3 Freud 1: From Biology to Psychology

It is astonishing how tenacious Christian attitudes to sex have been in Western culture. They still surround us, and no doubt exist in all of us, at least in an unconscious form. But over the last five hundred years or more, changes have occurred in society and in human thought that began the slow disruption, and eventually perhaps the disintegration, of the dominant Christian world-view.

The Renaissance and the Reformation shattered many medieval ideas and many medieval institutions, not least the Catholic Church, whose temporal and spiritual authority was dealt devastating blows by the secession of churches in Northern Europe, and the advancement of new theological ideas by figures such as Luther, Calvin and Zwingli. And the Enlightenment in the eighteenth century (the so-called ‘Age of Reason’) intensified a trend towards the secularization of human thought from which Christianity has never recovered. The development of rationalism and empirical enquiry meant that many religious dogmas and symbols were subject to a remorseless examination, and the new scientific spirit of enquiry proceeded without looking for approval to prelate or pope.

In relation to sex, a more empirical approach began to emerge in place of the medieval mode of a priori and homologous reasoning. Reproduction began to be examined in terms of a biological framework, as opposed to the standpoint of moral theology. For example, through his accurate drawings of internal organs, musculature and human postures, Leonardo da Vinci made a huge contribution to anatomy, although his work was to remain in manuscript form for a long period. In the sixteenth century, Vesalius published his book on anatomy, which was empirically based on dissection rather than Aristotelian dogma.1

Michel Foucault dates the modern explosion of interest in sexuality from the eighteenth century, when disciplines such as criminology, biology and medicine begin to join in the ‘steady proliferation of discourses concerned with sex’.2 In the nineteenth century the study of sexual deviance became a discipline in its own right, as figures such as Krafft-Ebbing and Havelock Ellis published their voluminous studies, laden with newfangled terminology.3

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It has been argued by Foucault and others that it is at this period that the concept of sexuality itself was invented, and that this concept marks a new development in the study of human sexual relations. For the term ‘sexuality’ denotes an autonomous force within the human being, and one that acts as a kind of key to the personality. In other words, ‘sexuality’ partly denotes ‘identity’. I shall consider this argument in greater detail in Chapter 5.

It is against this historical background that the emergence of Freud’s ideas should be seen, for Freud can be viewed not just as the progenitor of a new way of looking at human sexuality, but also as a synthesizing figure who brought together many ideas that had been incubating for two hundred years. Many influences went into the stream of Freudian thought, including neurology, psychiatry, sexology, hypnosis, and so on.

In this and the following chapter I would like to examine several of the key ideas developed by Freud in relation to sexuality. It would be impossible to attempt a comprehensive study of the Freudian model of sexuality in one chapter, since the research and writings of Freud and his followers are vast, and could not be encompassed in the space of a book, let alone a chapter. It embraces such topics as the sexual drive or instinct; the pleasure principle; the Oedipus complex, including the castration complex and penis envy; the theory of infantile sexuality; the theory of neurosis and its aetiology; and the rich body of techniques used in psychoanalysis.

Out of this massive area, I have chosen to focus on five issues: first, the notion of sexual aetiology, that is, that neuroses stem from some disruption in sexual functioning. This idea also suggests that sexuality lies at the source of human motivation and behaviour in general. This is an astonishing claim, and one that has been largely abandoned in the late twentieth century by psychoanalysts and psychotherapists. None the less it has had a huge impact not just in the domain of psychology, but in Western culture at large.

A second issue is the key shift made by Freud from a biological or organic view of neurosis and sexuality to a psychological one, since this is a major paradigm shift, and can be seen in some senses as part of the move from nineteenth- to twentieth-century ways of thinking, part of the development of modern thought itself.

Third, Freud combined a radical analysis of human sexuality with a model of the unconscious: this produced a very powerful and elegant theory of unconscious desire. This was not seen as a homogeneous phenomenon but as heterogeneous: in the unconscious all manner of