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Sigmund Freud. Life and Work*

It was Thomas Carlyle who said: 'Let men beware when God lets loose a great thinker in the world.' Great and original thinkers are rare, and generations may pass away without one appearing. The nineteenth century was unusually rich in the outstanding genius it produced in the realm of literature, and science, and medicine. One can choose, almost at random, a list of great men whose work still influences thought, and will continue to do so for a long while to come. Darwin, Huxley, Spencer, Wallace, in biology; Pasteur, Koch, and Lister in medicine; William James in psychology; Dickens, Thackeray, Robert Browning, Emerson, Tennyson, Carlyle, Ruskin in the realm of literature and poetry, are a few of the stars which illuminated the nineteenth-century firmament. Last, but by no means least, of these great names, comes that of Sigmund Freud, who did much of his great work in the last decade of the last century, and continued it well into this. It may be said without exaggeration that he revolutionised psychology. Many of the technical words he used have become part and parcel of our common language; complex, repression, sublimation, the Oedipus complex, narcissism, inhibition, rationalisation are a few of the words which have entered into the language of the ordinary man. Furthermore, however much later schools of psychology and psychiatry may have diverged from Freud's original teaching, it is difficult to find any modern textbook on these subjects which does not make use of some of his ideas, often without acknowledging, and perhaps without realising, the source from which they sprang. When Ernest Jones set out to write an account of the life and work of Freud, he was confronted with an immense and difficult task. It may be said of Freud, what is equally true of some other great men, that his work was so tremendous in its scope and in the genius that it displayed, that the man himself, the events of his career, the details of his life, fall into comparative insignificance beside the richness, originality and variety of his thought.

It was a task of great difficulty to interweave an account of the outer life of the man with the vast scope of his teaching, so that the result should be both an exposition of psycho-analytical doctrine and a story

* *Sigmund Freud: Life and Work*. By ERNEST JONES (3 Vols), Hogarth Press.

of the life of a man who founded it. This intertwining of themes has been accomplished with great skill by the author, but with all his skill he found himself still obliged to defer some of Freud's teaching to the last part of the third volume, when, having completed the story of Freud's life, he writes several further chapters expounding his views on several subjects allied to his main discoveries in the realm of the mind. There are chapters on Metapsychology, lay Analysis, Biology, Anthropology, Sociology, Religion, Art, and Literature, on each of which subjects Freud had exercised his wonderfully versatile mind.

Ernest Jones has accomplished his formidable task with great skill and insight. He writes in good plain English, and sustains the interest of the reader from start to finish. He was well equipped for his task by a personal friendship with Freud of many years' duration. He was amongst the first of the small group of disciples who gathered round Freud in Vienna, and absorbed his doctrines. He was a member of the Psycho-analytical Society which met at regular intervals in Vienna, and he was the first British doctor to practise psycho-analysis in England. He kept in touch with Freud by correspondence and by visits, right up to the time of Freud's death. When Freud's earlier followers, Adler, Jung, and Stekel, broke away from Freud and finally separated from him, Jones remained faithful to the end.

Freud was born of Jewish parents at Freiberg in Moravia in 1856. When he was four years old the family moved to Vienna, where Freud lived and practised until his old age. Under the threat of the Nazi regime, he came over to England before the Second World War, and died in London in 1939.

After a brilliant career at school in Vienna, where he excelled in languages, he entered the University of Vienna at the age of seventeen as a medical student. His student days were longer than the average. He studied for eight years before qualifying, not from any lack of ability or hard work, but because he spent his extra time in the Physiological Department studying the minute anatomy of the nervous system. After qualifying he held various minor hospital posts, and continued his researches, and finally started private practice as a neurologist. It was in this speciality that he first made his name by the publication of several papers on the structure of the brain and spinal cord, and on paralysis in children.

Many of the patients who came to Freud for treatment were not suffering from any organic disease of the nervous system, but were ill from emotional and mental causes, psycho-neuroses, as we now

label them. Freud soon realised that little was known about the causes and treatment of these disorders, and he determined to make further investigations. He went to Paris where a famous psychiatrist, Charcot, gave lectures and demonstrations in mental and nervous diseases. Charcot practised hypnotism, and for a long period Freud used this method with his own patients. For various reasons, he abandoned this method, and gradually discovered an entirely new technique for dealing with neurosis, which he called psycho-analysis. With great courage and perseverance he set out to analyse his own mind—perhaps the first human being ever to do this in the same way. It was a painful, long and difficult process, but he emerged from it a changed man.

Thereafter he pursued his researches into the structure and functions of the mind, and for the rest of his life gave his whole energies to this field of research.

At the height of his career he showed an exceptional capacity for work. At one period he rose at seven o'clock, had sessions from eight until one, then lunch and a walk. He started work again at three, and was in continuous session with patients until nine in the evening. Each patient was interviewed for fifty-five minutes, with a five-minute interval between each. After supper he started work again, going over his day's work and writing essays and books, and finally retired to bed at one in the morning, or after.

He wrote a large number of books and essays, in addition to his clinical work. He gave lectures, and attended meetings of the psycho-analytical society in Vienna.

During the last sixteen years of his life he experienced a great deal of suffering. Cancer affected first his palate, then his upper jaw. He underwent a severe operation for removal of his upper jaw, and thereafter had to wear an artificial palate which caused him a great deal of trouble. He was obliged to undergo a long series of operations for the rest of his life, for repeated recurrences of the growth; but in spite of all this he continued working until within six months of his death. He died at eighty-three, an exile in England.

He married and had six children, and he was a good father and husband. He once said he did not know why he was so moral in his life, but he never wanted to be otherwise.

It is not possible in a short review to attempt even a summary of the extensive outcome of his fertile genius. He revolutionised psychological theory. Up to his time psychology had advanced along two main lines. First of all the Associationist school, of which the last, and perhaps the

greatest exponent, was William James, the American psychologist. The other line of development was along experimental channels, and was more physiological than psychological. Both schools of research contributed a great deal of knowledge to the understanding of the mind, and experimental psychology still occupies a large place in the field of research.

Broadly speaking, the value of Freud's contribution lay in the vitalising of psychology. The older school of association of ideas revealed a great deal about the structure of the mind, but could give no explanation of the forces and motives which lay behind mental processes. To adopt a simile from the petrol engine, one might liken the older psychology to a description of the various parts of an engine after it had been taken to pieces, but no one knew how it worked because the electric spark and the explosions of petrol gas in the cylinders were not known. The old psychology was static. The new psychology of Freud was dynamic. He discovered the secret of the spark and the explosive gases. In the light of Freud's discoveries, the mind became alive.

Unfortunately the word Psycho-analysis has an ambiguous meaning. In its primary meaning, it denoted a method of exploring the mind, but when Freud and his followers built up a system of theory founded upon their discoveries, a body of doctrine accumulated, and this also was called Psycho-analysis. Any psychiatrist may employ the method of analysis described by Freud, without necessarily subscribing to all his doctrines. How far his doctrines will bear the test of time and further research, the passing of the years will show. A great amount of research continues, and Freud himself never considered or claimed that his findings were final. He took a very humble attitude toward his own theories and said that he was but showing others the way to proceed.

In his later years Freud turned his thoughts to religion. In a series of essays and books, amongst which were *Totem and Taboo*, *The Future of an Illusion*, *Civilisation and its Discontents* and his last major work, *Moses and Monotheism*, he attempts to interpret religion in the light of psycho-analysis. In his earlier years he had read the Old Testament, but he did not believe in the reality of God, and questioned the historicity of the Gospels and of Jesus.

Whilst admitting that religion had played an important part in the development of civilisation, and in the lives of individuals, he maintained that the idea of God was an illusion founded on childish wishes.

He expressed the belief that with the advance of scientific knowledge, religious beliefs would be discarded because they would be no longer necessary. They had helped man in his onward march, but would ultimately be cast aside as worn out garments which had served their purpose.

In reading his ideas about religion, one is tempted to conclude that, with all his learning and sincerity, he had never seriously studied, and still less understood, the Christian faith. The religion he writes about is not the religion of a mature and well-taught Christian. It more resembles a bogey which he set up in his own imagination, only to shy things at it and knock it down. In *Totem and Taboo*, and in *Moses and Monotheism*, much of what he writes is the product of his own fantasy, and has no basis in fact or in history.

One is surprised to discover in a man of undoubtedly supreme genius such a distorted view of the Christian doctrine. It brings to mind the words of St Paul, 'But, and if our Gospel is veiled, it is veiled in them that are perishing; in whom the god of this world hath blinded the minds of the unbelieving'.

Unfortunately, because of his great genius and his world-wide fame, his views about religion would influence a far wider circle than that of his immediate followers. It should be remembered that specialised knowledge in one direction does not necessarily qualify a man to speak with authority on subjects outside his own sphere of investigation. Freud's views on religion are not any more authoritative than those of any other intelligent person, and certainly of less weight than the views of those who devote their lives to the study of the Bible and the Christian religion.

In conclusion, it should be said that Ernest Jones, by his comprehensive and well-documented life of Freud, and by the lucid account of Freud's teaching, has rendered a great service to all who are interested in psychology, whether they be psychiatrists, psychologists, or intelligent people in any walk of life who are interested in the manifestation of genius. This book will no doubt become a classic in the history and literature of modern psychology.