

Introduction

“I thought it – so it must be true”

Sigmund Freud, quoted by Carl Gustav Jung¹

Who was Sigmund Freud? A doctor? A psychologist? A philosopher?

Freud was not a philosopher. He had studied medicine in Vienna, before specializing in neuropathology and becoming a “nerve doctor” (today, we would say neurologist). We know that as a young man, he was very interested in philosophical questions and that during his studies, he enrolled in philosophy courses of the “brilliant” Franz Brentano (1838–1917). We also know that he projected, at that time, to obtain a double doctorate in Philosophy and Zoology. However, this early interest in philosophy soon gave way to an attitude that could well be described as resolutely antiphilosophical. In 1876, he joined the Institute of Physiology of Ernst von Brücke (1819–1892) as a research assistant (*Famulus*). Under the latter’s influence, Freud adopted a militant positivism that remained his “spontaneous philosophy” until the end.

Freud was not a philosopher because he wanted to do science, just like his master Brücke and the other members of the prestigious Viennese School of Medicine: Carl von Rokitansky (1804–1878), Theodor Meynert (1833–1892), and Sigmund Exner (1846–1926). For all these people, science is defined, among other things, by its rejection of the philosophical way of thinking. Science sticks to facts, to experience, to observable data that it links and organizes patiently with the help of laws. Philosophy, on the contrary, proceeds a priori. It puts ideas before facts, and in doing so, it goes beyond experience, wandering in the clouds. It goes beyond, *meta*: philosophy, in the eyes of positivists, is by nature a metaphysics. In a letter addressed in 1927 to the philosopher and psychologist Werner Achelis

*Footnotes refer to the bibliography at the end of the volume. Translations have been modified where necessary.

¹ Charteris 1960.

(1897–1982), Freud specified as follows his “attitude toward philosophy (metaphysics)”: “I believe that one day metaphysics will be condemned as a nuisance, as an abuse of thinking, as a survival from the period of the religious *Weltanschauung*.”²

Admittedly, Freud left the physiology laboratory of his beginnings, and he also abandoned his first neurological research (on infantile paralysis, on aphasia) to turn to psychology, traditionally a branch of philosophy next to cosmology and theology. Psychoanalysis, which was the product of this change of orientation, was nonetheless a science in his eyes. In the *New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis*, he defines it without ambiguity as “a specialist science, a branch of psychology.”³ For him, science is not a matter of object or content but of method: “The intellect and mind are objects for scientific research in exactly the same way as any non-human things. Psycho-analysis has a special right to speak for the scientific *Weltanschauung* at this point . . . Its special contribution to science lies precisely in having extended research to the mental field.”⁴

Thus defined, the Freudian project is that of a scientific, dephilosophized, despiritualized psychology. It should be noted, it was also that of all the psychologists of the second half of the nineteenth century, from Wundt to Brentano, from Ebbinghaus to William James. For them, as for Freud, it was a question of completing the scientific revolution by extending the method of the natural sciences (*Naturwissenschaften*) to the things of the mind, the traditional domain of philosophy and ethics. Franz Brentano (the same one whose philosophy courses the young Freud had assiduously followed) declared in the opening of his influential *Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint*: “We must strive to achieve here what mathematics, physics, chemistry and physiology have already accomplished.”⁵ Théodore Flournoy (1854–1920), another pioneer of the “new psychology”, was pleased that the government of Geneva had created for him a chair “in the faculty of sciences, rather than in that of letters where all the courses of philosophy are found; [it] has implicitly recognized (perhaps without knowing it) the existence of psychology as a particular science, independent of all philosophical systems, with the same claims as physics, botany, astronomy.”⁶

Psychoanalysis, in the same way, is supposed to take over from philosophy by surpassing it, by replacing it with a true science of man. This is what Freud’s often quoted statement means: “As a young man I knew no

² Freud 1960, 374–375. ³ Freud 1933a, 158. ⁴ *Ibid.*, 159. ⁵ Brentano 1874, 2.

⁶ Flournoy 1896, 1.

longing other than for philosophical knowledge, and now I am about to fulfill it as I move from medicine to psychology.”⁷ Scientific psychology (psychoanalysis) is not the continuation of philosophy; it is its truth. It unmask its metaphysical or theological illusion. Feuerbach, whose *Essence of Christianity*⁸ Freud had read when attending Brentano’s lectures, asserted that theology had to be translated into anthropology. Freud, in the *Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, similarly demands that metaphysics be translated into metapsychology, into the “psychology of the unconscious.”⁹

Freud has a name for the philosophical error: “speculation” (*Spekulation*). This is understood in a distantly Kantian sense: “Theoretical cognition is *speculative*”, says Kant, “when it relates to an object or certain conceptions of an object which is not given and cannot be discovered by means of experience.”¹⁰ Speculation is a pure thought that exceeds possible experience and rambles beyond, *meta*. Freed from the constraints of experience, it is then free to simplify reality and to deduce it from some basic concepts (*Grundbegriffe*) or a priori principles. Practically every time he evokes philosophy, Freud reproaches it for its systematicity and its abstract coherence: “Philosophy is not opposed to science . . . it departs from it, however, by clinging to the illusion of being able to present a picture of the universe which is without gaps and is coherent.”¹¹ Philosophy is a *Weltanschauung*, a conception of the world, that is to say “an intellectual construction (*Konstruktion*) that solves all the problems of our existence uniformly on the basis of one overriding hypothesis.”¹² But Freud hates *Weltanschauungen*: “I must confess that I am not at all partial to the fabrication of *Weltanschauungen*. Such activities may be left to philosophers.”¹³

To the totalizing speculation of philosophy, Freud opposes the fragmentary and provisional work of that “empirical science” that is psychoanalysis: “Psycho-analysis is not, like philosophies, a system starting out from a few sharply defined basic concepts, seeking to grasp the whole universe with the help of these and, once it is completed, having no room for fresh discoveries or better understanding.”¹⁴ Psychoanalysis fumbles around, letting itself be guided by experience, always ready to abandon its working hypotheses if necessary. (Conversely, in the *New Lectures*, he compares scientific work to the course of a psychoanalysis, with its false

⁷ Freud 1985, 180.⁸ Feuerbach 1841.⁹ Freud 1901, 259.¹⁰ Kant 1781, 355.¹¹ Freud 1933a, 160.¹² *Ibid.*, 158.¹³ Freud 1926b, 96.¹⁴ Freud 1923a, 253.

starts and its constant “withdrawal” of hypotheses.¹⁵) Psychoanalysis prides itself on being modest, in contrast to the arrogance of philosophers.

A passage from the essay “On Narcissism: An Introduction” sums up this negative epistemology:

I am of the opinion that that is just the difference between a speculative theory and a science erected on empirical interpretation. The latter will not envy speculation its privilege of having a smooth, logically unassailable foundation, but will gladly content itself with nebulous, scarcely imaginable basic concepts, which it hopes to apprehend more clearly in the course of its development, or which it is even prepared to replace by others. For these ideas are not the foundation of science, upon which everything rests: that foundation is observation alone. They are not the bottom but the top of the whole structure, and they can be replaced and discarded without damaging it.¹⁶

“The foundation of science is observation (*Beobachtung*).” Freud echoes here the positivism of the physicist and philosopher of science Ernst Mach (1838–1916), who seems to be his main reference in the theory of knowledge. “For the scientist”, Mach wrote, “it is quite a secondary matter whether his ideas fit into some given philosophic system or not, so long as he can use them with profit as a starting point for research. For the scientist is not so fortunate as to possess unshakeable principles, he has accustomed to regarding even his safest and best-founded views and principles as provisional and liable to modification through experience.”¹⁷ The concepts of the positivist are disposable, because only experience and observation count. They are, says Mach, “provisional fictions” that are used for convenience until better, more “economical” ones are found. Freud adds: the “basic concepts”¹⁸ of psychoanalytical science are never more than “fictions,”¹⁹ “speculative superstructures,”²⁰ “scientific constructions,”²¹ “working hypotheses,”²² “intellectual scaffolding,”²³ “conventions”²⁴ that are replaced as soon as they conflict with observation.

One will have noted the terms “basic concepts,” “speculation,” “construction”: these are the same terms that Freud uses to talk about philosophy. Would psychoanalysis, therefore, also be a speculation? In fact, Freud often acknowledges the speculative character of his theories. One cannot, he says, do without hypotheses and heuristic constructions: “Even at the stage of description it is not possible to avoid applying certain

¹⁵ Freud 1933a, 174.

¹⁸ Freud 1915a, 117.

²¹ Freud 1917a, 142.

²⁴ Freud 1915a, 117.

¹⁶ Freud 1914c, 77.

¹⁹ Freud 1900, 598; Freud 1926a, 194.

²² Freud 1915a, 124.

¹⁷ Mach 1905/1976, 9.

²⁰ Freud 1925a, 32.

²³ Freud 1938b, 159.

Introduction

5

abstract ideas to the material in hand, ideas derived from somewhere or other but certainly not from the new observations alone.”²⁵ Or again: “Without metapsychological speculation and theorizing – I had almost said ‘phantasising’ (*Phantasieren*) – we shall not get another step forward.”²⁶ Yet, if Freud allows himself to play freely with ideas, just to see, it is because, as a good positivist, he posits that they will be corrected by experience anyway. This is what one might call the principle of conceptual selection: the facts are hard, stubborn, resistant, and only the theories that adapt to them survive (which supposes that the “facts”, in psychoanalysis, are not influenced by the theories).

For Freud, then, there are two speculations, the bad and the good: the philosophical (the metaphysical), which goes beyond experience and bends reality to its *desiderata*; and the psychoanalytical (the metapsychological), which speculates under the control of experience and observation, in constant interaction with them.

However, Freud also sometimes criticizes philosophers for sticking too much to the observable. Psychoanalysis is a “psychology of the unconscious”, i.e., a psychology of what does not present itself to consciousness. Strictly speaking, we can therefore not observe this unconscious; we can only postulate it. Now, “philosophers, who know no kind of observation other than self-observation, cannot follow [analysts] into that domain.”²⁷ They are unable to accept that there is thought that is not conscious, that is not the object of a psychic experience or observation.

This is the second major reproach addressed to philosophers, tirelessly hammered throughout the work: “the majority of philosophers will hear nothing of ‘unconscious mental processes’”;²⁸ “they have identified the mental with the conscious and have proceeded to infer from this definition that what is unconscious cannot be mental or a subject for psychology”;²⁹ “To most people who have been educated in philosophy the idea of anything psychical which is not also conscious is so inconceivable that it seems to them absurd and refutable simply by logic”;³⁰ “The overwhelming majority of philosophers regard as mental only the phenomena of consciousness”;³¹ “The majority of philosophers . . . declare that the idea of something psychical being unconscious is self-contradictory.”³²

Why does Freud write “the *majority* of philosophers”? Because he knows perfectly well that he cannot write “*all* philosophers.” Not only was the

²⁵ Ibid. ²⁶ Freud 1937a, 225. ²⁷ Freud 1925b, 217. ²⁸ Freud 1905b, 266.

²⁹ Freud 1913a, 178. ³⁰ Freud 1923b, 13. ³¹ Freud 1925b, 216. ³² Freud 1938b, 158.

idea of an “unconscious cerebration” commonplace in the neurophysiology of the second half of the nineteenth century, but many philosophers had taken it up, starting with Theodor Lipps (1851–1914) and Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900). In reality, behind the philosophical crowd evoked by Freud, there is *one* very specific philosopher: Franz Brentano. It was in the latter’s *Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint* that Freud found the radical critique of “unconscious consciousness” that he later attributed to philosophers in general. The irony is that Brentano directed this critique against a “*philosophy* of the unconscious”, that of Eduard von Hartmann (1842–1906), by opposing it to his own “empirical psychology” conceived as a “rigorous science”. Like any other natural science, psychology was to be based on perception and experience, except that here it could only be a matter of self-perception in the first person (what Freud called “self-observation”): “Above all, however, [the] source [of psychology] is to be found in the inner perception of our own mental phenomena.”³³ It is on this account that Brentano rejected the idea of “unconscious psychic acts”: what is not consciously perceived cannot be the object of a truly empirical, scientific psychology. It can only be a philosophical speculation à la Hartmann.

No doubt Brentano would have consigned his ex-student’s “unconscious” to the same philosophical trash bin, which probably explains why it is with him that Freud silently polemicizes each time he stigmatizes the error of philosophers, in the plural. By making Brentano’s position the philosophical position par excellence, he opportunely diverts our attention from the fact that he himself philosophizes, speculates, transgresses the limits of empirical psychology.

Indeed, psychoanalysis presents itself without mystery as a “metapsychology,” that is to say, according to Freud’s own definition, a “psychology that leads behind consciousness”³⁴ – Brentano would have said: a psychology that goes beyond the empirical-perceptible-observable, a nonscientific psychology. What is the difference, then, between metapsychology and metaphysics? Freud may have translated the metaphysical into metapsychology, but the object of the latter is still *meta*, imperceptible, and unperceived: *unconscious*. The unconscious, the unique Thing of psychoanalysis, is as unknowable and unobservable as Kant’s “thing in itself.” The psychiatrist-philosopher Ludwig Binswanger (1881–1966) thus reports statements made by Freud in 1910: “He thought that just

³³ Brentano 1874, 29. ³⁴ Freud 1985, 301–302.

as Kant postulated the thing in itself behind the phenomenal world, so he himself postulated the unconscious behind the conscious that is accessible to our experience, but that can never be directly experienced.”³⁵

Freud knew that he would be called a philosopher by his psychologist colleagues, since he was speculating on an unrepresentable, “metapsychic” thing.³⁶ His great rival (and the ex-philosopher) Pierre Janet (1859–1947) put it bluntly: “Psycho-analysis is above all a philosophy . . . perhaps interesting if it were presented to philosophers. Unfortunately, psycho-analysis wants to be a medical science at the same time.”³⁷ So Freud is on the defensive on this point, and it’s what explains his strange insistence on presenting himself as a philistine in philosophical matters. No, he claims, he had not read Arthur Schopenhauer (1788–1860), or only very late in life. No, he had not read Nietzsche either, because he had carefully “avoided”³⁸ him. To his disciple and future biographer Ernest Jones (1879–1958), who once asked him if he had read much philosophy, he replied: “Very little. As a young man I felt a strong attraction towards speculation and ruthlessly checked it.”³⁹ Elsewhere, he states, on the contrary, that in his youth, he had little “taste for reading philosophical works.”⁴⁰ A “constitutional incapacity” supposedly kept him away from it.⁴¹

The man “protests too much, methinks”: no need for Shakespeare to understand that Freud leads us down the garden path. It is not only the case that he had read Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, and many other philosophers closely, whatever he may say. Much more fundamentally, it is that *he is, according to his own criteria, a philosopher himself*, since he speculates on an unconscious that no observation allows neither to prove, nor even to refute. And he knows it, even if his will to make science forbids him to admit it. Freud is an impeded, embarrassed, ashamed philosopher, a philosopher in denial.

Hence the contradictory criticisms of which he has been the object on the part of philosophers, some reproaching him for being too scientific and for “misunderstanding” the purely hermeneutic or existential character of his theory (Ludwig Binswanger, Karl Jaspers, Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre, Jürgen Habermas, Paul Ricoeur), others of not being scientific enough (Adolf Grünbaum), or even of falling into pseudo-science (Karl Popper, Frank Cioffi) or aesthetic persuasion (Ludwig Wittgenstein).

³⁵ Binswanger 1957, 7–8. ³⁶ Ibid. ³⁷ Janet 1913, 51. ³⁸ Freud 1925a, 60.

³⁹ Jones 1953, 32. ⁴⁰ Freud 1914a, 15. ⁴¹ Freud 1925a, 59.

Neither a true science nor a true philosophy either, psychoanalysis occupies a hybrid and contradictory place in modern thought, an inexhaustible source of irritation and misunderstandings.

In what follows, I try to situate this placement, as close as possible to the texts.