# Book Review

*Unauthorized Freud: Doubters Confront a Legend*, ed. By Frederick C. Crews. New York: Viking Penguin Publishers, 1998, 301 pages.

Over the last twenty years what has come to be called “the Freud Wars” has raged with considerable ferocity. Critics such as Adolf Grunbaum, Hans Eysenck, Edward Erwin, Frank Cioffi, Ernest Gellner, Jeffrey Masson, Frederick Crews and numerous others have nearly toppled the edifice of Freudian Psychoanalytic Theory. I think it’s fair to say that what was widely considered even fifty years ago as revolutionary science on a par with Darwinian and Copernican science is now widely suspected of being, well, pseudoscience. For those whose academic focus may have been elsewhere, Frederic Crews has edited a very accessible collection of essays reflecting the major angles of criticism of classical Freudian theory.

Crews, in his preface, indicates clearly that he regards Freudian Theory as hopelessly flawed (page x):

The chapters and editorial comments below not only take the full measure of Freud’s well-documented conceptual errors, relentless apriorism, disregard for counterexamples, bullying investigative manner, shortcuts of reasoning, rhetorical dodges, and all-around chronic untruthfulness; they also show that contemporary analysts possess no reliable means, internal to ‘clinical evidence,’ of locating and correcting their own misconceptions.

He is motivated in his critical efforts in great part because of the deleterious effects of the “suppressed memory recovery movement,” a topic upon which he has written another book (*The Memory Wars*).

In the introduction, Crews draws the reader’s attention to where Freud’s originality laid, the better to assess it. Plenty of thinkers explored “the unconscious” well before Freud, most notably Nietzsche. And the existence of unconscious mental functioning is undisputed and demonstrable. No, the specific and unique contribution of Freud is: (a) his postulation of a psychodynamic unconscious that plans, lusts, atones, remembers, represses, quarrels with itself, symbolizes, and so on; (b) his view that this psychodynamic unconscious causes all manner of ailments—“neurotic” ones, such as paralysis, rashes and sores, phobias and compulsions, and even psychotic ones such as schizophrenia, paranoia, and bipolar disorder (manic-depression); and (c) his view that the psychodynamic cause for these ailments can be understood and the ailments cured by examining slips of tongue, free association, and dreams. This core theory, psychoanalytic theory, and its application to anthropology and history, is what Freud developed, and is that for which he ought to be assessed. Rightly, Crews points out that we should assess this theory on the basis of empirical evidence, which is hardly overwhelming in the corpus of Freud’s own writings. It won’t do to merely assert, as some philosophers have done, that Freudian theory is merely a plausible way of extending our common sense way of inferring motives from observing behavior, because most of the characteristic claims of Freudian Theory are at variance with common-sense intuitions. And indeed, there is something problematic about the notion of using the testimony of patients under analysis as evidence for the truth of the theory, since the theory allows the analyst to interpret patients’ reports as literal or as requiring interpretation, depending upon the whims of the analyst.

Crews finishes the extended introduction by considering several strategies Freudians have employed to rebut criticism of the lack of observational support or even the possibility of clear observational support for their theory. First, some rehash relativistic claims (usually citing Kuhn) that all scientific observation is theory-laden. But the fact that observation is theory-laden does not mean that it is laden with precisely the specific theory being tested, rendering all experiment an exercise in begging the question. Second, some argue that psychoanalysis is not meant as science, but rather as a hermeneutic activity, so should be judged on intuitive and empathic, as opposed to empirical, grounds. But Freud certainly viewed his theory as science. And it is hard to see how to take his claims about the etiology of various phenomena, psychosexual development, mental structure, the formations of dreams and so on as interpretive principles, when they seem so clearly intended to be causal mental laws. Third, some argue that while Freud’s specific psychoanalytic theory is flawed, psychoanalytic theory subsequently developed into an empirically adequate scientific theory. To this tack, Crews has two replies. First, which of the myriad of post-Freudian theories has made this great scientific progress? Second, all these novel psychoanalytic theories “appeal to the same knowledge source—namely, the clinical interaction between therapist and patient, with particular stress on the two features that remain virtually universal, the analysis of free associations and the analysis of the transference.” (Page xxx.)

The articles in the anthology are grouped into four sections, each preceded by a detailed overview by Crews. In the overview to the first section, Crews lays out in summary form the legend of how Freud originated his theory, from his early association with Charcot in 1885 to his self-analysis and final break with Fliess just prior to 1900. The selections in the section each are intended to tell the real story of the origins of psychoanalysis.

The first selection, by Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen, examines the case of Anna O., where the idea was born in the minds of Breuer and Freud that that there is a disease, “hysteria,” that it is caused by traumatic memories, and that it can cured by taking the memory away under hypnosis. Freud later changed key elements of the theory, taking the memory causing hysteria first to be an actual childhood sexual assault, then to be a childhood sexual fantasy, then finally to be an oedipal fantasy, and moving from hypnosis to free association, to the analysis of resistances and transference. But despite the claim that the talking cure worked miraculous wonders for Anna O., it appears clear that the treatment Anna O. received did nothing to alleviate, much less cure, her symptoms.

The second selection, by Peter J. Swales, examines the case of “Frau Cacilie M.,” whom Swales was able to identify as Anna von Lieben. As in the case of “Anna O.,” we see a case of a patient presenting an ever-changing array of symptoms, who is treated by drugs and hypnotism in the hope of exposing the repressed, and thus eliminating the symptoms. But she underwent treatment by Freud and other physicians for over thirty years, and despite the “cathartic” methods, she never got better. Freud neglected to mention in his discussion of his patient that she had been addicted to morphine for years, and that Freud, after applying his cathartic methods, would also give her an injection of morphine, after which her symptoms would vanish, but only for a day, whereupon Freud would be called back!

The third selection, Frank Cioffi’s seminal BBC radio talk from 1973, explores the anti-empirical nature of Freud’s hypothesis of repressed Oedipal fantasy (the theory he moved to when he abandoned his seduction theory). Additionally, the Cioffi selection and the fourth selection (by Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen) argue that Freud suspected but refused to confront the likelihood that the real problem with the seduction theory was that the “memories” of the patients were in fact induced by the therapist (Freud) himself. The fifth selection, by Frank Sulloway, argues that Freud’s theories were much more tied to the thinking of Wilhelm Fleiss than Freudians care to acknowledge.

The second section of readings concerns the epistemic basis for Freudian theory—specifically, the ability of techniques such as free association, dream interpretation and the analysis of slips of tongue to empirically ground claims about mental causation.

The first selection, by Adolf Grunbaum, argues strongly that the data obtained from free association are hopelessly unreliable because of the selection biases of the analyst—the patient is prompted to continue until producing precisely the responses needed to validate the analyst’s diagnosis—and the suggestiveness of the patient’s reports.

The second selection, by Rosemarie Sand, casts doubt upon Freud’s theory of dream interpretation, arguing that the common-sense view of dreams (which takes the “manifest” dream to be a reflection of waking concerns) is more in line with modern scientific work on dreaming than Freud’s theory (which postulates a “latent” dream in which unacceptable wishes are repressed and expressed symbolically as the manifest dream).

The third selection, by Sebastiano Timpanaro, casts doubt upon Freud’s analysis of slips (parapraxes), arguing that from the point of view of a linguist, the sort of associations (phonetic and semantic similarities of words) used by Freud can connect any slip to any cause the analyst chooses.

The fourth selection, by Barbara Von Eckhardt, argues that Freud’s methodology was flawed in that it relies on mere explanatory power as a mark for truth, and the data adduced for its support are theory-laden in a pernicious way. A good theory not only explains data, it is superior to other theories explaining the same data. And while all data are theory-laden, a good test of a theory does not involve producing data that presuppose the theory being tested.

The fifth selection, by Frank Cioffi, argues that persistent flight from criticism and counterevidence is so characteristic of Freudian psychoanalysis as to make it a pseudoscience.

In the sixth selection, by Malcolm McMillan, the deficiencies in Freud’s account of female sexuality are explored in detail.

The third section of readings focuses on the inadequacies of the case studies cited by Freud as evidence for his views. Crews, in his introduction to the section, contends that even waiving problems with placebo effects and long-term relapses, Freud could not document even one unambiguously effective treatment of a client.

The first selection, by Allen Esterson, examines the case of Dora, and argues persuasively that Freud’s preconceptions led to a radical misdiagnosis and bullying treatment of a hapless young woman.

The second selection, by Joseph Wolpe and Stanley Rachman, examines the case of “Little Hans,” and argues that the child never accepted the Freudian interpretation of his fear of horses, but rather had words put in his mouth by his interrogators (mainly his own father, a devotee of Freud), and in any case there was no relation between the abatement of his symptoms and the interpretations he was given. This case is especially chilling, in that we get a glimpse of the current “recovered memory” therapists’ use of questionable tactics to interrogate children.

The third selection, by Frank Sulloway, makes the case that Freud systematically distorted his reports of his case studies to give the appearance of medical/scientific success, in order to build his personal legend.

The fourth selection, by Stanley Fish, attempts to analyze Freud’s rhetoric to exhibit its power to charm the reader into overlooking the weakness of the empirical evidence being presented.

The fifth selection, by David Stannard, looks at the psychoanalysis Freud gave of Leonardo da Vinci, the first in a series of works in which Freud sought to analyze people whom he never met, and argues that Freud’s historical understanding was limited at best, and his conclusions about Leonardo are totally unsupported.

In the fourth and final section, Crews takes up the issue of why Freudian theory was so successful, despite its faulty methodology and lack of empirical or medical success. It certainly satisfied the desire, among people who are inclined to spurn religion-based traditionalism, to replace priests and ethicists by mind-doctors. And to Freudian initiates it delivered no little power, money, and prestige. But the selections point to other factors as well.

The first selection, by Ernest Gellner, sets forth the view that psychoanalysis is the transmission of a faith, in which the patient first gives up independent judgment while being swamped with a lot of attention, and then is rehabilitated in terms of the Freudian belief system.

The second selection, by John Farrell, argues that Freud’s view of himself and his intellectual creation had a paranoid slant, which led him and his followers to promulgate their system more in the manner of a cult than a science.

The third selection, by Francois Roustang, explores the unscientific and vicious squabbles among the disciples of the aging Freud to become sole heir to his legacy, reinforcing the image of a cult.

The fourth selection of the section (and the final one of the book), by Lavinia Edmunds, explores the case of Horace Frink, an emotionally unstable disciple picked and cynically used by Freud as a tool to spread psychoanalysis to America.

This anthology is a good place to start to survey the various lines of criticism of Freudianism that have grown over the last quarter century. The survey does leave out some topics one would like to see addressed. In particular, one very important reason for the rapid demise of psychoanalytic theory has been the rise of biological understanding of behavior. It is hard to maintain the Freudian view of the cause of psychoses such as bipolar disorder and schizophrenia, given the efficacy of drugs such as lithium and the studies of twins reared apart, showing a high degree of inheritability of these ailments. Even so-called neuroses such as depression and obsessive-compulsive disorder are readily yielding to drug therapies. But despite that limitation, Crews book is a valuable one.

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