

## Starting with Freud, again!

### Book review

Jacobs, M (1992) **Sigmund Freud**. London: Sage Publications. ISBN 0 8039 8465 0 (pbk), 150 pages.

*Grahame Hayes  
University of Natal  
Durban*

The psychological and psychoanalytic literature might appear to be saturated with introductions to Freud, and hence any new text in this area is simply going to be a wasteful repetition of its many predecessors. And while Jacobs's text covers many familiar areas of Freud's work, his approach is refreshingly contemporary, as well as invitingly written. The "re-reading" which certain of the introductory texts on Freud imply, assures a critical perspective towards psychoanalytic ideas. Psychoanalysis is not, nor should be, an orthodox theory of the unconscious: heterodoxy is axiomatic of psychoanalysis.

It is the critical perspective which Jacobs brings to Freud that particularly impressed me. This is evident throughout his text, but especially so in chapter 4: "Criticisms and rebuttals". At the beginning of this chapter he writes: "The literary industry that sells, refutes, explains and debates Freudian ideas includes both reasoned criticism and uninformed generalizations." (p92). Jacobs's account of the influence of Freud's ideas is generally a positive one, and yet he presents a thoroughly reasoned and balanced introduction to Freudian thinking. The criticisms of Freud's work that he covers range from the disagreements within the early Freud circle (especially the secessions of Adler and Jung), to the neo-Freudians (the feminist critique of Karen Horney; and the social-cultural critique of Eric Fromm), to behaviourist, and contemporary feminist critiques (Chodorow, Dinnerstein, Millett).

Establishment psychoanalysis has often, too readily, dismissed the validity of certain forms of dissent by either attributing theoretical objections to a misunderstanding on the part of the critic, or worse, by referring to the critic's (unsavoury) character! Jacobs instead looks to the institutional organisation of psychoanalysis, where he says that critics "have in some instances been forced into founding their own schools [as] a mark of the difficulties which stem from the institutionalization of psychoanalysis, and the conservatism and protectionism of many of the national organizations. Institutions of all kinds frequently prevent debate and criticism, or circumscribe it, in their desire to protect their own standards and maintain the rules they have themselves set. *Psychoanalysis does not always seem to have been able to contain radical disagreement.*" (p97; emphasis added). Rather than "pathology grubbing" the opponents of

psychoanalysis, what seems to be required is a meticulous social history, and psychoanalysis, of psychoanalytic institutions and organizations. Besides the scurrilous, vituperative, and funny accounts of Jeffrey Masson, we still lack a proper social and organisational analysis of psychoanalysis. As with Jacobs, there is a tendency to focus on the theory, as though the theory can exist outside of an organisational context, and as though the theory were completely autonomous of institutional formations and practices.

To return to some of the core of Jacobs's criticisms of Freud, I would like to make mention of the question that he poses: "Is psychoanalysis a science?" (pp110-114). Jacobs introduces this question as part of the behaviourist criticism of psychoanalysis. The first behaviourist criticism that he discusses, is their objection to the lack of an empirically demonstrated therapeutic efficacy of psychoanalysis, and other psychodynamic therapies. The second behaviourist criticism is of course the one related to psychoanalysis's scientific status. Jacobs is correct to take the behaviourist criticisms of psychoanalysis seriously. There, again, post-Freudian psychoanalysis has tended to dismiss these criticisms as inherently invalid, because of the paradigm incompatibility between the theoretical underpinnings of behaviourism and psychoanalysis. The danger in this kind of approach is that it encloses psychoanalysis in a realm that is impervious to criticism.

Unfortunately, by concentrating on the behaviourist critique of psychoanalysis's scientific status, Jacobs seems to have adopted a rather uncritical neo-positivist conception of what constitutes science. For example, he writes: "For a theory to be scientific it needs to be based upon observations, which as far as possible are made under controlled conditions, in order to limit the influence of external variables. To be scientific, a theory must use clearly specified and identifiable concepts; and it must present hypotheses which are capable of being tested through replicated experiments or observations." (pp110-111). The nature of science is hardly uncontentious, and Bhaskar's (1978) influential work on a realist account of science, would certainly bring into question Jacobs' presentation above. I am not suggesting that to answer the question of whether or not psychoanalysis is a science, that we should shift the definition of what science is, until we find something that accommodates psychoanalysis.

Let me not be misunderstood on this score: *I do not think psychoanalysis is a science*. And furthermore, I do not think that not being a science is a particularly bad thing for psychoanalysis. The study of English literature is hardly a scientific activity, and yet this does not invalidate the objectivity of literary studies! There is more to knowledge and objectivity, than science. Arguably, psychoanalysis might be better off if it concentrated on the consequent problems of knowledge implied in developing a theory of the unconscious. In a related context, Lacan once asked: "What should the writing of a psychoanalyst be like?" In other words, how does one write the theory of the unconscious?

It could be argued that psychoanalysis has inappropriately focused on a reified conception of science, and as Jacobs points out, some of the origins of psychoanalysis's concerns with (a particular conception of) science come from Freud, who at times was clear that his work was far removed from the model of the physical sciences, and even medical science, and yet he maintained an interest in validating psychoanalysis as a

science. Maybe we should not be asking the question of whether psychoanalysis is a science, but following Lacan, to ask the rather more interesting question: *what kind of science* would include psychoanalysis within it? It would seem that this is a much more profitable way to proceed. That is, to ask what kind of theoretical knowledge psychoanalysis gives us about human experience, and more especially about our inner lives (the unconscious). How does psychoanalytic discourse derive a mode of self-criticism, so as to ensure a certain level of rationality and objectivity, which avoids the rebuke of theoretical solipsism?

Posing the question of the scientific status of psychoanalysis in the way that Jacobs does, means that he is forced into some very vague and unconvincing conclusions. For example, he states that "Many of the hypotheses put forward by Freud are ... exceedingly difficult to test; although this does not necessarily prove all Freud's ideas to be wrong, the sceptic is unlikely to be impressed." (p111). And again, he states that "Psychoanalytic thought does not have to be seen as a unified theory, which stands or falls by each single part of it. Some psychoanalytic hypotheses may be shown to be false, without this necessarily undermining other parts of Freudian thinking. Freud's metapsychology may be unscientific, but some of the implicit empirical propositions that can be tested are not; and if some of those empirical propositions are proved to be false, other may find sufficient support." (p112). This all sounds like a scientific smorgasbord! However, the issue of the scientific status of psychoanalysis is still current, and hence it is encouraging that Jacobs has dealt with it directly, albeit in my view in an unsatisfactory manner.

One of the Freudian controversies that Jacobs deals with very adequately is Freud's so-called "disavowal" of the seduction theory of neurosis. In discussing Freud's **Three essays on the theory of sexuality** (1905), Jacobs says that it "is important to note that here Freud asserted (as he continued to do throughout his life) *the incidence of actual sexual abuse*. Some of the fiercest criticism of Freud suggests that he withdrew his theory of actual sexual seduction altogether. Time and again this is shown to be an ignorant accusation. Here, for example, he asserted that '*sexual abuse of children is found with uncanny frequency* among school teachers and child attendants, simply because they have the best opportunity for it.'" (p44; emphasis added).

It is clear from Freud's early writing that he refers to particular instances of sexual abuse, and as he became more immersed in psychoanalytic thinking the distinction between fact and phantasy became more complex, and at times difficult to tell apart. Freud then emphasised, and probably overemphasised, the role of (unconscious) phantasy in the development neurosis. So it is the unconscious dynamics of psychosexual development that accounts for neurotic symptom formation, rather than the *reality* of actual sexual experiences. A close reading of the Freudian texts, of which Jacobs gives us many examples, makes it difficult to conclude that Freud completely *disavows* the seduction hypothesis. Clearly Freud (over-) emphasised the role of unconscious factors, and by implication under-emphasised actual seduction. Shifts of emphasis are *not* the same as disavowal and abandonment! Following Jacobs, the "most that can be said is that Freud was inconsistent in his attitude, and perhaps ambivalent towards his early theory of actual seduction of children." (p103). And finally, during Freud's *public lectures* of 1916/1917 he writes that "'Phantasies of being seduced are of particular interest, because *so often they are not phantasies but real memories*'" (p102; emphasis added).

As **Sigmund Freud** forms part of the Sage Publication series on "Key figures in counselling and psychotherapy" (edited by Windy Dryden), it is not surprising that a whole chapter is devoted to "Freud's major practical contributions" (chapter 3). Most introductions to Freud deal with the practical and therapeutic implications of psychoanalysis very briefly, if at all. In this chapter Jacobs discusses the development of Freud's techniques themselves, the details of the fascinating case of Elisabeth von R, and the usual issues of transference, interpretation, and termination.

Besides the publisher's interest in developing their own library of "Key figures in counselling and psychotherapy", no other rationale for this particular introduction to Freud is given. And furthermore, Jacobs doesn't give us any additional indication why he wrote this book, except to acknowledge his interest, fascination and respect for Freud's writing and thought (p.vii of the Preface). Jacobs's respect for Freud's thought is especially evident in the final chapter (Chapter 5: "The overall influence of Sigmund Freud") where he discusses the post-Freudian developments in psychoanalysis - ego psychology, the Kleinian school, object relations theory, group psychoanalytic psychotherapy, and feminist (psychodynamic) therapy - and the wider impact of Freud's ideas in philosophy, sociology, literature, and cultural studies more generally.

There is no greater tribute to Freud, than to recognise the ongoing influence of his thought in many spheres of intellectual life. Freud's influence has been so powerful that we often forget how Freudian we are in everyday and ordinary understandings of our own and others' lives. Freudianism has become our "second nature". The ubiquity of Freudian thought is all the more reason for us to maintain a critical perspective towards psychoanalysis, and its continuing influence, which Jacobs's little introduction more than adequately enables us to do.

## **REFERENCE.**

Bhaskar, R (1978) **A realist theory of science.** Hassocks: Harvester Press (1975).