What About the Unconscious?

By

Dr. Craig R. Rowe

I. Introduction:

A. Is an understanding of the unconscious helpful to Biblical counselors today?


Dr. Henri Ellenberger, The Discovery of the Unconscious

“The consensus is that Freud exerted a powerful influence, not only on psychology and psychiatry, but on all the fields of culture and that it has gone so far as to change our way of life and or concept of man.” (Ellenberger 1970, 546)

“There are those who claim that the effect of psychoanalysis has been disastrous. La Piere, for instance, claims that Freudianism ruined the ethics of individualism, self-discipline, and responsibility that prevailed among the Western world.” (ibid., 547)

B. You will encounter Freud in counseling: Examples:

1. Betty
2. Alice
3. Bill and Sue
4. Repressed memories

II. Freud’s Formulation of the Unconscious:

A. Freud’s "psychical topography" of the mind - three systems: (Freud: History and Concepts - website Joe Widder [google])

The Conscious: “consists of what someone is aware of at any particular point in time…If you are aware of it then it is in the conscious mind.”

The Preconscious: “contains information that is just below the surface of awareness. It can be retrieved with relative ease and usually can be thought of as memory or recollection.”

The Unconscious: “contains thoughts, memories, and desires that are buried deep in ourselves, well below our conscious awareness. Even though we are not aware of their existence, they exert great influence on our behavior.”

Freud: “We have found . . . That very powerful mental processes or ideas exist . . . which can
produce all the effects in mental life that ordinary ideas do… though they themselves do not become conscious” (Freud 1960, 4–5).

The unconscious is further defined as: “A domain of the psyche encompassing the repressed id functions, the primitive impulses and desires, the memories, images and wishes that are too anxiety-provoking to be accepted into consciousness.” (Reber 1985, 799)

B. Freud - unconscious, three “psychical processes”

1. “super-ego” - arbiter of right and wrong.

2. “id” - sexual passions (instincts)

3. “ego”
   a. Referee
   b. Gate keeper

C. Associated counseling methods

1. To discover: dream analysis, hypnosis, free association, Rorschach Test.

2. To dispel: catharsis, ventilation, imaging/visualization

III. Evaluation of the Unconscious

A. The existence of God

1. Biblical counseling begins with God.

2. Freud denied the existence of God (Freud 1913, 35)
   • Conceived a new anthropology
   • Redefined the nature and definitions of problems
   • Developed methods compatible with his theories
   • Conceived solutions to be applied
   • Determined goals for which to strive

Jas 3:12 makes it clear that the foundations of your thinking determine the fruit produced. "Can a fig tree, my brethren, produce olives, or a vine produce figs? Nor can salt water produce fresh."
B. Mankind in the image of God:

1. Origen of mankind
   
a. Gen. 1-2 teaches that mankind was created in the image of God

b. Freud – evolutionist: “Nowhere was the impact of Darwin, direct and indirect, more exemplary or fruitful outside of biology proper than within Freudian psychoanalysis” (Sulloway 1979, 275).

2. The crux - Unconscious vs. the Heart
   
a. Freud - “The division of the psychical into what is conscious and what is unconscious is the fundamental premise of psycho-analysis; and it alone makes it possible for psycho-analysis to understand the pathological processes in mental life…” (Freud 1960, 3)

   Guilt - "The tension between the harsh super-ego and the ego that is subjected to it, is called by us the sense of guilt.” (Freud 1957, 21:123-125).

b. Scripture
   
   • Pro 4:23 "Watch over your heart with all diligence. For from it flow the springs of life."

   • Pro 23:6-8 "For as he thinks within himself, so he is; he says to you, 'eat and drink!' But his heart is not with you."

Motivation

   Jas 1:14 "But each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust.”

   Jas 4:1 "What is the source of quarrels and conflicts among you? Is not the source your pleasures that wage war in your members?"

IV. Other Implications:

A. Nature of Man

1. Freud - A person’s problems and their solutions are psychological in nature and involve no one other than the person himself.
2. Christians - Mankind is a spiritual creature.

B. Authority

1. Freud - Mankind is dependent on his own strength and wisdom.

2. Christians – God’s Word:
   - **Ps 119:105** "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path."
   - **2 Ti 3:16** "All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness;"

C. Hope

1. Freud – Memories stored in the unconscious "are virtually immortal; after the passage of decades they behave as though they had just occurred." (Freud 1965, 92)

   The best you can hope for is to be in a constant state of “recovery.”

   **You are who you were and you always will be.**

2. Christians - hope in Christ
   a. **Rom 6:6** - "knowing this, that our old self was crucified with Him, in order that our body of sin might be done away with, so that we would no longer be slaves to sin;"

   b. **Is 61:10** - "I will rejoice greatly in the Lord, My soul will exult in my God; For He has clothed me with garments of salvation, He has wrapped me with a robe of righteousness..."

   c. **1 Cor 6:11** - "And such were some of you; but you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, and in the Spirit of our God."

   **In Christ, we are who we will be, and we will never be who we were.**

D. Responsibility

1. Freud - not responsible

2. Christians – responsible.
Mk 7:20-23 - "20 …That which proceeds out of the man, that is what defiles the man. 21 For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed the evil thoughts, fornications, thefts, murders…etc. 23 All these evil things proceed from within and defile the man."

E. Role of Questioning

1. Freud – Straight forward questioning - useless

2. Biblical Counselors – gather data - critical

F. Significance of History

1. Freud - your history controls and defines you.

2. Biblical Counselors - personal history shapes how our sin is expressed, but our new heart determines how we respond.
   - 2 Co 5:17 "17 Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come."

V. Relevance of the Unconscious to Suicide and Self-harm:

Suicide and self-harm - anger, lack hope, frequently used to escape pain and suffering.

Neither suicide nor self-harm are manifestations of past deposits made in the unconscious.

Patiently and gently ask straight-forward questions to determine how the person is responding to the struggles of life. Look for unaddressed sin. Search out areas where they are failing to apply God’s word and promises and help them do so. Check for areas of disappointment, lose, physical or emotional pain. Ask about personal spiritual disciplines, associations, and recent changes in or additions to medication.

Assume a logical reason for the behavior. The challenge is:

- To ask the right questions
- To help them to understand biblically was is taking place
- To motivate them to be willing to work with you.

VI. Conclusion:

The unconscious and it's offspring are “lofty thing(s) raised up against the knowledge of God.” 2 Co 10:5
Freud sadly stands with those who “suppress the truth in unrighteousness,” and who “became futile in their speculations.” Having “their foolish heart…darkened (and)….Professing to be wise, they became fools.” Rom. 1:18, 21–22

In biblical counseling, we are called on to respond to these "speculations…raised up against the knowledge of God” and to take them “captive to the obedience of Christ," 2 Co 10:5

Freud’s theory of the unconscious and it's offspring is an integrated package that is totally contrary to the Scripture. Together and individually these theories that systematically move a counselee away from God and toward greater dependence on man.

The unconscious is contradictory to God’s Word.

Works Cited


