

**The Birth of Psychoanalysis:
Nietzsche's Legacy and Influence on Freudian Thought**

by

Tyger Latham, Psy.D.¹

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¹ **About the Author:** Tyger Latham, Psy.D. is a graduate of The George Washington University's Doctorate of Psychology Program. He is a licensed clinical psychologist in Washington, D.C. and currently has a private practice, where he specializes in men's issues, LGBT concerns, and the impact of sexual abuse on patients.

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Abstract

According to Walter Kaufmann, Fredrich Nietzsche's unofficial English translator, Sigmund Freud was only begrudgingly capable of acknowledging the influence that Nietzsche had had on his own thinking. Kaufmann quotes Freud's autobiography, in which the "father of psychoanalysis," reluctantly admitted having read the German existential philosopher's works. He goes on to write:

The other philosopher [besides Schopenhauer] whose premonitions and insights often agree in the most amazing manner with the laborious results of psychoanalysis, I have long avoided for this very reason. After all, I was less concerned about any priority than the preservation of my own open-mindedness. (Kaufmann, 1956, p. 382)

This seemingly innocuous comment highlights Freud's own intrapsychic conflicts surrounding the novelty of psychoanalytic thought. Why was Freud so dismissive of Nietzsche's contribution to psychoanalysis and, more importantly, why was he so reluctant to recognize Nietzsche's influence on his own intellectual development? The truth is that Freud was not only familiar with Nietzsche's polemics, but he also borrowed many key concepts from his writings when formulating his own theory of the unconscious.

The Historical Record

Nietzsche died in 1900; that same year Freud published his magnum opus, The Interpretation of Dreams. Soon after his death, the fame that had eluded Nietzsche during his own lifetime started to develop. The Victorian conventionalism and complacency that had pervaded 19th century Europe began to shift at the turn of the century and Nietzsche's writing began to take on a new meaning in light of contemporary events. There is no question that Freud and other intellectuals of his day would have been reading and discussing Nietzsche's provocative ideas.

According to Peter Gay (1988), Freud was first introduced to Nietzsche as a young student in Vienna and would later purchase Nietzsche's collected works in 1900. He hoped, he told his friend and confidant, Wilhelm Fliess, "to find the words for much that remains mute in me" (p. 45). Yet Freud treated Nietzsche's texts as something to be resisted rather than to be studied. It is somewhat telling of Freud's ambivalence toward Nietzsche that, after reporting to Fliess of his recent purchase of Nietzsche's writings, he had to add that he had not yet opened the volumes. Freud gave as his principle motive for this somewhat transparent defensive statement a reluctance to be diverted from his own important work by "an excess of interest." Instead, he told Fliess that he preferred the clinical material

that he gleaned from his own analytic practice to those insights of a thinker he had publicly and privately regarded as an eccentric, albeit a brilliant one. The truth of Freud's professed ignorance, however, was probably far more complex than he was able to admit even to himself.

In a letter cited by Gay, Freud later wrote his colleague, Lothar Bickel, that he (Freud) lacked the talent for philosophy and so had trained himself to "convert the facts that revealed themselves" in as "undisguised, unprejudiced, and unprepared" a form as possible (p. 45). I suspect that Freud by accepting Nietzsche's philosophy of life, Freud feared he would be unable to maintain his scientific objectivity: "Hence I have rejected the study of Nietzsche although – no, because – it was plain that I would find insights in him very similar to psychoanalytic ones" (Freud to Bickel, June 28, 1931, as cited in Gay, p. 46).

In case there was any question as to Freud's reading habits and whether he had ever laid eyes on Nietzsche's writings, Ernest Jones' provides an historical account that is indisputable. In Volume II (1955) of Jones' three-volume biography of Freud, he reports that the, "The Vienna Society [of Psychoanalysis] held discussions on Nietzsche's writings on April 1 and October 28, 1908. On the first occasion [Eduard] Hitschman read a section from Nietzsche's Genealogy of Morals,

and raised several questions for discussion" (p. 385).

According to Jones, Freud insisted that he found the "abstractions of [Nietzsche's] philosophy so unsympathetic that he gave up studying it" (p. 385). He insisted furthermore that the philosopher had in no way influenced him and that he had tried to read him, but "found his thought so rich that he had renounced the attempt" (p. 385). Despite such objections, however, Jones also quotes Freud as admitting that Nietzsche had "a more penetrating knowledge of himself than any other man who ever lived or was likely to live" (p. 385).

There is also evidence that Freud's knowledge of Nietzsche was not limited solely to his philosophical writings but that Freud also shared a mutual acquaintance with the German philosopher. Much earlier, in 1883, Dr. Joseph Paneth, a Viennese physician and close friend of Freud, shared lodgings with Nietzsche in the Engadine resort district of Switzerland. According to records, Paneth had long conversations with Nietzsche during the month they were together and would later write Freud lengthy letters about Nietzsche as a person and his developing ideas. Paneth would speak with Freud about Nietzsche until his death in 1890 (Chapman et al., p. 785). Taken together, despite Freud's efforts to disavow Nietzsche's influence on his own thinking, there can be no denying that he

was not only familiar with the great philosopher but, in the course of his life, had many opportunities to reflect on Nietzsche's thinking in the company of those who comprised his intellectual circle.

Common Psychological Themes in Nietzsche and Freud's Writings

Given these facts, what was Nietzsche's impact on Freud? Since, as been documented, Freud was reluctant to acknowledge Nietzsche's contribution to his own thinking, the answer can only be one of speculation. However, close examination of both men's writing strongly suggests common themes (as well as important points of divergence). Though the two writers set out with different aims and employed somewhat different methodological approaches, many of the conclusions they drew – particularly those pertaining to human psychology – are notable for their similarities.

At the most basic level, Freudian psychology is founded on the belief that human motivation stems from a dynamic unconscious. For Freud the unconscious served as a depository for unacceptable ideas, wishes, desires as well as traumatic memories. He wrote of the unconscious (1923), that there were two kinds:

The one which is latent but capable of becoming conscious, and the one that is repressed and which is not in itself and without more ado, capable of becoming conscious [...] The latent, which is unconscious only descriptively, not in the dynamic sense, we call *preconscious*, we restrict the term *unconscious* to the dynamically unconscious repressed [italics in original] (p. 5).

The notion of repression is fundamental to Freud's understanding of the unconscious, as he argued that painful emotions and memories could not be kept unconscious without repression as a major defense. Repression itself is an unconscious process, which requires the psychoanalytic method to break down the repressive barrier so as to be able to unearth the unconscious material.

The idea of a dynamic unconscious, however, was not an entirely novel concept as Nietzsche had also made similar references in his own writings. In *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886), Nietzsche argued that unconscious motivations determine philosophers' thoughts, more so than what philosophers think they believe. He writes that, "it has become clear to me what every great philosopher has so far been: namely, the personal confession of its author and a kind of involuntary and *unconscious memoir* [italics added] (Nietzsche, p. 6). This

allusion to an "unconscious memoir" is not pre-conscious waiting to be articulated as conceived by Freud, but a powerful force behind all philosophical thinking. In other words, the writing of philosophy (and presumably this includes Nietzsche's writing) is an unconscious expression of autobiographical details rather than a "universal truth" to be discovered by the objective philosopher.

Arguably Nietzsche's greatest work was also the one that would foreshadow much of Freud's writings on human drives, the repetition compulsion, and the therapeutic power of transference. In Thus Spoke Zarathustra (1892), Nietzsche writes:

I am a wanderer and a mountain climber, he said to his heart; I do not like the plains, and it seems that I cannot sit still for long. And whatever may yet come to me as destiny and experience will include some wandering and mountain climbing; in the end, one experiences only oneself. The time is gone when mere accidents could still happen to me; and what could still come to me that was not mine already? What returns, what finally comes home to me, is my own self and what of myself has long been in strange lands among all things and accidents (Nietzsche, "The Wanderer").

As this passage attests, Nietzsche was fully aware of the phenomenon that Freud would later term the "repetition compulsion," i.e., the individual's compulsion to repeat a fixed pattern of behavior again and again. Nietzsche, through his protagonist Zarathustra, recognizes the repetition compulsion as both a personality trait and an inescapable dramatic plot that the individual is destined to repeat. This recognition on the part of Zarathustra has implications for how he understands himself and his fellow man, for Zarathustra becomes aware in the course of the story that human behavior is not solely a conscious act of will but also an instrument of an unconscious process. However, the story is not without hope, as Zarathustra's insight regarding his compulsion to wander in the mountains enables him to become a witness to himself. At first, Zarathustra feels alienated from himself as he is forced to come to terms with the presence and force of the compulsion that drives him. However, at the same time, the discovery of the compulsion gives his life a renewed meaning and he is able to see himself in a manner that has forever eluded him.

Nietzsche returned to this very theme in Beyond Good and Evil (1886). In an aphorism that succinctly summarizes Zarathustra's discovery of the repetition compulsion, Nietzsche writes, "If one has character one also has one's typical

experience, which recurs repeatedly." (Nietzsche, p. 70). This statement sounds strikingly similar to Freud's thinking on the subject. In his theoretical paper, Beyond the Pleasure Principle (1920), Freud describes the repetition compulsion as "an essential character-trait which always remains the same and which is compelled to find expression in a repetition of the same experiences" (p. 45). The similarities to Nietzsche's work are unmistakable, whether Freud chose to recognize them or not. Freud makes several references to "eternal return" and to the "demonic" power that Nietzsche so often uses to categorize this phenomenon. Freud refers to the repetition compulsion as the 'perpetual recurrence of the same thing,' (p. 45) a clear reference to Nietzsche's doctrine of the eternal recurrence of all events. But, instead, Freud chooses to call it a "compulsion of destiny" (p. 46). He also remarks, "The manifestations of a compulsion to repeat [...] gives the appearance of some 'daemonic force at work'" (p. 65) and later writes, "this compulsion with its hint of possession by some 'daemonic power'" (p. 67).

Zarathustra himself implies that the relevance of external return is also present in the everyday experiences of man's life. Nietzsche illustrates this point when he has Zarathustra comment on the mundane:

And this slow spider, which crawls in the moonlight, and this moonlight itself, and I and you in the gateway, whispering together, whispering of eternal things – must not all of us have been there before? And return in the other lane, out there, before us, in this long dreadful lane – must we not eternally return? (Nietzsche, "On the Vision and the Riddle")

This frequently quoted passage suggests that everyday life is itself an eternity in which history is destined to repeat itself.

The compulsion to repeat, as Freud saw in his clinical practice, often manifested itself in the form of the patient's transference to the analyst. As Freud conceived it, transference is a form of repetition in which the patient repeats important and meaningful episodes in his/her affective life with the analyst. Freud observed that, even in the artificial environment of the analyst's office, his patients were compelled to replay their conflicts with him. Transference is yet another example of the "eternal return" that Nietzsche claimed we all experience. In a passage that Freud certainly would have endorsed, Nietzsche writes:

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 every joy and every thought and sigh and everything unutterably small or great in your life will have to return to you...

(Nietzsche, p. 341).

Freud believed that the origins of neurosis derived from such repetitive compulsions and termed those cases in which it could be observed in the transference as examples of "transference neurosis." For Freud transference was a theory of forgetting and remembering. This paradox of forgetting and remembering is withheld from conscious awareness through repression, an idea that can also be found in Nietzsche's writings. What Freud added to this idea was a clinical dimension. He would go on to argue that all neurotic symptoms represent a "return of the repressed," allowing the patient to remember in a displaced form. In his paper, "Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety" (1926), Freud described symptoms as arising from "an instinctual impulse, which has been detrimentally affected by repression..." (p. 20). He believed that the repetition compulsion in the form of transference was the greatest impediment to the analytic. As Freud wrote, the conflicted patient will inevitably struggle with the wish to receive symptomatic relief while at the same time holding onto the symptom as a means of warding off conscious awareness of hidden

thoughts. Only when the patient is able to surrender this compulsion to repeat, according to Freud, would he be able to free himself of the "demonic" forces that Nietzsche believed trap all men.

Discussion

This paper has argued that Nietzsche had a profound influence on Freud's conception and understanding of the human unconscious. Though Freud often chose to dismiss Nietzsche's impact on his own intellectual development, the historical record suggests, otherwise, as Freud was clearly exposed to at least some of the great philosopher's ideas through friends and acquaintances that belonged to his intellectual circle in Vienna. It should come as no surprise that Freud and other thinkers of his day would have been attracted to Nietzsche's writings as the latter often addressed issues that were at the forefront of the psychoanalytic movement at the turn of the century, including the relationship between trauma and memory, the existence of human drives and their affective discharge, repression, and inhibition. Specifically, Nietzsche was revolutionary for his time and articulated perhaps better than any philosopher before him the vital importance of a dynamic unconscious. Though he was certainly not the only thinker to

have influenced Freud's ideas regarding the human mind, he may have been one of the most important intellectual figures in Freud's life. The fact that Freud claimed to be ignorant of Nietzsche's work may ironically be further evidence of Freud's own unconscious and unresolved conflicts around his own intellectual merits. At the very least, one can appreciate that many of Freud's psychological "discoveries" were at the very least foreshadowed by Nietzsche writings on the human condition.

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