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Mechanisms and fundamental principles in Freudian explanations

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to analyze the structure of explanation in Freudian psychoanalysis. Psychoanalysis contains some fundamental psychoanalytic and philosophical principles – for example, determinism, the laws governing psychic energy, and the differentiation of the mind into id, ego, and super-ego – that are involved in explanations of psychoanalytic phenomena. However, psychoanalysis also explains phenomena by demonstrating how they are generated by underlying psychodynamic mechanisms. For example, repression is an explanatory model that describes the psychodynamic mechanism whereby unpleasant memories and thoughts are blocked from entering consciousness. It is not clear what is the relation between the fundamental principles and the mechanistic models. It is argued that in Freudian psychoanalysis the fundamental principles are used as tools and guidelines to construct explanatory mechanistic models of psychoanalytic phenomena. This account of Freudian psychoanalysis' explanatory structure is based on theories of scientific models and explanation that are currently being discussed in philosophy of science.

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A dominant approach in Western philosophy and science since antiquity is the attempt to explain phenomena by referring to a limited number of fundamental principles. For example, Newton was able to explain diverse phenomena, such as planetary orbits and the tides, by referring only to four fundamental laws: Newton's three laws and the law of gravitation. Freudian psychoanalysis belongs in part to this tradition, because Freud attempted to offer detailed explanations of phenomena, such as dreams, religion, art, morality, neurotic symptoms, humour, slips of the tongue, child development, and the evolution of civilization by referring to a limited number of fundamental principles. This included, for example, the difference between primary and secondary processes (that is, the distinction between unconscious processes based on associations vs. the logic characterizing conscious verbal thought), the constancy principle (that is, the homeostatic principle that the nervous system attempts to reduce excitation), and the familiar differentiation of the mind into id, ego and super-ego. It has even been argued by some contemporary neuroscientists that one of the most valuable aspects of psychoanalysis is its coherent and unified view of the human mind, as expressed by the fundamental principles (Kandel, 1999; Shevrin, 2000). However, Freud offered psychodynamic explanations by showing how symptoms, etc.,

are generated by interacting mental states and energies in the psychic structure. This exemplifies a mechanistic explanation in which a phenomenon is decomposed into its causally interacting parts and thereby enables us to see how the phenomenon is generated. A fully developed notion of a mechanism-based approach to scientific explanation first arose in the 17th century and has proven to be one of the most successful strategies in science. René Descartes (1596–1650) was an important figure in outlining the mechanistic strategy with a fair degree of precision (Des Chene, 2000). However, contrary to Freud, Descartes claimed that the operations of the soul (*res extensa*), which he believed was an entity distinct from the body, could not, unlike the functions of the body, be explained mechanistically.

The account of psychoanalytic explanation expressed in this paper is rather schematic and may, of course, not do full justice to the complexity and developments of Freud's psychoanalytic writings. However, the main purpose of this paper is to extract the primary structure of psychoanalytic explanation by using some theoretical perspectives from the contemporary philosophy of science related to mechanism-based explanations and the construction of scientific models.

Of note, this paper is exclusively about the structure of *Freudian* explanations, which means that other

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psychoanalytic and psychodynamic theories will not be considered. Thus, in this context, the expressions ‘Freud’s psychoanalysis,’ ‘psychoanalysis,’ and ‘Freudian psychoanalysis’ mean the same.

It is not immediately clear how Freud’s references to both fundamental principles and mechanistic explanations connect to one another. The following makes the case that explanatory models are built using the principles as tools and guidelines.

Three theoretical levels

In addition to the psychoanalytic principles mentioned previously, Freud also referred to principles of a more philosophical and metaphysical character. These principles constitute the philosophical framework of psychoanalysis. I will argue, and elaborate further, that the structure of psychoanalytic explanation comprises at least three (1–3) related levels:

- (1) Philosophical framework
- (2) Psychoanalytic principles
- (3) Models of explanatory mechanisms

(*) The phenomena we want to explain

In order to clearly delineate the explanatory structure of Freudian psychoanalysis, it is important to show how the levels are related. The primary focus is on the relationship between levels 2 and 3. In this context, the concept ‘model’ is important and is further elaborated. Of course, psychoanalysis aims to explain specific phenomena, such as a patient’s dreams or idiosyncratic symptoms, which is indicated by (*) at the bottom of the list above.

If psychoanalytic explanations are mechanism-based, then it is important to clarify the function of the fundamental principles in Freudian theory; that is, what is their function in psychoanalytic explanations? It is argued that the principles (1–2) are essential for psychoanalytic explanation because Freud used them as tools and guidelines in the construction of models of explanatory mechanisms (3) that explain different kinds of phenomena (*). Thus, according to this account of psychoanalytical explanation, principles are guidelines or rules devised by humans to be used in building models to represent and explain certain aspects of the mind, and these rules instruct us to locate the relevant explanatory properties (Giere, 1999, pp. 94–95).

Philosophical framework

The philosophical framework comprises the most abstract and fundamental principles, that is the general

metaphysical principles that were tacitly assumed in Freudian theory and other sciences in Freud’s time. Freud contended that psychoanalysis does not constitute a distinct worldview, but, rather, shared the same worldview as other sciences (Freud, 1933, pp. 158–182). We can detect at least five metaphysical principles that were elements in psychoanalysis and the scientific worldview during Freud’s time.

Determinism

Freud presupposed determinism, which is the principle that all events, including human behavior and psychic processes, are necessitated by antecedent events and conditions. Freud contended that psychoanalysis is based on ‘the thoroughgoing meaningfulness and determinism of even the apparently most obscure and arbitrary mental phenomena’ (Cited in Jones, 1953. Cf. also, p. 366; Freud, 1910, p. 38).

Naturalism

Gods and supernatural entities were not included in Freud’s ontology (Freud, 1920, 1927). Freud appeared to accept the kind of naturalism expressed by the philosopher Wilfrid Sellars (1997, p. 83): ‘In the dimension of describing and explaining the world, science is the measure of all things, of what is that it is, and of what is not that it is not.’ Or, in Freud’s own words:

It is not permissible to declare that science is one field of human mental activity and that religion and philosophy are others, at least equal in value, and that science has no business to interfere with the other two A view of this kind is regarded as particularly superior, tolerant, broad-minded and free from liberal prejudices. Unfortunately it is not tenable Research regards every sphere of human activity as belonging to it and that it must be relentlessly critical if any other power tries to take over any part of it. (Freud, 1933, p. 160)

The mind-body problem

The mind-body problem concerns the relationship between the mind (conscious and unconscious states of mind) and brain-states. According to Freud, there is a very close link between mind and body, as shown, for example, in his account of hysteria (conversion disorder), where inner conflict is expressed through the body. The memory of a trauma that the patient fails to confront because it will cause them too much mental anguish can be ‘converted’ into physical symptoms such as paralysis, blindness, or coughing. Surprisingly, Freud did not have much to say about the mind-body problem, and it is unclear whether he reached a conclusion regarding this problem. According to Livingstone Smith (1999), after 1895, he seemed to

have settled on an identity theory (the mind is identical to the brain), entailing that no mind could exist apart from a brain.

Mental states' causal relevance

Freud believed that mental states, such as conscious and unconscious desires, motives, and beliefs, are causes of behavior. This is consistent with Freud's view on the mind-body problem; mental states have causal relevance by being identical to brain states. According to the principle of determinism, mental states are caused by previous events but also have causal effects. The principle of mental states' causal relevance is the common-sense view of mental states and was first elaborated and defended by Aristotle. Although it was questioned by philosophers such as Wittgenstein (1953) and Melden (1961), most contemporary philosophers were convinced by Davidson (1963), who re-established the Aristotelian perspective on mental causation. Freud never seemed to question the Aristotelian or common-sense theory of the causal relevance of mental states.

Unconscious mental states

Ellenberger (1970) and Whyte (1979) argued convincingly that the concept of unconscious psychic processes is much older than psychoanalysis. The generic concept of unconscious mental states, that mental states have the ability to influence behavior without the subject's awareness, was widely accepted in Freud's time. The principle of the existence of unconscious mental states is therefore included in the philosophical framework.¹ Freud's *dynamic* account of the unconscious, however, is a specifically psychoanalytic notion that belongs to the list of fundamental psychoanalytic principles, which is described in the next section. Instead of introducing two conceptions of the unconscious (generic and psychoanalytic), for simplicity's sake, I will classify the principle of the existence of unconscious mental states as a philosophical or metaphysical principle. Of note, the following arguments do not depend on whether this principle is classified as a philosophical or fundamental psychoanalytic principle.

The five principles constitute a central component of the philosophical framework of Freudian theory, and it will later be shown that they function as general guidelines in the construction of psychoanalytic explanations.

Psychoanalytic principles

The fundamental explanatory principles in psychoanalysis belong to metapsychology. Metapsychology seems

to describe the mental apparatus in purely subpersonal terms – referring to mental forces, the discharge of energy, and mental systems or locations (id, ego, and super-ego) – but makes scarcely any reference to human agency, subjectivity or meaning. It is not clear which principles are included, and Freud's use of the term metapsychology seems rather inconsistent (Brenner, 1980). There is, however, general agreement that metapsychology comprises the most abstract and general psychoanalytic principles. Freud (1917b, p. 222) stated that the aim of metapsychology is to 'clarify and carry deeper the theoretical assumptions on which a psycho-analytic system could be founded.' Rapaport and Gill (1959) argued convincingly that Freud's metapsychology comprises a limited number of fundamental principles, most notably the dynamic, economic, and structural principles.

Dynamic principle

Psychological phenomena are brought about by the play of forces with direction and magnitude, which work with or against one another. Intrapsychic conflicts are often unconscious and are struggles within the mind between thoughts or feelings with opposing aims. According to Freudian theory, the mind is almost always in conflict; the paradigmatic example is id impulses (unconscious wishes) in the struggle with super-ego demands (internalized moral prohibitions).

Economic/Quantitative principle

The psychoanalytic notion of 'psychic energy' is based on the familiar experience that mental states, such as emotions and wishes, can be more or less strong or intense; that is, they have a quantitative aspect that Freud associated with psychic energy. It is governed by the principle of constancy, which means that the psychic apparatus tends to keep the quantity of excitation as constant as possible. This principle of constancy is reflected in behavior that is either associated with the discharge of energy already present, or the avoidance of whatever may increase energy (Laplanche & Pontalis, 1973, pp. 341–7). The reduction (or elimination) of psychical excitation as the governing tendency of the mind remained a constant principle throughout Freud's career. In addition, many Freudian explanations assume that psychic energy can be transformed in different ways; for example, the intensity or energy can be separated from the idea with which it is associated, displaced from one idea to another, or converted into symptoms.

Structural principle

Psychoanalytic explanations refer to the mental structures involved – for example, the structural model that

depicts the mind as constituted of three agencies: id, ego, and super-ego. (These are functionally and psychologically defined and do not necessarily reflect an isomorphic structure in the brain.) Freud's original topographical model of the mind was a tripartite division between consciousness, the preconscious, and the unconscious. Freud did not completely abandon this model, instead integrating it with the structural model (Freud, 1933, p. 78).

Of note, even though the principles are fundamental, it does not follow that they are fundamental *simpliciter*; they are not unexplainable brute facts. Only the most basic physical laws are fundamental in this absolute sense because there are no other and more fundamental laws that can explain them. Freud contended that the human mind is a result of evolution, and therefore it should at least be possible in principle to explain the fundamental psychoanalytic principles in the same way we explain the development and existence of other phenotypes.

It is not obvious which principles should be classified as fundamental, and I do not pretend that the lists presented in this and the previous section are complete. Of course, a lot more can be said about each principle, but the point of listing the principles is not to discuss the principles *per se*, but to show how they function in psychoanalytic explanations. For example, Rapaport and Gill (1959, p. 155) state that the dynamic principle 'underlies the propositions concerning drives, ego interests, and conflicts,' however, they do not further elaborate regarding what it means for 'principles to underlie an explanatory proposition' or, in other words, how the fundamental principles contribute to explanations. That is the subject of the next section.

Models of explanatory mechanisms

A mechanistic explanation explains a target phenomenon (for example, a kind of behavior, symptom, or change in experience) in terms of an underlying mechanism. The mechanism consists of the organized activities of components that jointly produce the phenomenon in question. The 'mechanism' concept can be defined in many different ways, but Craver's account seems relevant in this context: 'Mechanisms are causally interacting entities organized such that they exhibit the *explanandum phenomenon*'² (Craver, 2007, p. 6). We explain the phenomenon by decomposing it into its functionally salient components and then construct a model that demonstrates how these components interact with each other to produce or exhibit the phenomenon in question (Cummins, 2000).

The phenomenon we intend to explain and the mechanism are not two distinct entities, because the mechanism *constitutes* the phenomenon in the same way that atoms constitute a table. In a mechanistic explanation, the phenomenon is decomposed into its causally interacting parts, however, the relationship between the whole and the causally interacting parts is not a causal relation, but, rather, a part-whole relation. A paradigmatic mechanistic explanation is the explanation of the functioning of a clock in terms of the springs and gears and their interactions with each other. The clock as a whole is merely the interacting parts, and we understand the working of the clock by decomposing it into its causally interacting parts. In medicine, the mechanistic explanation of a symptom is called the 'pathology.' Freud studied and conducted research in medicine and neuroscience, and since mechanistic explanations are prevalent in both disciplines, he probably took for granted that to explain is almost tantamount to providing descriptions of underlying mechanisms. Freud stated that we explain the workings of the human mind in the same way that we explain the workings of a camera, namely, to 'make the complications of mental functioning intelligible by dissecting the function and assigning its different constituents to different component parts of the apparatus' (Freud, 1900, p. 536). This is a rather succinct description of the mechanistic approach to scientific explanation which indicates that Freudian explanations were meant to be mechanistic in the sense that they decompose the phenomenon to be explained into the underlying intrapsychic processes that constitute it.

By virtue of being mechanism-based, Freudian explanations have a lot in common with explanations in biology, neuroscience, psychology, and the social sciences (Bechtel, 2007; Bechtel & Richardson, 2010; Craver, 2007; Hedström & Swedberg, 1998). These explanations demonstrate how phenomena are generated by underlying mechanisms. There is a vast body of literature on mechanistic explanations in contemporary philosophy of science, but the generic account presented above is sufficient for the purpose of this paper.

There are many Freudian mechanism-based explanations, for example, his explanation of paranoia (Freud, 1911). Freud conjectured that persecutory anxiety and paranoid delusions are a defence against repressed homosexual wishes. First, there is a transformation of homosexual love into hate. The patient considers homosexual impulses unacceptable, forcing them to be unconscious (repressed) and transformed into their opposite, namely hate. This first transformation is an example of the defence mechanism 'reaction-formation' whereby intolerable thoughts

or feelings are turned into their acceptable opposites. However, the hateful impulse is also unacceptable and is subsequently evacuated via projection onto an external persecutor; 'I do not hate him; it is he who hates me.' This mechanism-based explanation is a concatenation of two defence mechanisms: reaction formation and projection.

In Freud's writings, we find explanations that are not clearly mechanistic, namely narrative explanations. These explanations provide a narrative or story that tells us how a phenomenon came into being. For example, the underlying mechanism that explains a phobic symptom can be an internal constellation of conflicting motives. Still, childhood trauma could be an essential causal factor in the narrative explanation that explains how it arose. Likewise, a narrative explanation of a clock tells the story of how it came into being – how the different parts were produced and assembled at the factory. In medicine, the narrative explanation of a symptom is called the 'etiology.' In psychoanalysis, narrative explanations of character (personality) or sexual orientation almost always describe how the child solved the Oedipus conflict. This paper's primary focus is on mechanistic explanations, and I will argue briefly later that narrative explanations may have a mechanistic nature as well. The relationship and the difference between mechanistic and narrative explanations are shown in Figure 1.

Since mechanistic explanations are *models* of the underlying mechanisms that generate the phenomena we seek to explain, it is a matter of some importance to characterize the function of scientific models. There are many different accounts of scientific models, but I will base my discussion on Ronald N. Giere (1988, 2004) because his and similar versions appear to fit the structure of Freudian explanations quite well.³ The basic idea is that an explanatory model mediates between theoretical principles and the phenomena we want to explain. Giere does not refer to psychoanalysis, but I will argue

that his characterization of models also applies to Freudian explanations. There are five characteristics that define an explanatory scientific model, with *compromise formation* used as an illustration.

Fundamental principles

As shown in the previous sections, psychoanalysis contains some fundamental principles that play a role in explanations. Using compromise formation as an example, it will be explicitly shown how these principles are used as tools and guidelines in the construction of models of explanatory mechanisms. In the following, principles are written in italics.

Compromise formation is a mechanism referred to in some psychoanalytic explanations, and it explains symptoms as an outcome of *unconscious* intrapsychic conflicts. Psychoanalysis began as a theory of mental conflict, and conflict is the struggle within the mind between thoughts and wishes with opposing aims. In compromise formation, a repressed memory contributes to shaping a symptom, but the repressed idea has been distorted by defence such that the symptom appears enigmatic to the individual. The symptom, however, still bears the imprint of the conflict (Freud, 1917a, pp. 358–359). The symptom can be a compromise between a wish originating from the *id* that is opposed by *super-ego forces* which block its expression in consciousness. In conversion disorder, the *psychic energy* related to the wish can be converted into somatic symptoms, such as a paralysis or hysterical blindness. For example, a young man is called up for military service and although he sincerely believes that a man should be brave and defend his homeland (part of his *super ego*), unconsciously he does not want to participate in war, afraid he will die or be injured (the survival instinct, a part of *id*). However, this latter 'cowardly' wish is unacceptable and is therefore repressed. The intrapsychic conflict is *unconsciously* solved through a compromise formation; that is, the *psychic energy* related to the unacceptable wish is converted into

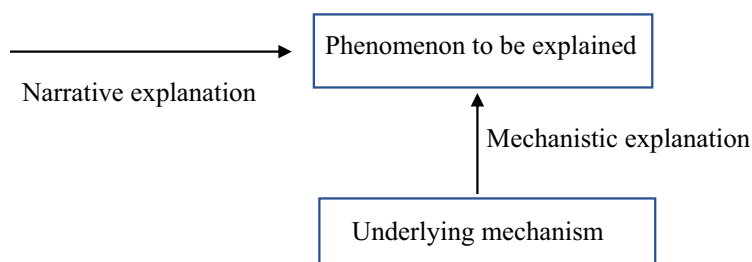


Figure 1. Narrative and mechanistic explanations. *Narrative explanation:* Events in the past explain the emergence and existence of the phenomenon. *Mechanistic explanation:* A model of the underlying mechanism explains the phenomenon.

paralysis of his legs. Since the wish has been drained of energy, it is also less likely to become conscious. To know the meaning of the paralysis is to know the repressed wish that partially caused its occurrence.

Concepts in italics refer to the basic psychoanalytic principles described in the previous section, and the example demonstrates how they are used, or how they function, in the construction of the compromise formation model. They point to the salient causal factors that must be taken into consideration to explain the phenomena. The *philosophical principles* stated previously are tacitly assumed, but the process of rendering them explicit is relatively straightforward (in italics): All processes described in the compromise formation model are *deterministic*, the explanation is *naturalistic*, the model takes for granted the *existence of unconscious mental states*, and the *mental states are causally relevant*.

Generality

Freudian defence mechanisms and other psychoanalytic mechanisms describe general intrapsychic mechanisms that can be realized in many different subjects at different times. Compromise formation is an abstract or general model, since it obviously has the potential to explain more than just one particular event. The criterion generality entails that the mechanism must be robust and relatively stable and must denote recurrent and repeatable patterns. This also applies to non-psychoanalytic mechanisms, such as photosynthesis and protein synthesis (DNA→RNA→Protein).

Representation

It is not the fundamental principles *per se* that explain phenomena, but, rather, the *model* that describes or represents the explanatory underlying mechanisms of the phenomena. It is the model of a mechanism that explains a psychoanalytic phenomenon and not the fundamental principles themselves, because they are simply too general and abstract to be able to represent detailed psychodynamic interactions and processes in the mind; this is the job of the models. In this regard, there is a certain analogy between painting a portrait and constructing a model. You need tube paint and brushes to paint a portrait; however, it is the portrait (model) that represents the person. The tube paint and brushes are tools (principles) in creating the portrait. In our example (compromise formation), it is the model of the psychodynamic mechanism that does

the explanatory work, not the fundamental principles themselves. There is no easy way to build explanatory models, just as you won't become a competent painter by virtue of having some tube paint and brushes lying around. To build explanatory models using psychoanalytic and philosophical concepts requires inventiveness, ingenuity, and (clinical) experience.

Models as mediators

Based on the previous observation, we note that the model mediates between the fundamental principles and the real-world phenomena we intend to explain. Since there is no direct explanatory relationship between the principles and real-world phenomena, the relationship is indirect via an intermediary model that describes the underlying mechanism (see Figure 2). For example, the compromise formation model mediates between the fundamental principles and the behaviors it seeks to explain.

Since some models are built from the bottom up, scientific models are not always founded on theoretical principles (top down). For example, the model describing the interaction among predators and prey animals was constructed using only commonsensical assumptions about predators and prey and the mathematics of differential equations (Frigg, 2020). The fact that Freudian psychoanalysis expresses human nature explicitly through its philosophical and psychoanalytic principles is an intriguing difference between it and contemporary psychology, which seems to be made up of countless explanatory models of narrowly focused aspects of human reality rather than based on a shared set of fundamental principles (Kirkpatrick & Navarrete, 2006, p. 288).

Simplicity vs. complexity

A model in Newtonian mechanics, for instance, of a swinging pendulum, represents a simplification where it is assumed that there is no air resistance, and that the wire has no mass. Such simplifications are ubiquitous in many sciences. The compromise formation model is a simplification in the sense that it focuses on some salient causal factors and ignores many details. In general, it is not likely that any scientific explanation will be able to take all causally relevant factors into consideration; there are simply too many of them, and they are involved in very complex interactions. In addition, many causally relevant factors remain unknown. However, in order for a model to have any scientific merit, it must be possible to

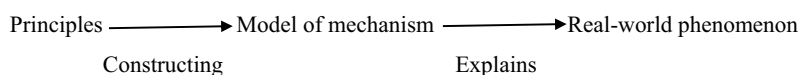


Figure 2. The relations between principles, models, and real-world phenomena. We use general principles to construct a model. The model explains a real-world phenomenon by exhibiting the underlying mechanism.

apply it to real-world phenomena, and since every model is a simplification, it is likely that we must add more causal factors and interacting mechanisms in order to explain complex, real-world phenomena. One mechanism – for example, compromise formation – can seldom explain everything we seek to explain. Therefore, we must supplement the model with other interfering mechanisms and causal factors.

A characteristic aspect of mechanisms is that they can be constituents in other mechanisms. We have seen that compromise formation is defined in terms of repression, but repression is itself a mechanism. Repression is one of the core concepts in psychoanalysis, and according to Eagle (2018, pp. 219–220), Freud (1926) considered repression to be a negative feedback system: (1) a forbidden mental impulse threatens to reach consciousness; (2) this elicits a signal of anxiety; (3) the signal of anxiety triggers opposing forces in order to keep the forbidden content out of consciousness; and (4) when this is accomplished, ‘signal anxiety’ is abated. In this model, we recognize several of the fundamental principles that were used in its construction: for example, an *unconscious* mental impulse in (1), and opposing *forces* that protect *consciousness* in (3). In addition, according to Freudian theory, a repressed impulse does not necessarily cease to exist, but opposing *forces* may need to be constantly applied in order to keep the impulse out of one’s consciousness. This entails a constant expenditure of *psychic energy*.

The account defended in this paper is consistent with Sherwood (1969, p. 244), who contends that ‘the role of the general theory, including [...] higher level theoretical statements, can be characterized as directive in the sense of pointing out to the analyst the areas that should be investigated and the sorts of factors likely to be found operative.’ Sherwood refers to the therapeutic context, but his perspective is equally relevant in understanding the structure of psychoanalytic explanations, because the general theory or principles point to salient factors that should be taken into consideration when we construct models.

The Freudian psychoanalyst’s task is to determine which model, or combination of models, best explains an analysand’s symptoms and behavior. It requires detailed knowledge about the patient and his/her present and past situation to determine which mechanisms (repression, projection, sublimation, etc.) underlie the symptoms. For example, Manson (2003, p. 191) describes how the model of the Freudian dream mechanism can be applied to specific dreams:

The dream theory provides a broad causal template, identifying (relative to the model) the types of psychological sources, and psychological relations lying behind a dream. Free association allows Freud to shift from general theorizing to idiographic explanation by

uncovering information about a unique individual’s motivational, affective, and associative shape.

It seems reasonable to consider Manson’s expression a ‘causal template’ with the same meaning as ‘model of mechanism.’ As indicated in the second half of the quotation, the analyst must of course use his or her interpretative and communication skills to uncover the individual’s conscious and unconscious motives, affects, behavioral patterns, symptoms, and associations. These phenomena can then be explained and understood in terms of the models just described.

A note on narrative explanations

The essence of a narrative explanation is to describe the emergence of a phenomenon by providing some information about its causal history – that is, how it came into being. Narrative explanations describe a sequence of causes and effects resulting in the emergence of the phenomenon. Narratives are fixed events along a temporal dimension, so that prior events are understood to have given rise to subsequent events that are thereby explained. For example, the historical explanations of the outbreak of the First World War and other historical events have a narrative structure. Unlike the stories (narratives) expressed in novels, short stories, and films, a necessary condition for a narrative explanation is that it aims to provide a true description of the sequence of causes and effects; it needs to be based on empirical evidence. Since the term ‘narrative’ is associated with stories and literature, one may get the impression that narrative explanations are found only in the ‘soft sciences’ and not in the natural sciences. This, however, is not correct, because the explanation of the formation of a landscape and the formation of the solar system are both narrative explanations, and so are etiological explanations in medicine.

As depicted in Figure 1, a mechanistic explanation of a phenomenon consists in decomposing it into its causally interacting entities. A narrative explanation, on the other hand, explains how a phenomenon came into being through a causal sequence with a certain time span. These are two different kinds of explanations, but it has been argued that narrative explanations are mechanistic as well. If events of kind A *regularly* cause events of kind B (although not necessarily without exception) and we have been able to describe the causal chain linking A and B, then it seems reasonable to conclude that a description of this causal chain constitutes a mechanistic explanation of how A generates B. In order for a causal sequence starting with A and ending with B to be a *narrative mechanism*, it must be possible

to apply it to many instances. In other words, it must have some sort of generality. Thus, a narrative mechanism is a *generalized* narrative. A well-known biochemical generalized narrative shows how mixing sugar, water, and yeast eventually produces ethanol (alcohol), although the term ‘narrative’ is of course seldom used in biochemical contexts. The description of this mechanism is a *general* model because it describes a repeatable pattern of a causal sequence that can be instantiated at many different times and places. As stated previously, a certain degree of generality is a necessary condition for a scientific explanatory model. Freudian psychoanalysis is full of references to narrative mechanisms and these explanations assume that the past lives within the present in powerful and complex ways. One example is how certain repressive oedipal conflicts become reactivated at puberty, when the sexual drives are intensified. Generalized narratives, including mechanism-based explanations in general, are based on the fundamental psychoanalytic principles described in previous sections. These principles help us identify the salient causal properties, such as unconscious sexual and aggressive drives that are referred to in the explanatory models.

A narrative psychoanalytic explanation may, for example, describe the development and emergence of a phobic symptom. The underlying mechanistic explanation of the symptom (the psychodynamic mechanism) could be an internal constellation of conflicting motives, but the narrative explanation of the symptom may refer to a childhood trauma. The narrative explanation complements the mechanistic explanation, and together, they can provide a more complete explanation of the symptom (see [Figure 1](#)).

Many psychoanalytic narrative explanations are based on Freud’s theory of human development comprising the psycho-sexual stages: the oral, anal, phallic, latency, and genital stages. Personality traits, such as the oral and anal character, are the result of how the subject handled specific challenges related to the different stages. Other examples are the explanations of the emergence of different kinds of behavioral and communicative patterns. Narrative explanations of these patterns may demonstrate how they helped the subject to handle challenges in the past, gradually becoming automatized and repeated in adult life, even though they now make the subject maladapted and cause suffering.

Of note, a whole narrative, such as a case study analysing a specific patient, does not constitute a single mechanism (a generalized narrative), because it is a non-repeatable sequence that lacks generality. Likewise, Freud’s (1939) narrative explanation, beginning with the birth of Moses and ending with the establishment of monotheism, is an idiosyncratic and non-

repeatable causal sequence, and is therefore not an instantiation of a general ‘establishment-of-monotheism’ model; there is no such model. However, if we analyse the Freudian case studies, we note that they refer to models of mechanisms, including both generalized narratives and the mechanisms described in the previous section, such as different defence mechanisms, compromise formation, etc. However, taken as a whole, the narrative is an idiosyncratic and non-repeatable sequence and is not supposed to satisfy the criterion of generality.⁴

Conclusion

Freud suggested a limited number of fundamental principles, but it is not obvious how these principles are related to psychoanalytic explanations. It has been argued that psychoanalysis offers mechanism-based explanations, but then we faced the following question: What is the function of fundamental principles in Freudian explanation? It has been argued that fundamental principles function as tools and guidelines in the construction of explanatory models. However, since these principles represent a general description of human beings, they constitute Freud’s view on human nature. Thus, Freud offered explanations of specific phenomena within a coherent and unifying perspective of human nature, which is quite similar to the views of Nietzsche and especially Schopenhauer (Young & Brook, 1994).

It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss fundamental topics such as the relation between psychoanalytic theory and therapy, the scientific status of psychoanalysis, or to compare Freudian psychoanalysis with the other major schools of psychoanalysis. However, it would make discussions about Freudian theory clearer if we could first outline the basic structure of the theory. For example, questions regarding the validity of the fundamental principles (Freud’s view on human nature) are different from problems related to the accuracy of the explanatory models, even though these theoretical levels are connected.

Notes

1. Freud gave a succinct and sophisticated argument for the existence of unconscious mental states in his article *The Unconscious* (Freud, 1915).
2. The explanandum phenomenon is the phenomenon we intend to explain.
3. Giere’s account of models is akin to Nancy Cartwright (1999) and Margaret Morrison (1999).
4. Cf. Glennan (2010) and Currie (2014) for two different accounts regarding narrative explanations and mechanisms.

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