

The Influence of Nietzsche on Freud's Ideas

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Background. The striking analogies between the ideas of Freud and Friedrich Nietzsche, whose works were published from one to three decades before those of Freud, have been commented upon, but no previous systematic correlation of the ideas of Nietzsche and Freud has been made.

Method. The major works of Nietzsche were read, and each possible analogy to an idea later broached by Freud was correlated by a systematic review of his works. Any references to Nietzsche in Freud's writings and reported conversation were culled.

Results. Concepts of Nietzsche which are similar to those of Freud include (a) the concept of the unconscious mind; (b) the idea that repression pushes unacceptable feelings and thoughts into the unconscious and thus makes the individual emotionally more comfortable and effective; (c) the conception that repressed emotions and instinctual drives later are expressed in disguised ways (for example, hostile feelings and ideas may be expressed as altruistic sentiments and acts); (d) the concept of dreams as complex, symbolic "illusions of illusions" and dreaming itself as a cathartic process which has healthy properties; and (e) the suggestion that the projection of hostile, unconscious feelings onto others, who are then perceived as persecutors of the individual, is the basis of paranoid thinking. Some of Freud's basic terms are identical to those used by Nietzsche.

Conclusion. Freud repeatedly stated that he had never read Nietzsche. Evidence contradicting this are his references to Nietzsche and his quotations and paraphrases of him, in casual conversation and his now published personal correspondence, as well as in his early and later writings.

During the last quarter of the 19th century and the first two decades of this one, Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900), the German philologist, critic, and philosopher, was the most discussed writer in Europe. His impact on many intellectual circles was great. In regard to psychiatry and psychology, Henri F. Ellenberger (1958), the existential psychotherapist, has written (p. 20): "At almost any point at which one opens Nietzsche, one finds psychological insights which are not only penetrating and astute in themselves but amazingly parallel to the psychological mechanisms which Freud was to formulate a decade or more later."

This becomes clear as a few extracts from Nietzsche are reviewed.

In 1887, in *The Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche (1956a) wrote – and if the word 'repression' is substituted for the word 'oblivion' here this passage could have been written by Sigmund Freud:

"Oblivion is an active screening process, responsible for the fact that what we experience and digest psychologically does not . . . emerge into consciousness any more than what we digest physically does. The role of this active oblivion is . . . to shut the doors and

windows of consciousness. . . . This maintains order in the household of the psyche. There can be no happiness, no serenity, without oblivion. A man in whom this screen is damaged or inoperative is [sick] . . . There is an opposite power, that of remembering, by which aid, in many cases, oblivion may be suspended." (p. 189).

Continuing, Nietzsche states (p. 191): "The autonomous man has a vigorous consciousness [because] his awareness has penetrated deeply and has become dominant. . . . This is a psychological axiom."

As he proceeds in this book, Nietzsche writes, and, if the term 'severe superego' is substituted for the term 'bad conscience' this could have been penned by Freud:

"I take bad conscience to be a deep-seated malady to which man has succumbed under the pressure of the most profound transformation he ever underwent – the one that made him once and for all a sociable and pacific creature. . . . In its earliest phase bad conscience is nothing more than the instinct of uninhibited action forced to become latent, driven underground, and compelled to vent its energy upon itself." (p. 200)

Nietzsche proceeds (pp. 217–219) to outline what happens to these strong emotional and instinctual

forces that are 'driven underground' in the mind by the actions of oblivion and bad conscience in words very similar to those Freud was to use 10–15 years later. "The pleasure in cruelty has had to undergo a certain sublimation and sublimization, and to find expression in psychological ways. . . [Thus], the resultant feeling of guilt and personal obligation had its inception in the oldest and most primitive relationship between human beings." Nietzsche, in continuing here, speaks of "the guidance of their unconscious drives."

In tracing what further happens to these repressed emotional forces, he states: "As the outward discharge of his feelings was curtailed . . . these wild, extravagant instincts [such as cruelty and hostility] turned in upon man. . . . They had to depend on new, covert satisfactions. . . This is what I call man's interiorization." As Freud was later to do, Nietzsche traced altruism, along with other things, to repressed, unconscious forces (p. 221). "Bad conscience, the desire for self-mortification, is the wellspring of all altruistic values."

The antecedents of Freud's mechanism of projection, with consequent paranoid feelings, are revealed as Nietzsche continues (pp. 263–264).

"Is it not true that every sufferer instinctively seeks . . . 'a guilty agent' on whom he can vent his feelings directly or in effigy, under some pretext or other? This release of aggression is the most effective palliative for such an affliction. *Somebody* must be responsible for my suffering. This sort of reasoning is universal among [these] sick people."

Again anticipating Freud, Nietzsche traces man's aesthetic capacities to sublimated unconscious sexual drives (p. 247). "It may well be that the emergence of the esthetic condition does not suspend sensuality . . . but merely curbs it in such a way that it is no longer experienced as a sexual drive."

In various places in his books, Nietzsche employs the German pronoun *es* (usually translated as 'it' in English) to designate the depository in the mind of unconscious emotional and instinctual forces. He uses the pronoun *ich* ('I', 'myself'), often translated in English as 'ego', to designate that part of the conscious mind which deals with hour-to-hour activities and problems.

Moreover, he talks of anxiety (*Angst*) (pp. 265–266) as follows: "Psychological pain, anxiety, is a causal interpretation of a set of facts which have so far eluded exact interpretation", and he looks forward to the time when "an authentic psychologist" will, in dealing with severe anxiety, accomplish "the rehabilitation of the personality. . . . The earth has been a psychiatric asylum far too long."

In another of his pivotal works, *The Birth of Tragedy*, written in 1872 and revised in 1886, Nietzsche (1956b) divides human mental processes into two groups – the primitive, chaotic processes by which emotions and instincts operate, which he calls 'Dionysiac', and the well-organised, logical processes that day-to-day social living requires, which he terms 'Apolonian'. If Freud's later terms 'primary process thinking' and 'secondary process thinking' are substituted in Nietzsche's passages on this subject they dovetail well with Freud's psychoanalytic teachings.

Nietzsche's views on dreams are equally interesting. He describes "nature's healing powers during the interval of sleep and dream" along the same lines that Freud (1950, p. 404) was to follow 14 years later in his book *The Interpretation of Dreams*. Nietzsche (1956b) recognises the obscure symbolism in dreams which hide their true meaning, speaking of them as "illusions of illusions". He stresses the healthiness of interpreting, and thus understanding, the meaning of dreams, and of the emotional release thereby gained. He calls this general process 'catharsis', as Freud was later to do, and is "unsure whether to place it among medical or moral phenomena." In many other passages (pp. 21, 33, 133), Nietzsche wrote about mental functions in ways Freud was to duplicate later.

To what extent did Freud acknowledge a debt to Nietzsche?

In 1908, at a meeting of the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society, Freud (Jones, 1955, pp. 343–344) stated that he had never read Nietzsche, and he repeated this statement over the years on several other public occasions, including other meetings of the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society. However, Ernest Jones, a close friend and dedicated follower of Freud, records (1953, p. 365) that Freud told him in conversation about that time that Nietzsche was one of the "authentically great men of all time" and that "Nietzsche developed a more penetrating knowledge of himself than any other man who ever lived."

About a decade earlier, in one of his rare references to Nietzsche in his writings, Freud (1950) in his *The Interpretation of Dreams* had briefly noted (p. 404), "We begin to suspect that Friedrich Nietzsche was right when he said that in a dream 'there persists a primordial part of humanity which we can no longer reach by a direct path'". The internal quotation marks here are Freud's. In his shorter book, *On Dreams*, published in 1901, Freud (1952, p. 53), wrote: "What I have called dream replacement might equally be described, in Nietzsche's phrase, as a transmutation of psychological values." In 1920, in his book *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud (1926, p. 52) quoted Nietzsche's phrase "the eternal occurrence of the

same". Much later in his life, in 1932, in his *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, Freud (1933, p. 102) wrote, "Borrowing a term used by Nietzsche, we shall call it [the unconscious depository of instincts and emotions] the 'id'."

The publication of much of Freud's personal correspondence long after his death has made available material relevant to this subject. In an 1897 letter to a close friend, Freud (Jones, 1953, p. 365) aptly paraphrased a passage from Nietzsche, writing: "In the collapse of all values only the psychological theory remained unimpaired. The theory of dreams stands as sure as ever." In 1916, Freud (Jones, 1955, pp. 343–344) wrote to a colleague that Nietzsche's (1950) book *Thus Spake Zarathustra* had given "broad suggestions about the mental mechanism involved in the production of criminals from a sense of guilt." In 1917, again in a private letter, Freud (Jones, 1957, pp. 189–190) cited and quoted Nietzsche: "I have occasionally spells of disliking life and relief at the thought of there being an end to this hard existence. At such moments thoughts weigh on me." In a lengthy letter to the writer Arnold Zweig in 1934, Freud (Jones, 1957, pp. 283–284) revealed an extensive knowledge of Nietzsche's life and speculated on the causes of his prolonged terminal illness and death.

Our search of the literature (aided by the comments of one of the editorial consultants who reviewed this paper) has revealed only two psychiatric writers who have dealt with this subject in more than a passing manner. Ernest Gellner (1985) in his book *The Psychoanalytic Movement* makes some of our points; we have addressed the subject more systematically

and completely. Ellenberger (1958) does not cite the specific places in Nietzsche's and Freud's writings on which his previously quoted statement is based, but concludes (p. 33): "In fact the analogies are so striking that I can hardly believe that Freud never read him [Nietzsche], as he contended. Either he must have forgot that he read him, or perhaps he must have read him in indirect form. . . . It is almost impossible that Freud could not have absorbed his thought in one way or another."

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(First received 10 January 1994, final revision 15 March 1994, accepted 26 April 1994)