability) probably shaped Freud's concept of the *pleasure principle*. The physiological schemata of Freud's mentors, Brücke and Meynert, and the neurological theories of Hughlings Jackson, influenced Freud's theory of hysteria as an attempt to dispose of surplus excitation (Macmillan, 1991/1997, pp. 171-172). The discoveries of Pasteur and Koch made an indelible impression on Freud and may have motivated his own search for a "single pathogen" or a "single key" that would unlock the pathology of neurosis. Initially, it was a "seduction theory", which he replaced with the Oedipus complex.

In this essay, I present a limited comparison of a range of cardinal psychoanalytic concepts of Freud with corresponding ideas of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche. I am much indebted to the scholarship of other researchers in this area, and particularly to Ellenberger (1970/1994), Chapelle (1993), Young and Brook (1994), and Lehrer (1999), who have exposed some of these parallels. The tripartite structure, as well as the interpretation as to why Freud refused to pay his debt of gratitude to these two thinkers, is exclusively my own.

Selected Psychoanalytic Concepts

The Unconscious

The unconscious was not discovered by Freud. Ancient tragedians, Shakespeare and German Romanticism – not to mention Dostoevsky, Ibsen and Wagner – paved the way for psychoanalysis. *The Philosophy of the Unconscious* by Von Hartmann (an enthusiastic Schopenhauerian), published in 1869, became a bestseller and was discussed in intellectual circles of Vienna, which Freud frequented.

In his masterpiece, *World as Will and Representation*, Schopenhauer (1819-44/1969) asserted:

The intellect remains so much excluded from the real resolutions and secret decisions of its own will that sometimes it can only get to know them, like those of a stranger, by spying out and taking unawares; and it must surprise the will in the act of expressing itself, in order merely to discover its real intentions. (II, p. 209)

Freud (1912/1958) wrote:

Unconsciousness is a regular and inevitable phase in the processes constituting our psychical activity; every psychical act begins as an unconscious one, and it may either remain so or go on developing into consciousness, according as it meets with resistance or not. (p. 264)

Schopenhauer's (1819-44/1969) imagery is vividly compelling:

Let us compare our consciousness to a sheet of water of some depth. Then the distinctly conscious ideas are merely the surface; on the other hand, the mass of the water is the indistinct, the feelings, the after-sensation of perceptions and intuitions and what is experienced in general, mingled with the disposition of our own will that is the kernel of our inner nature. (II, p. 135)

This resonates with Freud's famous metaphor of mind being akin to an iceberg, with most of its body – the unconscious – submersed underwater. Nietzsche's (1881/1982) insight into the unconscious is that of a brilliant philologist: "All our so-called consciousness is a more or less fantastic commentary on an unknown, perhaps unknowable, but felt text" (p. 76). And:

Man, like every living being, thinks continually without knowing it; the thinking that rises to *consciousness* is only the smallest part of all this – the most superficial and worst part – for only this conscious thinking *takes the form of words, which is to say signs of communication*, and this fact uncovers the origin of consciousness. (1882/1974, pp. 298-299)

Dreams

Freud (1900/1953a) declared dreams to be "the royal road to ... the unconscious" (p. 608), while Nietzsche (1878/1994a, §13) had this to say:

In the dream, this primordial piece of humanity continues to operate in us, for it is the basis on which higher reason developed and continues to develop in every human being. The dream takes us back to remote conditions of human culture and gives us a means for understanding them better. (p. 21)

In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud (1900/1953a), for once acknowledging his inspirator, wrote:

We can guess how much to the point is Nietzsche's assertion that in dreams "some primaeval relic of humanity is at work which we can now scarcely reach any longer by a direct path"; and we may expect that the analysis of dreams will lead us to a knowledge of man's archaic heritage, of what is psychically innate in him. (pp. 548-549)¹

¹ These lines were apparently added in 1919, but that does not preclude the possibility that Freud had read Nietzsche earlier.

Nietzsche (1883-85/1969, pp. 157-158) was similarly attracted to the idea of the *interpretation of dreams* (*Traumdeutung*): "Thus Zarathustra narrated his dream and then fell silent: for he did not yet know the interpretation of his dream [*die Deutung seines Traumes*]." If only he had waited 17 years or so!

Id, Ego and Superego

Freud presented his tripartite structure of the mind – consisting of the *id*, the *ego*, and the *superego* – in *The Ego and the Id* (1923). The *id* (*das Es*), an unconscious part of the human psyche, corresponds with Schopenhauer's concept of the *will*, "the innermost essence, the kernel of every particular thing and also of the whole" (1819-44/1969, I, p. 110). Later, Schopenhauer elaborated:

All philosophers have made the mistake of placing that which is metaphysical, indestructible and eternal in man in the *intellect*. It lies exclusively in the *will*, which is entirely different from the intellect, and alone is original. ... The will alone is that which conditions, the kernel of the whole phenomenon; consequently, it is free from the forms of the phenomenon, one of which is time, and hence is also indestructible. (1819-44/1969, II, pp. 495-496)

Freud (1923/1961a) proceeds thus:

We are "lived" by unknown and uncontrollable forces. ...

We shall now look upon an individual as a psychical *id* [*das Es*], unknown and unconscious, upon whose surface rests the ego [*das Ich*] developed from its nucleus. (pp. 23-24)

There is, however, an important difference between Schopenhauer's *Will* and Freud's *id* (*das Es*). For Schopenhauer, the "individual *will*" is only a small part of the "universal *Will*", a blind and immutable force with a cosmic dimension. From this cosmic *Will* we all came, and to this cosmic *Will* we shall return, in the Heraclitean flux of becoming. Ultimately, all attempts to control our lives are futile, and this thought constitutes the core of Schopenhauer's "determinism". Freud, however, was not concerned with metaphysics, and his *id*, devoid of a cosmic dimension, would largely correspond with the personal (unconscious) *will*. Nietzsche's (1872/1993) celebrated dichotomy of the Dionysian and the Apollonian forces from his *Birth of Tragedy* (deeply influenced by Schopenhauer) prefigured Freud's *id* and *ego*.

Nietzsche chose to use the German pronoun *das Es* (translated as the *id*) to denote the unconscious and

instinctual forces of the psyche, the personal pronoun *das Ich* (translated as *ego*) to represent the conscious, reality-oriented part of the mind, and *das Selbst* (the self) to signify totality of personality (see his *Zarathustra*, Book I, “On Despisers of the Body”). Jones (1957, p. 303) pointed out that *das Es*, while extensively employed by Nietzsche, was popularised by Groddeck, and so it was Groddeck whom Freud chose to acknowledge.

Freud’s *superego* (*Über-Ich*) – the moral censorship part of the psyche – would seem to match Nietzsche’s concept of “bad conscience”:

All instincts that are not discharged outwardly *turn inwards* – this is what I call the *internalization* of man: with it there now evolves in man what will later be called his “soul”. ... Animosity, cruelty, the pleasure of pursuing, raiding, changing and destroying – all this was pitted against the person who had such instincts: *that* is the origin of “bad conscience”. (1887/1994b, p. 61)

Earlier, in *Human, All too Human* (1878/1994a, p. 258), Nietzsche talked about a “higher self” (*höhere Selbst*), a kind of awe-inspiring ideal. Freud seemed to have made use of Nietzsche’s favourite prefix *über* (*over*), although in a rather different sense than the philosopher meant it. The similarity between the “higher self” postulated by Nietzsche and Freud’s “super-ego” has also been observed by Golomb (1999, p. 18), while a detailed comparison between Nietzsche’s “bad conscience” and Freud’s “superego” has been carried out by Greer (2002).

Libido

The concept of *libido*, which has been at the centre of Freud’s theory of the unconscious, goes back to Plato’s idea of *Eros* as a propelling force in life. Inspired by Plato, Schopenhauer (1819-44/1969) had argued:

In keeping with all this is the important role played by the sex-relation in the world of mankind, where it is really the invisible central point of all action and conduct, and peeps up everywhere, in spite of all the veils thrown over it. It is the cause of war and the aim and object of peace, the basis of the serious and the aim of the joke, the inexhaustible source of wit, the key to all hints and allusions, and the meaning of all secret signs and suggestions, all unexpressed proposals, and all stolen glances. ... I have called the genitals the focus of the *will*. (II, p. 513)

Only when his theory of libido met severe criticism

(not least by Jung), Freud called upon Schopenhauer as an ally. In 1920, in the preface to the fourth edition of *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, he put up this defence:

[S]ome of what this book contains – its insistence on the importance of sexuality in all human achievements and the attempt that it makes at enlarging the concept of sexuality – has from the first provided the strongest motives for the resistance against psychoanalysis. People have gone so far in their search for high-sounding catchwords as to talk of the “pan-sexualism” of psychoanalysis and to raise the senseless charge against it of explaining “everything” by sex. We might be astonished at this, if we ourselves could forget the way in which emotional factors make people confused and forgetful. For it is some time since Arthur Schopenhauer, the philosopher, showed mankind the extent to which their activities are determined by sexual impulses – in the ordinary sense of the word. (1905–1920/1953b, p. 134)

As Young and Brook (1994) have commented, Schopenhauer was not responsible for the concepts of “infantile sexuality” and the “Oedipus complex”, and these ideas were very much Freud’s own. They achieved a status of quasi-religious dogma, as Jung (1961/1983, pp. 173-174) aptly observed. Several of those Freud termed “heretics”, and most notably Jung, were dismissed from the Psychoanalytic Movement when they refused to subscribe to these tenets. After rereading Sophocles’s tragedy *Oedipus Rex*, Freud had an epiphany. He confided to Fliess in October 1897: “[O]ne idea of general value has occurred to me. I have found love of the mother and jealousy of the father in my own case too, and now believe it to be a *general phenomenon of early childhood* ...” (Freud, 1954, p. 223; emphasis added). And this, he thought, had explained the everlasting, gripping power of *Oedipus Rex*. Thornton (1986) persuasively argues that the Oedipus-idea could be retraced to Freud’s relapse into cocaine addiction:

A common effect of drug intoxication is that its victims see some special significance in whatever attracts their attention at the time. There is often no logical reason for their choice ... (p. 267)

Webster (1995, pp. 318-319) has persuasively interpreted the Oedipus complex as Freud’s uncanny revival of the doctrine of Original Sin; in effect, an anti-psychological doctrine. In an emotionally sterile marriage, however, a mother may form a close bond with her son, who becomes her ideal “husband”, and

in consequence he is unable to attach himself to any other woman. But this is not what Freud argued. Nietzsche (1872/1993) viewed Oedipus as “the noble man who was predestined for error and misery despite his wisdom”, and who had to pay dearly for “a glance into the terrible depths of nature” (pp. 45-51). Cybulska (2009) suggests that Oedipus’s incest could be interpreted as the dreadful price for attaining self-knowledge and solving “the riddle of existence”, rather than due to any unconscious incestuous desire.

Drives and Instincts

For Nietzsche (1886/1990), the soul consisted of a multiplicity of *drives* (*die Triebe*) and *instincts* (*die Instinkten*). Expressing his thoughts in the Platonic language of politics, he conceived of the soul as a “social structure of drives and emotions” (p. 44). In a struggle for supremacy, the agonistic internal factions of this Nietzschean “polis” would metamorphose into their opposites: “Between good and evil actions there is no difference in type; at most a difference in degree. Good actions are sublimated evil actions; evil actions are good actions become coarse and stupid” (Nietzsche, 1878/1994a, p. 75). In *Instincts and their Vicissitudes*, Freud (1915/1957b) proposed: “Reversal of an instinct into its opposite resolves on closer examination into two different processes: a *change from activity to passivity*, and a *reversal of its content*” (p. 127). While, for Nietzsche, agonistic components of instincts and drives worked in a complementary manner (beyond duality), for Freud their unacceptability would lead to a counteractive “reaction-formation”.

Repression

The concept of *repression* underwent a considerable evolution in Freud’s mind. Initially, he talked about *intentional* repression of painful memories and asserted that “the essence of repression lies simply in turning something away and keeping it at a distance from consciousness” (Freud, 1915/1957c, pp. 147-148). Later, he differentiated between “primal repression” (when the ideational representative of the instinct is denied entrance into the conscious) and “repression proper” (when memories, initially conscious, are expelled from consciousness). Freud gave credit to Möbius, Strümpell and Benedict, but not to Schopenhauer. And yet this is what Schopenhauer (1819-44/1969) had to say about repression:

The description of the origin of madness given in the text will become easier to understand if we remember how reluctantly we think of things that powerfully prejudice our interests, wound our pride, or interfere with our wishes; with what difficulty we decide to lay such things before our own intellect for accurate and serious investigation; how easily, on the other hand, we

unconsciously break away or sneak off from them again. (II, p. 400)

When Otto Rank pointed out to Freud the similarity between his own and Schopenhauer’s view of repression, Freud attributed “the chance of making a discovery” to his “not being well-read” (Freud, 1914/1957a, p. 15).

Nietzsche (1886/1990) articulated the concept of repression with his customary succinctness:

“I have done that,” says memory. “I cannot have done that,” says pride, and remains adamant. At last – memory yields. (p. 91)

Nietzsche (1887/1994b) viewed forgetting as an active ability to suppress, “which is like a door-keeper or a guardian of mental order” (p. 38). In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud (1900/1953a) used a similar image, depicting the censorship of the unconscious “as a watchman of our mental health” (p. 567).

Resistance

The closely related concept of resistance was expressed by Schopenhauer (1819-44/1969) as a way of coping with suffering:

[I]f the resistance and opposition of the will to the assimilation of some knowledge reaches such a degree that the operation is not clearly carried through; accordingly, if certain events or circumstances are wholly suppressed for the intellect, because the will cannot bear the sight of them; and then, if resultant gaps are arbitrarily filled up for the sake of the necessary connection: we then have madness. ... [T]he resultant madness then becomes the *Lethe* of unbearable sufferings; it was the last resource of worried and tormented nature, i.e. of the will. (II, pp. 400-401)

In *Human, All Too Human*, Nietzsche (1878/1994a) observed:

Man is very well defended against himself, against his own spying and sieges; usually he is able to make out no more of himself than his outer fortifications. The actual stronghold is inaccessible to him, even invisible, unless friends and enemies turn traitor and lead him there by a secret path. (p. 235)

Freud (1926/1959b) believed that “the therapeutic influence of psychoanalysis depends on the replacement of unconscious mental acts by conscious ones, and is effective within the limits of that factor” (p. 265). But, more than half a century earlier, Schopen-

hauer (1819-44/1969) had had this to say:

Every new adverse event must be assimilated by the intellect, in other words, must receive a place in the system of truths connected with our will and its interests, whatever it may have to displace that is more satisfactory. As soon as this is done, it pains us much less; but this operation itself is often very painful, and in most cases takes place only slowly and with reluctance. But soundness of mind can continue only in so far as this operation has been correctly carried out each time (p. 400).

Sublimation

The word *sublimation* was used in medieval German alchemical texts, and, in modern times, it was used by Goethe, Novalis and Schopenhauer. It derives from the Latin *sublimare* (to alleviate), but is also related to *sublimis* and *sub limin* (from under the threshold).

For Freud, sublimation meant a transformation of sexual instinct into cultural pursuits:

Historians of civilization appear to be at one in assuming that powerful components are acquired for every kind of cultural achievement by [the] diversion of sexual instinctual forces from sexual aims and their direction to new ones – a process which deserves the name of “sublimation”. (Freud, 1905/1953b, p. 178)

Later, Freud (1930/1961c) adapted it thus:

Professional activity is a source of special satisfaction if it is a freely chosen one – if, that is to say, by means of sublimation, it makes possible the use of existing inclinations, of persisting or constitutionally reinforced instinctual impulses. (Freud, 1930/1961c, p. 80)

Yet, Nietzsche (1887/1994b) had already proposed that instincts could be channelled into spiritual creativity, and that sublimated sexual drive was at the heart of his “physiology of aesthetics”: “sensuality is not suspended as soon as we enter the aesthetic condition, as Schopenhauer believed, but is only transfigured and no longer enters the consciousness as a sexual impulse” (p. 85). Nietzsche’s (1883-88/1968) assertion that “music is another way of making children” (p. 421) would no doubt have been music to Freud’s ears!

Repetition Compulsion

Repetition compulsion was one of Freud’s cardinal psychoanalytic concepts, explaining the unconscious tendency to repeat a life pattern, and particularly to repeat traumatic experiences. The compulsion to repeat

overrides the pleasure principle by forcing the repressed material into the “eternal return of the repressed”. This idea bears an inescapably strong resemblance to Nietzsche’s doctrine of the “eternal return of the same” (*die ewige Wiederkehr des Gleichen*), a link discussed in detail by Chappelle in his book *Nietzsche and Psychoanalysis* (1993). The famous passage from Nietzsche’s *The Gay Science* (1882/1974) is beguiling:

– What, if some day or night a demon were to steal after you into your loneliest loneliness and say to you: “This life as you now live it and have lived it, you will have to live once more and innumerable times more; and there will be nothing new in it, but every pain and joy and every thought and sigh and everything unutterably small or great in your life will have to return to you, all in the same succession and sequence – even this spider and this moonlight between the trees, and even this moment and myself. The eternal hourglass of existence is turned upside down again and again, and you with it, a speck of dust!” (p. 273)

In *Beyond [Jenseits] the Pleasure Principle*, Freud (1920/1955b) stated:

This “perpetual recurrence of the same thing” [*die ewige Wiederkehr des Gleichen*] causes us no astonishment when it relates to active behaviour on the part of the person concerned and when we can discern in him the essential character-trait which always remains the same and which is compelled to find expression in a repetition of the same experiences. (pp. 21-22)

In *Beyond [Jenseits] Good and Evil*, Nietzsche (1886/1990) put his observation rather more succinctly:

If one has a character, one also has one’s typical experience which returns repeatedly. (p. 91)

Freud (1919/1955a) linked the notion of the “return of the repressed” with Schelling’s (1835) idea of *das Unheimliche* (“the uncanny”). In his essay entitled “The ‘Uncanny’”, Freud commented that “whatever reminds us of this inner *compulsion to repeat* is perceived as uncanny” (p. 238). For Nietzsche (1883-85/1969), “uncanny (*unheimlich*) is human existence and still without meaning” (p. 49).

Nowhere does this compulsion to repeat manifest itself more forcefully than in the transference, the cornerstone of psychoanalytic therapy. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920/1955b), Freud wrote:

What psychoanalysis reveals in the transference phenomena of neurotics can also be observed in the lives of some normal people. The impression they give is of being pursued by malignant fate or possessed by some daemonic power. (p. 21)

Whilst Nietzsche never explained his epiphanic idea of “eternal return”, Freud can be said to have made an excellent adaptation of it.

Melancholia and Mourning

Freud’s “Mourning and Melancholia” (1917/1957d) was his major treatise on the psychogenesis of depression. He claimed that in melancholia

... self reproaches are reproaches against a loved object which have been shifted away from it on to the patient’s own ego. ... [The patient’s] complaints are really “plaints” in the old sense of the word. ... Thus the shadow of the object fell upon the ego, and the latter could henceforth be judged by a special agency, as though it were an object, the forsaken object. (pp. 248-249)

Nietzsche (1883-85/1969) reached the same insight by his customary “via etymologica”, and expressed it poetically in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*:

“Is all weeping not a complaining? And all complaining not an accusing?” [*Ist alles Weinen nicht ein Klagen? Und alles Klagen nicht ein Anklagen?*] Thus you speak to yourself, and because of that, O my soul, you will rather smile than pour forth your sorrow. (p. 240)

Although I have found this similarity independently, Ellenberger (1970/1994, p. 277) has noted it too.

Criminals from a Sense of Guilt

That an unconscious sense of guilt often not only precedes, but induces, an act of crime appeared to have been Freud’s ingenious observation:

It was a surprise to find that an increase in this unconscious sense of guilt can turn people into criminals. ... In many criminals, especially youthful ones, it is possible to detect a very powerful sense of guilt which existed before the crime, and is therefore not its result but its motive. It is as if it was a relief to be able to fasten this unconscious sense of guilt on to something real and immediate. (Freud, 1923/1961a, p. 52)

In a letter to a friend in 1916, Freud confessed that Nietzsche’s *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* had given him

“broad suggestions about the mental mechanism involved in the production of criminals from the sense of guilt” (Jones, 1955, p. 418). In the essay “Of the Pale Criminal”, Nietzsche (1883-85/1969) wrote:

And now again the lead of his guilt lies upon him, and again his simple mind is so numb, so paralysed, so heavy. If only he could shake his head his burden would roll off: but who can shake this head? ... Behold this poor body! This poor soul interpreted to itself what this body suffered and desired – it interpreted it as lust for murder and greed for the joy of the knife. (p. 66)

Following the etymology of the German *die Schuld* (meaning both *guilt* and *debt*), Nietzsche (1887/1994b) alleged:

Have these genealogists of morality up to now ever remotely dreamt that, for example, the main moral concept “*Schuld*” (“guilt”) descends from the very material concept of “*Schulden*” (“debts”)? (p. 43)

The theme of murder from a sense of guilt (or a “burden of debt”) was central to Dostoevsky’s novel *Crime and Punishment* (1866/1991). Raskolnikov, with his “joy of the axe”, was the “pale criminal” incarnate. Shortly before his departure to a Siberian prison for a double murder, he reflected: “But why do they [mother and sister] love me so much, if I don’t deserve it? Oh, if only I were alone and no one loved me and I had never loved anyone! *All this would have never taken place!*” (p. 597). Astonishingly, Nietzsche read the novel (if he read it at all) several years *after* he had written the above passages. *Zeitgeist*, surely! Freud (1928/1961b) saw Dostoevsky’s preoccupation with patricide in the light of the Oedipus complex, but he allowed this Nietzschean insight to slip through: “As often happens with neurotics, Dostoevsky’s sense of guilt had taken a tangible shape as a *burden of debt*” (p. 190; emphasis added).

The idea of becoming a criminal from a sense of guilt was also given a powerful dramatic voice by Eugene O’Neill (who read both Nietzsche and Dostoevsky obsessively) in his play *The Iceman Cometh*. Hickey kills his ever-forgiving wife Evelyn because “There is a limit to the guilt you can feel and the forgiveness and the pity you can take!” (1947/1988, p. 205). His burden of debt/guilt is finally lifted when he confesses the murder to his drinking companions and arranges his own arrest. Paradoxically, provoking one’s own punishment might be a way of resolving the guilt.

Catharsis

In his *Poetics*, Aristotle (335 BC/1987) drew on the ancient ritual of *catharsis* – which literally means

“cleansing”, “purification” or “purgation” – as the main healing factor of the “agitation of the soul”. This purification of emotions was pivotal to ancient Greek tragedy, in which a protagonist would facilitate an emotional release among the audience by inducing “pity and terror”. Lehrer (1999) has traced Freud’s origin of the cathartic method to Nietzsche. Nietzsche (1872/1993), who read Sophocles, Aristotle, and also the influential treatise by Jacob Bernays (the uncle of Freud’s wife Martha) on Aristotle’s theory of *catharsis*, wrote:

Now the grave events are supposed to be leading pity and terror inexorably towards relief of discharge ... [t]hat pathological discharge, Aristotle’s catharsis, which philologists are uncertain whether to class among the medical or the moral phenomena. (p. 107)

Freud used the method of *catharsis* in the early stages of his psychoanalytic treatment of his hysterical patients and, in the Preface to *Studies on Hysteria*, stated that “the technique of the ‘cathartic method’ is propounded, just as it has grown up under the hands of the neurologist” (Breuer & Freud, 1893-95/1955, p. xxix). However, he mentions neither Aristotle nor Nietzsche, and not even Jacob Bernays.

Free Association

The method of *free association* became one of Freud’s favourite psychoanalytic tools, being one which provided immediate access to the unconscious. It superseded hypnosis and suggestion. Attributing the inspiration to his patient Elisabeth von R., and also to Schiller, Freud (1900/1953a) described how “the *involuntary* ideas are transformed into *voluntary* ones” (p. 102), and how these facilitate a process of “decoding” dreams and the unconscious. It would seem that Schopenhauer (1819-44/1969) must have read Schiller too:

It is no more possible for an idea to enter consciousness without an occasion than it is for the body to be set in motion without a cause. Now this occasion is either *external*, and thus an impression on the senses, or *internal*, and hence itself again an idea which produces another idea by virtue of *association*. This association in turn rests either on a relation of ground and consequent between the two, or on similarity, or even on mere analogy, or finally on the simultaneity of their first apprehension; and this again can have its ground in the spatial proximity of their objects. (II, p. 133)

Pathology as a Magnification of Normality

Pathology as a magnification of normality was Nietzsche’s compelling psychological insight, and in

The Will to Power (1883-88/1968), he wrote: “It is the value of all morbid states that they show us under a magnifying glass certain states that are normal – but not easily visible when normal” (p. 29). Freud (1933/1964) echoed it thus: “Pathology has always done us the service of making discernible by isolation and exaggeration conditions which remain concealed in a normal state” (p. 12).

Primary and Secondary Process Thinking

Primary and secondary process thinking correspond with Nietzsche’s Dionysian/Apollonian dichotomy from *The Birth of Tragedy*. For Nietzsche, the dream world (Dionysian), by virtue of having its roots in the primordial, was more “true” than logic and reason (Apollonian). The origin of this duality goes back to Kant, who claimed that the “phenomenon” was only a construction of the human mind (Schopenhauer called it *representation*), while the “thing-in-itself” (*noumenon*) remains undifferentiated, unknown and unknowable. Dreams are best viewed as a direct expression of Kantian *noumenon*, Schopenhauerian *will* or Nietzsche’s Dionysian consciousness. For Freud (1920/1955b, pp. 34-35), the “unbound” or “primary process thinking” belonged to earlier mental life, and a successful therapeutic intervention in psychoanalysis would imply its translation into “secondary process thinking”. The unconscious (nonverbal) should thus become conscious (verbal).

Pleasure/Nirvana Principle

On the surface, Freud’s *pleasure/Nirvana principle* looks very similar to Schopenhauer’s *cessation of the Will*. For Schopenhauer (1819-44/1969), existence was a ceaseless rising and passing away, creation and destruction imbued with suffering caused by worldly desires. Hence, a state of mental equilibrium (or Nirvana), could be achieved by abandoning desires, together with the renunciation of the Will (see his chapter “On Death and Its Relation to the Indestructibility of Our Inner Nature”, 1900/1953a, II, pp. 463-509).

In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud (1920/1955b) asserted: “The dominating tendency of mental life ... is the effort to reduce, to keep constant or to remove internal tension due to stimuli” (pp. 55-56). He called it the *Nirvana principle* and admitted to having borrowed the term from Barbara Low. Insofar as Schopenhauer never advocated life free from stimulation, but only from desire, his argument was on a different plane.

Nietzsche, a veteran of suffering, viewed pain and pleasure as two sides of the same coin and defined “pleasure as a kind of pain” (Nietzsche, 1883-88/1968, p. 271). He in fact went *beyond* duality and proclaimed that suffering was a necessary part of joy: “For pain and pleasure are not opposites” (ibid., p.

371). And: “Thus all pleasure includes pain. – If the pleasure is to be very great, the pains must be protracted and the tension of the bow tremendous” (ibid., p. 347). For Nietzsche, eradicating pain meant eradicating both pleasure and joy; hence his prescript – have more pain and more joy! On this point he radically departed from Schopenhauer and regarded his Nirvana-seeking quest as a sign of decadence.

Death Instinct

Freud (1920/1955b) regarded the *death instinct* as a manifestation of self-destructiveness, working in opposition to erotic instincts. He emphasised that “everything living dies for internal reasons – becomes inorganic once again ...” and that “the aim of all life is death” (p. 38). For Schopenhauer (1819-44/1969), death was a canonization of suffering in life, about which he wrote as follows:

Dying is certainly to be regarded as the real aim of life; at the moment of dying, everything is decided which through the whole course of life was only prepared and introduced. Death is the result, the *résumé*, of life, or the total sum expressing at one stroke all the instruction given by life in detail and piecemeal, namely that the whole striving, the phenomenon of which is life, was a vain, fruitless, and self-contradictory effort, to have returned from which is a deliverance. (II, p. 637)

The verbal parallels speak for themselves.

Only more than a decade later Freud (1933/1964) acknowledged Schopenhauer:

Why should not a bold thinker have guessed something that is afterwards confirmed by *sober and painstaking detailed research*? ... We are not asserting that death is the only aim of life; we are not overlooking the fact that there is life as well as death. We recognize two basic instincts and give each of them its own aim. How the two of them are mingled in the process of living, how the death instinct is made to serve the purposes of Eros, especially by being turned outwards as aggressiveness – these are the tasks which are left to future investigation. (p. 107; emphasis added)

Since there is no evidence that Freud did any “sober and painstaking research” on the subject, his assertion would seem purely speculative. Young and Brook (1994) have stressed that Schopenhauer had never postulated a positive drive to die, and that Freud acknowledged their similarities only at the point where they diverged.

Schopenhauer (1851/1974) viewed Eros as “secretly related to death” (II, p. 497), and Thomas Mann’s (1912) novella, *Death in Venice*, was a literary enactment of the philosopher’s view. In his film of the same title, Visconti (1971) ingeniously used Mahler’s *Adagietto* as part of the soundtrack. This mournful, erotic music, reminiscent of Wagner’s motif of *Liebestod* from *Tristan and Isolde*, was an ultimate transmutation of Schopenhauer’s idea into music. However, a great German Romantic poet Novalis (1797/1997) had already proclaimed in his philosophical musings that “life is for the sake of death” (p. 25), and it is possible that this served as an inspiration for Freud as well as for Schopenhauer.

Discussion: Influence, Confluence and the Burden of Debt

Influence may not always be sharply separated from confluence, and – as Plato (380 BC/1997) observed in *Meno* – human knowledge is often rooted in recollection. We learn what we already know, even if subliminally. Schopenhauer is often thought of as being influenced by Buddhism, and yet he had arrived at many of his “Buddhistic” ideas *before* he was introduced to the Eastern philosophies (Magee, 1983/1997, pp. 14-15). Wagner, who became besotted with Schopenhauer, made “Schopenhauerian” observations *before* he read his philosophy (ibid., p. 367). So, too, Nietzsche had reached several “Dostoevskyan” insights *before* he discovered Dostoevsky’s writings in 1887. In turn, Schopenhauer’s “Vedic” idea that “force and substance are inseparable because at the bottom they are one” (Schopenhauer, 1819-44/1969, p. 309) had pre-figured Einstein’s mass-energy equivalence formula.

Freud’s highly ambivalent attitude towards those who might have been seen as progenitors of his ideas led him to produce incompatible statements, perhaps even lies. The Minutes of the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society of 1 April 1908 (Nunberg & Federn, 1962) contain his statement about having “renounced the study of philosophy” and his denial of ever having read Nietzsche. And yet, he could not refrain from criticising Nietzsche for having failed “to recognise infantilism as well as the mechanism of displacement” (pp. 359-360). A few months later, Freud stated emphatically that he could never get beyond the first half page in his attempts to read Nietzsche because of the resemblance of the philosopher’s intuitive insights to the laborious investigations of psychoanalysis (session of 28 October 1908, Nunberg & Federn, 1967, p. 32). Earlier, he confessed to Fliess: “I have just acquired Nietzsche, in whom I hope to find the words for many things which are still mute in me ...” (Freud to W. Fliess, February 2, 1900; in Mason, 1985, p. 398). It is difficult to believe that this voracious reader had acquired an expensive collection of Nietzsche’s work only to let it sit idly on

his bookshelf. Roazen (2000) suggested that Freud had a need to ascertain his right to priority, and Freud's own statement indirectly supports this:

The large extent to which psycho-analysis coincides with the philosophy of Schopenhauer – not only did he assert the dominance of the emotions and the supreme importance of sexuality but he was even aware of the mechanism of repression – is not to be traced to my acquaintance with his teaching. I read Schopenhauer *very late in my life*. Nietzsche, another philosopher whose guesses and intuitions often agree in the most astonishing way with the laborious findings of psycho-analysis, was for a long time avoided by me on that very account; I was less concerned with *the questions of priority* than with keeping my mind unembarrassed. (Freud, 1925/1959a, pp. 59-60; emphasis added)

This issue of priority brings to mind the famous encounter between Oedipus and King Laius “where the three roads meet” (Sophocles, 429 BC/1984, p. 34). The old, autocratic king demanded priority of passage, and, as the younger man did not yield, he struck him with a staff. Oedipus's subsequent impulsive killing of Laius was the reaction of a proud and hot-headed man, who then readily accepted responsibility for his actions. As a result of his own investigation and self-imposed prosecution, he lost his kingdom, because for him truth was more important than prestige or even life. Rudnytsky (1987) claimed that, in his life, Freud enacted the Oedipus complex (pp. 3-17). However, unlike Oedipus, Freud never attacked his “progenitors” in an open combat, but merely obliterated their existence from his theory. Intolerant of any dissent, he ruthlessly expelled “heretics” from the Psychoanalytic Movement in a Laius-like manner. Jung recalled how Freud, when confronted with a certain uncomfortable truth, had exclaimed to him: “‘But I cannot risk my authority!’ At that moment he lost it altogether ... Freud was placing personal authority above truth” (Jung, 1961/1983, p. 182).

Fromm (1959) believed that Freud was inwardly torn between his need to be nurtured and his resentment at being dependent. A pattern of intense admiration, followed by the severance of contact and a withdrawal of gratitude, could be observed in Freud's relationships with important male figures in his life, such as Breuer, Brücke, Meynert, Fliess and Jung. Perhaps at the core of this attitude was his inability to accept nurturance without being overwhelmed by the conflicting feeling of debt/guilt (*die Schuld*). Webster (1995, pp. 33-51) has proposed an attractive theory that parents' excessive love and high expectations may produce a massive sense of debt in a child. Freud

received adulation and privileges from his parents (particularly from his mother) who expected him to go far in life. When the chasm between expectations and aptitude becomes too wide, it creates a debt that is impossible to repay, and such a burden of debt is bound to turn into guilt (Nietzsche, 1887/1994b, p. 23). That may have been Freud's predicament.

As Cioffi (1974/1998), Webster (1995) and Crews (2006) have convincingly demonstrated, there is no evidence that any of Freud's ideas were in fact the result of “painstaking research” or observation. Freud was not an empiricist, and he extracted the confirmations of his a priori claims from patients under “most energetic pressure exerted by the analytic procedure against strong resistance” (Freud as cited by Cioffi, 1974/1998, p. 246). According to Freud's “seduction theory”, only when the trauma of early sexual molestation (usually by a father) was deeply buried in the unconscious could it cause neurotic symptoms. Freud obtained his patients' confessions only with the use of this “energetic pressure”. Yet, as he abandoned the theory, and put it on its head by creating the Oedipus complex, he blamed his patients for lying to him. (For a full discussion of this see Cioffi's *Was Freud a Liar?*, 1974/1998, pp. 199-204.)

Despite an undeniable proclivity for speculation, Freud had a burning ambition to conquer the world as a scientist, in the manner of Darwin (as implied by his dream upon entering England in 1938 in which he saw himself as William the Conqueror). Yet, his scientific aptitude was not that of Darwin, and, despite numerous nominations for the Nobel Prize in science, he was never awarded this (Stolt, 2010). Simultaneously, Freud wished to be remembered by posterity as an unassailable “solver of riddles”, a heroic, lone begetter of a new school of thought, and he managed to persuade a considerable number of followers that he was. However, his philosophising abilities were not in the league of Schopenhauer or Nietzsche, and by acknowledging his debt to them he may have felt obliged to enter into a philosophical debate. From such a confrontation, Freud was unlikely to have emerged victorious. He wrote to Fliess perspicaciously:

I am not really a man of science, not an observer, not an experimenter, and not a thinker. I am nothing but by temperament a *conquistador* – an adventurer if you want to translate the word – with the curiosity, the boldness, and the tenacity that belongs to that type of being. Such people are apt to be treasured if they succeed, if they have discovered something; otherwise they are thrown aside. And that is not altogether unjust. (Freud to W. Fliess, February 1, 1900; in Mason, 1985, p. 398)

Many parallels presented in this essay are too specific to be a consequence of the *Zeitgeist* alone. Let us briefly consider cryptomnesia as offering a possible explanation. This is a phenomenon of a long forgotten memory re-emerging into consciousness, yet being perceived as new and original. Jung (1905/1957) discusses it in relation to Nietzsche's *Zarathustra* and a text by Justinus Kerner (a Swabian poet and ghost story teller), which Nietzsche had probably read more than two decades previously. A disturbing image of a figure descending into a hellish volcano appears in both texts, with some identical verbal expressions. But the source of that image may be traced even further. Around the same time, Nietzsche also read and admired Hölderlin's dramatic poem, "The Death of Empedocles", about a philosopher who had flung himself into the flames of Etna. Kerner was a fervent admirer of Hölderlin, and that poem may have been the original source of inspiration. While Nietzsche had unconsciously reproduced an image, Freud would have had to unconsciously reproduce a whole array of complex, abstract concepts. This looks improbable. While Jung had no opportunity to confirm directly

with Nietzsche the source of his volcano image, those who questioned Freud about his philosophical sources met with a vehement denial. One is tempted to paraphrase Freud's beloved poet and say that the gentleman protested too much.

It is impossible to prove "beyond any reasonable doubt" Freud's indebtedness to Schopenhauer and Nietzsche; one can only draw tentative conclusions "on the balance of probabilities". His contradictory statements as to the origin of his ideas undermine their truthfulness. Cioffi (1974/1998) not only gravely challenged the position of psychoanalysis as a science, but called into serious doubt Freud's probity (in connection with seduction theory) by posing the provocative question: "Was Freud a liar?". The charge of lying and plagiarism is probably the most ignominious that a thinker and author can face; it can demean the validity of his entire work. By not paying the debt of gratitude to his conceptual predecessors, Freud has risked a guilty verdict of intellectual dishonesty, as well as having jeopardised the legacy of the valuable and lasting contributions he has made.

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About the Author

Eva Cybulska
Retired Consultant Psychiatrist
National Health Service, United Kingdom
E-mail address: corsack@btinternet.com

Dr Eva M. Cybulska graduated from Gdansk Medical School in Poland in the early 1970s. She received her postgraduate training and further degrees in London, UK. During a long clinical career as a consultant psychiatrist, she applied psychoanalytic understanding to everyday psychiatry, and particularly to psychotic illnesses. Dr Cybulska has published many articles in her field, and also a collection of short stories based on the narratives of her elderly patients (*Old Trees Die Standing*, Athena Press, 2006). She has served as a reviewer for professional journals, and has lectured on controversial topics to cross-disciplinary audiences drawn from a variety of professions. One of her chief interests has been the relationship between mental illness and creativity. Since taking an early retirement a few years ago, Dr Cybulska is now devoting her time to reading, writing and travel.

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