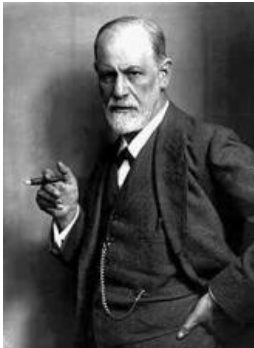


Freud and the Modern Mind

Monday, February 4, 2008



The makers of the modern mind are many, but few can match the influence of Sigmund Freud. Freud's basic ideas have now become part and parcel of the contemporary mindset. His terms are now part of our vocabulary and his idea of the unconscious has formed much of the structure for the therapeutic culture all around us.

Peter D. Kramer looks at Freud's influence in *Freud: Inventor of the Modern Mind*. Consider these excerpts:

It is impossible to imagine the modern without Freud. Consider a single area, literature. The inner monologue or stream of consciousness, in the novels of James Joyce and Virginia Woolf, bears the mark of Freud's method of psychoanalysis, with its reliance on the patient's flow of associations. In their use of dense symbolism and wordplay, T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and Vladimir Nabokov pay unwilling homage to Freud's account of the complexly encoded effects of hidden desires.

Even after the limited "modern" era of the last century, we remain Freudians in our daily lives. We discuss intimate concerns in Freud's language, using words like ego and defensiveness. We listen and observe as Freudians. As others address us, we make note of telltale incongruities that simultaneously hide and reveal unacceptable thoughts and feelings.

Freud believed that, using sex as the dynamic force, he could explain a range of psychological phenomena, from hysteria to blighted love life to slips of the tongue. Because his simple hypotheses often failed and because the social environment changed dramatically—the brutal World War was a turning point—Freud kept modifying and adding perspectives. The result was that he developed a highly eclectic psychology.

Stripped of its underlying premises, this psychology proved workable.

The account of mind and person begins with the premise that there are grave limitations to human rationality. Our thought, emotion, and character are partly products of animal drives. These drives have a developmental history. They change throughout childhood and after. In the course of development, the mind becomes segmented. Memory stores templates of important persons and interactions as they are experienced in childhood. Inner conflict emerges. The templates and the conflicting forces lead to limitations on the freedom to perceive accurately and behave adaptively in adulthood. Distortions of perception and self-awareness have characteristic forms—the various defenses. Guided self-examination can lead to improved self-awareness and then to less stereotyped behavior.

Kramer is absolutely correct in stressing that it is impossible to imagine the modern mind without Freud. Freud's influence added fuel to the erosion of the Christian understanding of the human being, and his legacy remains with us now. Understanding Freud's legacy is an important step toward taking the measure of the dominant secular worldview. *Freud: Inventor of the Modern Mind* is a good start.

