



69 SIGMUND FREUD

1856 - 1939

Sigmund Freud, the originator of psychoanalysis, was born in 1856, in the town of Freiberg, which is now in Czechoslovakia but was then part of the Austrian empire. When he was four years old, his family moved to Vienna, where he lived almost his entire life. Freud was an outstanding student in school, and he received his medical degree from the University of Vienna in 1881. During the next ten years, he did research in physiology, joined the staff of a psychiatric clinic, engaged in private practice in neurology, worked in Paris with the eminent French neurologist, Jean Charcot, and also worked with the Viennese physician, Josef Breuer.

Freud's ideas on psychology developed gradually. It was not until 1895 that his first book, *Studies in Hysteria*, appeared, with Breuer as co-author. His next book, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, appeared in 1900, and was one of his most original and most significant works. Although the book sold very slowly at first, it greatly enhanced his reputation. Other important works followed, and by 1908, when he gave a series of lectures in the United States, Freud was already famous. In 1902, he had organized a psychology discussion group in Vienna. One of the earliest members was Alfred Adler, and a few years later, Carl Jung joined. Both men were to become world-famous psychologists in their own right.

Freud was married and had six children. In his later life, he developed cancer of the jaw, and from 1923 on, he underwent more than thirty operations in an attempt to correct the condition. Nevertheless, he continued working, and some important works were produced during these later years. In 1938, the Nazis entered Austria, and the 82-year-old Freud, who was Jewish, was forced to flee to London, where he died the following year.

Freud's contributions to psychological theory were so extensive that it is difficult to summarize them briefly. He stressed the enormous importance of unconscious mental processes in human behavior. He showed how such processes affect the content of dreams, and cause commonplace mishaps such as slips of the tongue and forgetting names, as well as self-inflicted accidents and even diseases.

Freud developed the technique of psychoanalysis as a method of treating mental illness. He formulated a theory of the structure of the human personality. He also developed or popularized psychological theories concerning anxiety, defense mechanisms, the castration complex, repression, and sublimation, to name just a few. His writings greatly stimulated interest in psychological theory. Many of his ideas were, and are, highly controversial, and have provoked heated discussion ever since he proposed them.

Freud is perhaps best known for proposing the idea that

repressed sexual feelings often play a causative role in mental illness or neurosis. (Actually, Freud did *not* originate this idea, although his writings did much to give it scientific currency.) He also pointed out that sexual feelings and desires begin in early childhood, rather than in adolescence.

Because many of Freud's ideas are still so controversial, it is very difficult to assess his place in history. He was a pioneer and a trailblazer, with a remarkable talent for coming up with new ideas. However, Freud's theories (unlike those of Darwin or Pasteur) have never won the general endorsement of the scientific community, and it is hard to tell what fraction of his ideas will ultimately be considered correct.

Despite the continuing controversy over his ideas, there seems little doubt that Freud is a towering figure in the history of human thought. His ideas on psychology have completely revolutionized our conception of the human mind, and many of the ideas and terms which he introduced have become common usage—e.g., the id, the ego, the superego, the Oedipus complex, and the death wish.

It is true that psychoanalysis is an extremely expensive mode of treatment, and that it quite often fails. But it is also true that the technique has a great many successes to its credit. Future psychologists may well conclude that repressed sexual feelings play a lesser role in human behavior than many Freudians have claimed. However, such feelings surely play a greater role than most psychologists before Freud had believed. Similarly, the majority of psychologists are now convinced that unconscious mental processes play a decisive role in human behavior—one that was greatly underestimated before Freud.

Freud was certainly not the first psychologist, and in the long run probably will not be considered the one whose ideas were most nearly correct. Still, he was clearly the most influential and important figure in the development of modern psychological theory, and in view of the enormous importance of his field, he certainly deserves a place on this list.