

The Partly Hidden Self: Sigmund Freud, *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis**

4

As we have seen, Locke explains the self in terms of the continuities of memory and consciousness; Butler takes the sense of self as a primitive 'given'; and Hume reduces the idea of self to a mere constant succession of impressions. But all these philosophers appear to take it for granted that each of us does possess a transparent awareness of the mental contents that constitute our personal lives. At the start of the twentieth century, however, the Austrian physician and founder of psychoanalysis Sigmund Freud propounded a revolutionary account of the mind which challenged the long-standing identification of the self with the conscious thinking subject (a conception with its roots in the philosophy of Descartes: see Part III, extract 4). Freud argued that a large part of what makes up my mind is often hidden from me as a conscious subject. The notion of a 'divided self' was nothing very new; Plato, for example, had referred to 'conflicts' in the soul produced by different faculties (reason, spirit and desire);¹ but for Plato these conflicts were all, as it were, 'out in the open'. What Freud advances is the striking proposition that the desires, attitudes and actions that make up our conscious selves are strongly influenced by *unconscious* mental processes –

wishes, beliefs, fears and anxieties of which we are typically unaware. Anyone who accepts Locke's account of the self as constituted by *consciousness*, by immediate or transparently remembered impressions, will find Freud's views bordering on the incomprehensible (and his ideas did, and still do, arouse strong opposition for violating established definitions of the mind). But Freud's claim that there are hidden contents which are none the less genuinely attributable to the subject's mind is made plausible by his account of how the subject can come to acknowledge those contents via the therapeutic process of guided self-discovery. In the course of psychoanalysis, those parts of the self which were before concealed from the thinking 'ego' now make their influence felt as beliefs, wishes, fears or anxieties that we recognize were, in a certain sense, there 'all along'. Although many of the details of Freud's theories have given rise to intense critical discussion, his ideas have irreversibly changed our ways of thinking about the self and the mind, and the full implications of those changes are still in process of being assimilated. The following extract is translated from lectures Freud originally delivered in Vienna in 1915–17.

A lady of nearly thirty years of age suffered from very severe obsessional symptoms. In the course of a day she would run out of her room into the adjoining one, there take up a certain position at the table in the centre of the room, ring for her maid, give her a trivial order or send her away, and then run back . . . Every time I asked the patient 'What is the meaning of it?' or 'Why do you do it?' she had answered 'I don't know'. But one day, after I had succeeded in overcoming a great hesitation on her part, she suddenly did know, for she related the history of the obsessive act. More than ten years previously she had married a man very much older than herself, who had proved impotent on the wedding night. Innumerable times on that night he had run out of his room into hers in order to make the attempt, but had failed every time. In the morning he had said angrily,



* Sigmund Freud, *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis* [*Vorlesungen zur Einführung in die Psychoanalyse*, 1916–17], trans. J. Riviere (London: Allen & Unwin, 1922), extracts from chs 17 and 18.

¹ See Plato, *Republic*, 441–5.