

[Published in *Annual of Psychoanalysis*, 2003,
Vol. XXXI, pp. 65-78. Hillsdale, NJ: Analytic Press.]

Sigmund Freud, Psychohistorian

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Suppose the only books Sigmund Freud ever wrote were his two psychohistorical monographs, Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of His Childhood and Moses and Monotheism. What would their impact have been? They concerned subjects about whom little reliable biographical data existed, and Freud tended to emphasize the more obscure aspects of those data. His synthesis and interpretation of the data derived from a theoretical system accepted at the time by no reputable biographer or historian. Published in isolation, the books would have passed into obscurity, and the name of Sigmund Freud would be long forgotten.

Of course Freud did write other books and papers, a total of twenty-three substantial volumes in the Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud. The entire body of Freud's work, ranging from theoretical discussions to detailed case histories, invests any part of it with clinical or cultural significance. Thus the monographs on Leonardo and Moses have continued to receive attention as part of the authentic Freudian oeuvre. Indeed, although those monographs and a scattering of similar but briefer works constitute less than five percent of Freud's total wordage, they have if anything been given disproportionate attention. For example, the seventy-page Leonardo book was recently the subject of a 260-page commentary (Collins, 1997), while in the past decade the Moses book was the main focus of at least half a dozen substantial scholarly monographs (e.g., Bernstein, 1998; Grubrich-Simitis, 1997; Said, 2003). Attention to Freud's psychohistories has often been negative, emphasizing the inadequacies of his work as biography or history, or his confusion of his own personal issues with the character and achievements of his subjects. Yet Freud's tentative but pioneering efforts of six to nine decades ago launched a scholarly approach that has largely taken over the field of biography and has made significant inroads into history and cultural studies. When we look past the intermittent factual errors and poorly grounded leaps of inference, his work as a psychohistorian reveals a whole strategy of investigation, sharply different from what went before and still worth serious attention today.

Freud never used the term "psychohistory." He referred instead to "applied psychology" or "applied psychoanalysis." Whichever term we use, we are concerned here with the psychological study of historical phenomena, including both group processes

and the behavior of publicly significant individuals. The study of such individuals is also referred to as psychobiography, and indeed the majority of psychohistorical studies are largely psychobiographical. Freud's book on Leonardo is almost entirely psychobiographical; his book on Moses necessarily deals as much with the group dynamics of the early Jews as with Moses' individual character. Freud also wrote several works that theorized about historical processes but did not deal in detail with actual historical figures or events: for example, Totem and Taboo, Civilization and Its Discontents, Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego. Such works of social and anthropological theory have been ably discussed by others (e.g., Roazen, 1968; Freidländer, 1978; Winter, 1999), and will not be re-examined here. Instead I focus on Freud's development as an applied psychoanalyst, a working psychohistorian, in the Leonardo and Moses books and in several shorter works. (A case study of Woodrow Wilson, supposedly by Freud and William Bullitt [1967], was written almost entirely by Bullitt and in any case contributed little to the field of psychohistory.)

Freud's Earliest Psychohistorical Efforts

Prior to Freud, psychiatrists and writers familiar with the language of clinical case histories had already begun to publish studies of well-known figures in the arts and politics. As their studies without notable exception emphasized the presumed psychopathology of their subjects, their approach appropriately came to be called "pathography." Freud could have made it his mission to improve the field of pathography by introducing new categories of clinical diagnosis or by refining old ones. But as his theoretical concepts rapidly expanded in scope, he found himself in pursuit of bigger game: the development of what he called a general psychology. He was widely read in literature, the arts, history, and politics, and as his general psychology developed, it was only natural to move beyond observations and conclusions about his patients, applying his ideas to prominent individuals throughout history and across the broadest range of human affairs.

Thus Freud's first psychohistorical inspirations (recorded in his correspondence with his friend Wilhelm Fliess) did not concern whether Sophocles was obsessive-compulsive or whether Shakespeare suffered from a hereditary inclination toward melancholia. Rather, Freud recognized that Sophocles had tapped into omnipresent components of ordinary human psychology in Oedipus Rex, and that Shakespeare had done much the same in Hamlet (Masson, 1985, pp. 272-273). Freud noted elsewhere that Shakespeare had undergone personal experiences that heightened his sensitivity to Oedipal issues while writing Hamlet (such as the recent deaths of his father and his infant son). But Freud had little information about those personal experiences, so all he could conclude was that Shakespeare had unconsciously focused on issues in Hamlet that resonated with the unconscious psychology of audience members.

Soon after these speculations about Sophocles and Shakespeare, Freud took the next step in his development of the psychohistorical approach. To show his appreciation for one of Fliess's favorite authors, Conrad F. Meyer, Freud wrote a brief paper (actually a highly condensed abstract) about one of Meyer's novels (Masson, 1985, pp. 317-318). Freud identified aspects of Meyer's psychosexual history, especially his expressions of incestual desire for his sister, as an explanation for the novel's main concerns. Freud was intrigued enough by this apparent connection between the novelist's life and the novel's themes to look for further evidence in published biographies of Meyer. When he found the biographies inadequate to his purposes, he put the paper aside for good, never circulating it beyond a letter to Fliess.

When the Wednesday Evening Meetings of what would become the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society began in Freud's apartment in the early 1900s, he seems to have encouraged members' efforts at psychohistory. At that time, he was the group's only member who had a substantial backlog of clinical case histories to discuss. His new disciples had treated few if any cases psychoanalytically, and remained uncertain as to how much clinical detail they could ethically communicate to others in the group. But they shared a common familiarity with the work of various popular writers and with the histories of prominent politicians. So the minutes of those Wednesday Evening Meetings often include formal presentations and sharp discussions about the psychology of these public figures.

In the Meetings' first recorded minutes (Nunberg and Federn, 1962, p. 6), Freud announced plans for a series of monographs in "applied psychology" (later "applied psychoanalysis"), which he planned to edit and to which he would contribute his own psychohistorical efforts. Worthy contributions to this series did not immediately come from the Wednesday Evening group, who remained largely locked into the traditional pathographic mode. In the first several years of published minutes, Freud can be observed repeatedly attempting to whip (or lick) his pathographic followers into shape, clarifying his own ideas about appropriate psychohistorical methodology as he went along.

In the pathographic mode, an overall clinical diagnosis is made that typically reduces the individual subject's entire life experience to one standard syndrome. Sometimes the diagnosed syndrome is seen as having emerged from hereditary defects, sometimes from a single traumatic experience. In his earliest discussion of psychohistorical method, Freud instead stressed the examination of changes in personality over time, as expressed in changes in the individual's work: "I would very much like to know something about his [C. F. Meyer's] life story and also the sequence of his works, which I need for interpreting" (letter to Fliess, December 5, 1898; Masson, 1985, p. 336). Freud later made a similar suggestion to a Wednesday Evening group member who had presented a strongly pathographic picture of a famous German writer, Johann Paul Richter: "It would be interesting to investigate the relationship between his works and the age at which he wrote them" (Nunberg and Federn, 1962, p. 169). Freud

repeatedly rejected the idea of “hereditary neurosis,” as used for instance by Isidor Sadger in a pathographic presentation to the Vienna group in 1906 (Nunberg and Federn, 1962, p. 65). Again chastising Sadger, who made the mistake of pathographizing Freud’s admired writer C. F. Meyer a year later, Freud said Sadger’s emphasis on “hereditary tainting” was “too rigid” and yielded “not one iota” of additional understanding of the subject (Nunberg and Federn, 1962, p. 257). Freud told another pathographically inclined group member, “The experience [of the individual subject] must not be underestimated as compared with constitutional factors” (Nunberg and Federn, 1962, p. 237).

Freud expressed his annoyance not only at rigid applications of traditional diagnostic categories, but also at simplistic uses of some of his own concepts in pathographic analyses. At one point, while making the significant observation that “The mental life of the child is important for the psychological understanding of philosophical concepts,” Freud joked, “When we take the infantile factor into account, however, we must leave aside the idea, more humorous than provable, that Thales, who let everything originate from water, was an enuretic, and that Heraclitus, on account of his auditory hallucinations and his sense of orderliness, was an anal-erotic” (Nunberg and Federn, 1962, p. 150). In several other instances, he observed that characteristics identified by one or another Wednesday Evening participant as seriously pathological are so widely distributed as to be diagnostically meaningless: for example, “Stekel’s analytic method is too radical; everything he finds in [the playwright] Grillparzer can be found in every neurotic, as well as in all normal persons” (Nunberg and Federn, 1967, p. 9).

In a sustained assault on pathographic pigeon-holing, Freud insisted that his disciples must pay attention to individual idiosyncrasy, rather than merely assigning a biographical subject to some broad clinical category. This point was part of what Freud had in mind in repeatedly characterizing Sadger’s pathographies as “too crude” (e.g., Nunberg and Federn, 1962, p. 66). More positively, Freud told the Vienna group, “Each case must be dealt with individually. Our presentation begins to be conclusive only with the intimate detail” (Nunberg and Federn, 1962, p. 172).

Freud also repeatedly urged his followers to be more empathic toward their subjects, and thus more sensitive to nonpathological characteristics. When the group, for instance, continued to discuss the pathology of the writer J. P. Richter in spite of Freud’s earlier criticisms, he interrupted to say, “Jean Paul is of a complex nature, a peculiar saint” (Nunberg and Federn, 1962, p. 169). During two separate discussions by the group of Nietzsche’s pathology, Freud first mused, “Someday one should investigate how infantile impressions influence great achievements, and not only how they influence later illness” (Nunberg and Federn, 1962, p. 361). He then dryly observed about one member’s pathographic characterization of Nietzsche, “It is very doubtful whether paresis can be held responsible for the contents of Ecce Homo. . . . The indication that this work of Nietzsche is fully valid and to be taken seriously is the preservation of the mastery of form” (Nunberg and Federn, 1967, p. 30). In other words, this late work by Nietzsche was

not merely an expression of syphilitic brain damage, but continued to exhibit the eloquence characteristic of Nietzsche's earlier work.)

The first publication in Freud's edited series of applied psychoanalytic monographs was his own detailed analysis (1907) of a light popular novel, Wilhelm Jensen's Gradiva. Freud drew few actual psychobiographical connections between Jensen and his fictional creation; his analysis of the novel mainly served to show a general audience how psychoanalytic ideas could be used to explain various kinds of puzzling but nonpathological behavior. However, Freud included halfway through the monograph, perhaps mainly for the education of his Viennese disciples, an emphatic denunciation of standard pathographic practices:

[P]sychiatry would be doing wrong if it tried to restrict itself permanently to the study of the severe and gloomy illnesses that arise from gross injuries to the delicate apparatus of the mind. Deviations from health which are slighter and capable of correction, and which to-day we can trace back no further than to disturbances in the interplay of mental forces, arouse its interest no less. [Freud, 1907, pp. 44-45].

The Lessons of Leonardo

It was not until 1910, when Freud wrote Leonardo Da Vinci and a Memory of His Childhood, that he clearly enunciated his ideas about how psychobiography, and more broadly psychohistory, should be approached. In that book, though it still contained elements of clinical diagnosis, Freud moved well beyond the simplistic and rather mean-spirited pathographies of Sadger and others. The Leonardo book was innovative in at least four major ways:

1.) Systematic application of a motivational theory to the subject

Freud did not simply ask (as old-style biographers would have), "What kind of person was Leonardo?" or even (as the more recent pathographers would have) "What kind of crazy person was Leonardo?" Instead, he asked, in effect, Why was Leonardo that kind of person? Why did he develop a specific pattern of motives and particular ways of expressing those motives? What effects did Leonardo's underlying motivational patterns have on a wide variety of his visible behaviors? When Freud developed psychoanalytic theory, he created a theory of human motives. A motivational theory is useful to the extent that it helps to organize and explain many different behaviors in an economical way, showing how the large variety of behaviors that an individual displays all originated from a relatively small number of motives. In the Leonardo book, Freud tried to account for a much wider range of Leonardo's behaviors than anyone previously had attempted, and he accounted for them by referring to a very small set of motives.

What kind of motivational theory did Freud apply to Leonardo? Unsurprisingly, it was mainly a sexual theory. (As Freud told his Vienna group in late 1909, “We shall, of course, first inquire into the man’s sexual life in order, on that basis, to understand the peculiarities of his character” [Nunberg and Federn, 1967, p. 339]). Freud traced both Leonardo’s artistic creativity and his scientific curiosity back to a blockage of sexual energy, an inability to express his sexual urges directly. Freud assumed that Leonardo’s sexual motives were blocked from direct expression because of a somewhat unusual set of circumstances in Leonardo’s childhood. According to Freud, Leonardo was raised by an extremely attentive and loving mother for the first several years of his life, without an adult male parent in the house or close by. That situation, according to Freud, produced a complicated and unusual version of the Oedipus complex and its resolution, involving Leonardo’s strong identification with his mother at the same time that he repressed his powerful sexual interest in her.

There are major problems with the specifics of this motivational explanation by Freud, as I have noted elsewhere (Elms, 1994, Chapter 3). In addition to questions discussed there, recent documentary discoveries about Leonardo’s mother strongly suggest that he did not continue to live with her beyond his second year, if then (Collins, 1997, p. 74). To make Freud’s account still work, identification with the mother would have had to occur at an unusually early age. Thus the specifics of this case remain debatable and arguments about it continue. But Freud’s general approach, his discussion of the development of a motivational pattern and its expression in complex behavior, was a major advance in biography. It was considerably more systematic than the shallow or scattered comments about motives in previous biographies, and it discussed basic psychological processes that might help to explain other variants in developmental patterns, not only the specific version that Leonardo had presumably experienced.

2.) Application of psychoanalytic methods to biographical data

In order to develop factual support for his motivational hypotheses, Freud took the methods of observation and analysis that he had developed in his psychoanalytic therapy and applied them to the information available concerning Leonardo. Freud did not limit his research to the most obvious or well-known aspects of Leonardo's behavior, as a traditional biographer would have done. Instead, he sought clues to Leonardo's motives and psychological conflicts in minor but unusual bits of behavior, such as slips of the pen. (As he said several years later in an essay on Michelangelo’s statue of Moses, he was “accustomed to divine secret and concealed things from despised or unnoticed features, from the rubbish-heap, as it were, of our observations” [1914, p. 222].) He looked for other clues in the symbolic meanings of Leonardo's artistic works and Leonardo's writings. These clues included the subtle and mysterious smile that frequently appeared in Leonardo's later paintings, the recurrent theme of two mothers, the strongly androgynous appearance of various male figures in other paintings, and

especially Leonardo's anecdote about a bird thrusting its tail repeatedly into little Leonardo's mouth, the "memory" or fantasy referred to in the title of Freud's book.

3.) Attempts to deal with the subject's achievements and positive characteristics, not just with failures or psychological shortcomings

Isidor Sadger said he wrote pathographies "purely out of medical interest, not for the purpose of throwing light on the process of artistic creation" (Nunberg and Federn, 1962, p. 267). Not only at the beginning but again toward the end of the Leonardo book (1910, p. 131), Freud protested that he was not writing a mere pathography that identifies Leonardo's psychiatric syndrome. Instead, he said, he was interested in the entirety of Leonardo's psychological development, including what contributed to Leonardo's greatness as well as to his failures. This was an extension of the lessons Freud had tried repeatedly to teach his Viennese disciples over the previous eight years: A famous writer's or politician's pathology is at most a starting point or a side issue in a psychohistorical study; look instead for the sources of his creativity.

4.) Introduction of several important guidelines for psychohistorical research

Freud did not merely adapt methods from his therapeutic techniques, but began to develop scientific methods and research strategies specifically for psychohistory. Some of Freud's guidelines are presented in the Leonardo book as proscriptive guidelines, telling us what we should not do when we want to write good psychohistory. Freud is rather explicit in proposing those proscriptive guidelines: Avoid arguments built on a single clue; avoid pathographizing or idealizing the subject; avoid drawing strong conclusions from inadequate data. (These proscriptive guidelines are discussed further, along with examples of how Freud himself violated them, in Elms, 1994, pp. 40-49.) Others are presented as prescriptive guidelines, telling us what we should do to write good psychohistory. These prescriptive guidelines are mainly demonstrated by example in the Leonardo book, rather than being stated explicitly. They include the following:

A.) Collect as much data as possible, as many different kinds of data as possible, and as much primary-source data as possible. Primary sources may include the subject himself or herself, or people who knew the subject personally and were therefore able to observe his or her behavior directly. Secondary sources include people who may know something about the subject but didn't get it first-hand: for example, Giorgio Vasari (1568), who assiduously collected gossip and rumors about Leonardo and other Italian Renaissance artists, but who never met Leonardo and got even his age at death wrong by eight years.

What sorts of primary source data did Freud collect about Leonardo? He was resourceful, using material from Leonardo's notebooks, looking closely at his paintings and sketches, scouring biographies in several languages for legal and other documents

relevant to Leonardo's psychological development and character. Freud's secondary sources were even more varied and, as Freud knew, less reliable. They ranged from Vasari to Dmitri Merezhkovsky's well-researched historical novel The Romance of Leonardo da Vinci, which provided Freud with an imagined but persuasive account of Leonardo's undocumented childhood.

B.) Examine the external and internal probability of biographical data. This is especially important for information from secondary sources, but it is also essential for data from primary sources. As Freud was well aware from his clinical practice, what the subject says about himself or herself, or what even close friends and relatives report, is not always true.

In using the terms "external and internal probability" (1910, p. 64), Freud referred to the same concepts that are now often termed external and internal validity. External probability refers to how well a new piece of information about a biographical subject fits with what we already know about the subject's overt behavior and circumstances, whether by actual observation or through another form of reliable documentation. Freud's example concerned a story recounted by Vasari: Leonardo on his deathbed spoke of "how much he had offended God and mankind in not having worked at his art as he should have done." As Freud suggested, this story is seriously lacking in external probability: Leonardo did not write the statement down in his own handwriting for us later to read, and Vasari did not hear the statement come from Leonardo's mouth with his own ears. Nor did Vasari report that anyone actually present at Leonardo's death (such as the king of France) wrote the statement down, or was able to remember it clearly enough to tell it to Vasari many years later. Leonardo could have made such a statement, but we have no evidence except Vasari's story. Although no known external circumstances contradict the story, none support it.

Internal probability refers to how well a new piece of biographical data fits with what we already know about the subject's internal psychological processes or structure. Using the same example, we might ask how Vasari's story about Leonardo's deathbed confession fits with what else we know or can reasonably hypothesize about Leonardo's personality. Little in Leonardo's writings suggests that he felt much concern about offending God. Instead, Freud argued, "When anyone has, like Leonardo, escaped being intimidated by his father during his earliest childhood, and has in his researches cast away the fetters of authority, it would be in the sharpest contradiction to our expectation if we found that he had remained a believer and had been unable to escape from dogmatic religion" (1910, p. 123). Freud strengthened this internal-probability argument against the deathbed confession with evidence regarding external probability, by noting that Leonardo had at least once been charged with apostasy. "There is scarcely any doubt that Leonardo had prevailed over both dogmatic and personal religion, and had by his work of research removed himself far from the position from which the Christian believer surveys the world" (p. 125).

C.) Compare the subject with other people living in the same era and culture, to determine his/her behavior's relative normality or deviancy. Certain information about a subject's life may at first look interesting, then turn out to be unhelpful in explaining the subject's unique personality, because many other people in that time and place display similar behavior. In contrast, a behavior that at first glance appears ordinary to us may have been extreme or unusual within the subject's temporal and cultural context, and may therefore reveal a distinctive personality characteristic. For example, Freud noted Leonardo's practice of leaving most of his paintings unfinished. Certain of Leonardo's "later admirers," Freud said, have tried to excuse this practice by pointing out that Michelangelo and other great artists also left many of their paintings and statues unfinished. But, Freud observed, "this behavior is shown in Leonardo in an extreme degree" (p. 66). He was then able to quote several observers from Leonardo's own time as referring to "Leonardo's notorious inability to finish his works" (p. 67). In this instance, then, Freud presented data about the context of Leonardo's behavior, to show that the behavior was indeed rather unusual and therefore revealed more about Leonardo's psyche than about his society.

D.) Conduct psychobiographical research iteratively, rather than attempting to amass all the data at one time and drawing final conclusions from that single data mass. "Iterative" was originally a mathematical term, describing a process in which repeated but increasingly accurate approximations are used to solve a problem (such as determining a square root). As used in psychohistorical research, the iterative method also involves repeated approximations, in an attempt to get closer and closer to understanding a life or a personality. Freud did not use the word to describe his psychohistorical strategy, but he clearly used the process in the course of his work on Leonardo. He began with a few bits of biographical information (such as hints that Leonardo might have been homosexual) and some rather vague hypotheses (e.g., that the absence of an adult male in a small boy's household might disrupt "normal" gender identification). Freud then searched more systematically for evidence that could either support such ideas or disconfirm them, revising his hypotheses according to his latest evidence. He continued to look for more information and to make further revisions in his current hypotheses until he reached a point where his hypotheses appeared to account for most of the data in his possession and most of the new data still coming in.

Freud was of course unable to do any experiments to test his hypotheses about Leonardo, nor was he able to formulate a definitive list of questions about Leonardo's personality and then have Leonardo answer them in person. In retrospect, we can see that Freud never attained enough data about certain aspects of Leonardo's life (especially his early childhood) to reach firm conclusions, and that his assessment of key data (such as Leonardo's "vulture" fantasy) sent part of his iterative process off along a wrong track from which his reasoning never fully recovered (Elms, 1994, pp. 39-42). But as with other aspects of his development of psychohistorical research techniques beyond the

simplistic procedures of pathography, Freud's modeling of an iterative process in the Leonardo project was much more important for the field's future than the results with which he concluded.

Lessons from Lesser Works

Completion of the Leonardo book in 1910 seems to have largely satisfied Freud's desire to offer a clear psychohistorical alternative to the despised pathographies that he had so often criticized. During the next quarter-century, he essayed only a few brief papers that dealt in any substantial way with psychohistorical matters. Each of these papers did, however, contribute in certain ways to the further development of psychohistorical methods. A paper on Goethe's earliest childhood memory (Freud, 1917), for instance, illustrates the value of identifying the motives that lie behind screen memories in a subject's memoirs. Freud's paper on Dostoevsky and The Brothers Karamazov (1928) is valuable for its discussion of overdetermination in a creative artist's life and work. In Freud's analysis, Dostoevsky's compulsive gambling (which is depicted in his fiction as well) was in part a matter of le jeu pour le jeu (gambling for its own sake), in part a means of reaching a level of self-abasement that punished him for his feelings of guilt for parricidal urges (as dramatized in The Brothers Karamazov), and in part a substitute for long-established masturbatory behavior. We need not accept all these interpretations of Dostoevsky's motives in order to appreciate the broader lesson: that psychohistorians should always go beyond single-motive analyses in considering a subject's prominent behavior patterns.

Charisma in Moses

Much of the commentary on Freud's last major work of psychohistory, Moses and Monotheism (1939), has taken either (or sometimes both) of two approaches: (a) that Freud was simply wrong about the details of Moses' life and/or Egyptian history; and (b) that the book is mainly autobiographical rather than psychohistorical. Approach (a) continues to be debatable (and debated). As Freud acknowledged, we have no reliable information on the life of Moses, and much uncertainty still exists even about which Egyptian era(s) he lived in, if he lived at all. Approach (b) is so obvious that virtually everyone who has discussed the book in print, from the earliest book reviews onward, has made similar points: that Freud strongly identified with Moses the lawgiver, the leader of a new "religion"; that as with Moses, some of Freud's followers rebelled against him or backslid to the old ways; that Freud felt he would never live to see the promised land, in which his ideas would bring new harmony to the lives of those who followed his precepts. Indeed, Freud on several occasions made such comparisons between himself and Moses, though not in the Moses book.

Moses and Monotheism is indeed, at numerous points, as autobiographical as Freud's Leonardo book. But an emphasis on this approach may lead us to ignore two

important contributions the book made to Freud's continuing development of psychohistory: his discussion of Moses' ambition, and his analysis of charismatic leadership.

Several times in his writing (e.g., in "Creative Writers and Day-dreaming," 1908), Freud identified two major categories of human motivation: sex and ambition. (His apocryphal formulation of "love and work" as goals for psychological health is a similar but not identical pronouncement; see Elms, 2001.) Sexual issues were foremost in Freud's analysis of Leonardo; matters of ambition are mainly at issue in his discussion of Moses' character. Freud's main line of argument was fairly straightforward: First, Moses was by birth an Egyptian, not a Jew (an idea that had occurred to several other commentators as well, and mentioned by Freud as early as 1908 [Nunberg and Federn, 1967, p. 69]). Second, Moses was a member of the royal household of the Pharaoh Akhenaten, rather than of a somewhat later pharaoh (as Egyptologists have usually assumed). Third, Akhenaten was a harsh but innovative ruler, promulgating the first genuinely monotheistic religion in the history of the world. From these basic assumptions, Freud moved to this characterization of Moses:

He was undoubtedly aware of his great capacities, ambitious and energetic; he may even have played with the notion of one day becoming the leader of his people, of becoming the kingdom's ruler. Being close to the Pharaoh, he was a convinced adherent of the new religion, whose basic thoughts he had made his own. When the king died and the reaction [against monotheism] set in, he saw all his hopes and prospects destroyed; if he was not prepared to abjure all the convictions that were so dear to him, Egypt had nothing more to offer him — he had lost his country. In this predicament he found an unusual solution. . . . founding a new kingdom [and] finding a new people to whom he would present for their worship the religion which Egypt had disdained [Freud, 1939, p. 28].

As Freud saw him, then, Moses possessed not only the individual personality characteristic of strong ambition but also an innovative belief system that he was eager to share. He needed only a receptive audience — and that's where the Hebrews resident in Egypt entered the picture. They were, Freud argued, badly in need of a new belief system and a leader who would improve their lives:

There is no doubt that it was a mighty prototype of a father which, in the person of Moses, stooped to the poor Jewish bondsmen to assure them that they were his dear children. And no less overwhelming must have been the effect upon them of the idea of an only, eternal, almighty God, to whom they were not too mean for him to make a covenant with them and who promised to care for them if they remained loyal to his worship [p. 110].

Thus Moses was able to satisfy his psychological needs and the Hebrews to satisfy theirs simultaneously. Moses the royal Egyptian chose the lowly Hebrew exiles “to be his new people — a historic decision. He came to an agreement with them, put himself at their head and carried the Exodus through ‘by strength of hand’” (pp. 28-29).

Freud made many unsupported and unsupportable assumptions here, as he acknowledged by initially titling his work The Man Moses: A Historical Novel. Once again, however, it is productive for us to put aside the specifics of the case he chose to explore, and to consider the overall strategy he used. Here Freud’s concern was not so much with the individual “great man” but rather with a leader in interaction and interdependence with a distinctive group of followers. The picture Freud presented, of a highly talented individual who possesses a new or different vision of important human issues and the ability to translate them into action, plus a body of potential followers whose current state is so dismal that they yearn for just such a leader and just such a vision, was his model of charismatic leadership and followership. This model or similar ones are now widely used by political scientists, historians, and psychohistorians. Erik Erikson, as the most prominent example of the latter, followed the model implicitly in studying Martin Luther, Mohandas Gandhi, and to some extent Jesus.

Saul Friedländer has stated the model more explicitly than Erikson and more abstractly than Freud: A charismatic movement develops when a potential leader is able to offer a new vision because “the particular circumstances of his individual development were such that they interfered with the process of assimilating the values of the immediate limited group,” and when “the immediate group is undergoing such rapid transformations that a coherent assimilation of old and new values becomes impossible; finally, if social, political or cultural circumstances violently impose the absolute priority of general values, as totalizing as possible” (1978, p. 72). Even in this abstract form, the model advanced by Freud in Moses and Monotheism is recognizable, with Moses the Egyptian as the charismatic leader and his Hebrew followers as “the immediate limited group” to whom he brings a new system of values. This model can be applied to Freud and his disciples as well; in that sense the Moses book can continue to be regarded as in large part autobiographical. But the model also gives us a way to look at many other charismatic leaders, and to move beyond individual “great men” (or great women) to the psychological analysis of charismatically energized groups, both large and small.

Sigmund Freud always regarded his own psychohistories with serious reservations, and he repeatedly apologized for their flaws. He felt that what he was doing was a distinct improvement over old-style pathography, but he knew that the data he used were inadequate and that his conclusions were debatable. The specifics of his major studies in the field now often read as rather dated in their assumptions, or as outdated by later scholarly research. The personal identifications and countertransferences embodied in his evaluations of his subjects appear obvious in retrospect. But his contributions to the development of psychohistory cannot be dismissed. Every psychohistorian can learn

valuable lessons, including and going beyond those discussed here, by reading and re-reading Freud's pioneering work in the field.

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