

Sigmund Freud and the Masculinity of Human Sexuality

In James Strachey's translated and revised edition of Sigmund Freud's Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality, Freud asserts that a theory of human sexuality can be generalized and understood by examining certain fundamental aspects of sexual developments and drives the most powerful of these drives being the libido. Freud's hydraulic analogy of the workings of libido on page 43 describe the sexual instinct as a flowing force which should normally be impeded by certain forces of inhibition such as "disgust, feelings of shame and the claims of aesthetic and moral ideals."

It is plausible to argue that what matters most to Freud in his understanding of human sexuality, and its differences in terms of male and female condition, are sexual inhibitions which lead to normality. On page 85 Freud makes the argument that repression is feminine in nature due to the earlier development and lesser resistance of sexual inhibitions (shame, disgust etc.) in girls during a time when "we have...good reason to believe that there is no period at which the capacity for receiving and reproducing impressions is greater..." (41).

I think that Freud would also claim that the divergence of male and female sexuality is actually the female's *divergence from* normal, unrepressed, human (masculine) sexuality. If human sexuality is driven by libido, and libido is innately masculine (85), then the 'dams' and other sexual inhibitions that block the flow of libido (43), which develop earlier and with less resistance in girls than in boys (85), are causes of feminine repression and deviance from normal male sexuality – especially when considering Freud's theory of the castration complex on page 61. "The assumption that all human beings have the same (male) form of genital is the first of the many remarkable and momentous sexual theories of children" (61), and when little girls realize

that they are ‘missing’ a penis, they “are overcome by envy for the penis – an envy culminating in the wish, which is so important in its consequences, to be boys themselves” (61). Freud would see this kind of envy as the basis for female sexuality to develop in the context of a kind of perceived anatomical deficit which facilitates an alternate/deviant development of sexuality.

It is clear to me that Freud’s understanding of the differences between men and women’s sexuality stems from theorizing the fundamental divergence of the two during puberty – “puberty which brings about so great an accession of libido in boys, is marked by a fresh wave of repression in which is precisely clitoridal [masculine] sexuality that is affected” (86). In Freud’s third essay, he explains his view of perhaps the leading cause for this divergence which ultimately distinguishes female from male sexuality:

When erotogenic susceptibility to stimulation has been successfully transferred by a woman from the clitoris [masculine] to the vaginal [feminine] orifice, it implies that she has adopted a new leading zone for the purposes of her later sexual activity. A man on the other hand, retains his leading zone unchanged from childhood. The fact that women change their leading erotogenic zone in this way, together with the wave of repression at puberty, which, as it were, puts aside their childish masculinity, are the chief determinants of the greater proneness of women to neurosis and especially hysteria.

These determinants, therefore, are intimately related to the essence of femininity (87). In accordance with Freud’s understanding, female development of stronger sexual inhibitions inevitably leads to repression, making repression innate to a woman’s sexuality. In addition, Freud claims that, by nature, a woman’s sexual drive or instinct is masculine, and by her shift in erotogenic zone, she is putting “aside her childish masculinity” (87) to assume a more mature feminine role. Upon further speculation, I believe Freud sets out to understand a general or

universal sketch of human sexuality as way to help people suffering from neurotic disorders – disorders he believes stem from repressed sexual instincts. With that in mind, I believe Freud would endorse the notion that being a woman makes you prone to neurosis and hysteria.

However it seems that Freud's reasoning is on the fence where achieved-ness and innateness of repression are concerned. Freud rationalizes female neuroses by claiming that a certain amount of repression of masculine sexuality is initiated during puberty and is innate, but still acknowledges that there are cultural pressures which facilitate this kind of repression.

When speaking about the normal sexual destination of mature adults, the sexual aim is reproductive function, where there is the emergence of a leading erotogenic zone (63). However, Freud claims that this destiny is a difficult one at which to arrive; "it is like the completion of a tunnel which has been driven through a hill from both directions" (73). During the transformation of puberty males have a much clearer and more logical sexual trajectory – the sexuality "of males is the more straight-forward and the more understandable, while that of females actually enters upon a kind of involution" (73). It is also important, moreover, to note how Freud attributes altruistic function to the male sexual instinct:

The new sexual aim in men consists in the discharge of the sexual products. The earlier one, the attainment of pleasure, is by no means alien to it; on the contrary, the highest degree of pleasure is attached to this final act of the sexual process. The sexual instinct is now subordinate to the reproductive function; it becomes, so to say, altruistic (73).

I think it is clever of Freud to attach an *altruistic* sentiment to male and masculine attainment of sexual pleasure, by the grounds that the instinct is active and driven by the reproductive function – to give life. Another aspect of sexual development which Freud sees as directly related to natural and anatomic structure is the construct of culture, and social significance on the

development of humanity. The importance of culture with respect to these kinds of sexual inhibitions is significant for Freud, and I see that he connects the worlds of cultural/societal norms to anatomy and natural organic development. Freud attempts to connect conventions and constructs that are imposed by societies and civilizations. However this asserted connection is inconsistent in the way the connection works. There seems to be some tension in Freud's theories here, but they also appear to influence each other. Although the connection may be tenuous, Freud uses it to rationalize the idea that nature, as Freud understands, is normal. On page 91, Freud discusses incest, and how humanity has developed safe-guards against it, for the betterment of our species. "Respect for this barrier [against choice near kin as object-choice] is essentially a cultural demand made by society" (91); here Freud is claiming that initially it was a conscious refusal to one's family members as potential object-choices. However in the third footnote of this page, Freud bridges the gap between cultural and anatomic constructs by asserting that, "the barrier against incest is probably among the historical acquisitions of mankind, and, like other moral taboos, has no doubt already become established in many persons by organic inheritance" (91). This is an example of the methods by which Freud resorts to justifying his theories – by myths of human history and acquisition.

I believe that Freud understands sexual inhibitions such as pity, shame and disgust as having been programmed into us by means of organic inheritance such as with the taboo of incest. On page 43-4, Freud even takes a step to distinguish between how one's education affects a person differently than one's organic heredity:

"One gets an impression from civilized children that the construction of these dams is a product of education, and no doubt education has much to do with it. But in reality this development is organically determined and fixed by heredity, and it can occasionally

occur without any help at all from education. Education will not be trespassing beyond its appropriate domain if it limits itself to following the lines which have already been laid down organically and to impressing them somewhat more clearly and deeply” (43-4).

Here, Freud makes it clear that the power of nature, which is “probably” (91) initiated by societal constructs and over time programmed to be an inherited part of our organic anatomy, is the stronger driving force of our sexual instinct – in relation to that of education. But it is clear to see here that the two methods of sexual inhibition installation (anatomically and societally) are actually directly related, and only separated by generations of time.

In conclusion, Freud describes the libido as a natural sexual instinct, and likens its flaws to a hydraulic system in which sexual inhibitions (disgust, shame, horror, etc.) normally serve to impede perverse and aberrant sexual desires.

I believe Freud would claim that ultimately repression, caused by sexual inhibitions, is the leading factor in the difference between adult male and female sexuality. Being that children all develop with the assumption that everyone is endowed with their same genitals (61), repression doesn’t begin to set in for females until they realize that they don’t have a penis; at which point a deep envy ensues in little girls often followed by repression. This process usually begins during childhood and puberty, but happens in girls earlier and at a time of increased susceptibility to impressionable circumstances. Another factor that destines women to suffer from repression would be the transition of their erotogenic zones from clitoridal (masculine) to vaginal (feminine), which as Freud asserts is itself a form of repression of the females “childish masculinity” (87). Freud thus claims that repression is innately a feminine in nature, and at the very least much greater in feminine sexuality.

By this understanding of the repression of masculine sexuality by females, I believe Freud would claim that the divergence of male and female sexuality isn't an anatomical function or innate to the human sexual experience, but is a function of the earlier development in girls which leads them to experience sexual inhibition earlier and more intensely causing repression, in conjunction with the realization that there is a difference between male and female genitals. Since mature female sexuality results in the repression of masculine sexuality, it is plausible to say that Freud's understanding of the divergence is thus: feminine sexuality deviates, as a result of repression, from normal/masculine sexuality.

Freud's understanding of mature male sexuality is that it is active and altruistic in nature – to serve the reproductive function. One of the key differences in the development of male sexuality, as opposed to female sexuality, is that there is no transfer of erotogenic zones and, consequently, males don't experience the associated repression. In this way, male sexuality is more straight-forward and understandable, while female sexuality develops in involution.

Freud draws upon the culture and conventions of civilization to explain some anatomical dispositions for certain sexual inhibitions. His most profound example of this connection is made on page 91 with his assertion that societally constructed safeguards to strength the barrier against incest is an historical acquisition, and since has been undoubtedly passed down by inheritance; through generations of time, this once societal convention has become a part of organic natural inheritance. Freud also interestingly compares the power of nature over education of children in their dispositions for the development of sexual inhibitions. I believe that Freud explains the relationship between societal conventions and inherited anatomy as a progression of generations of conformity to said conventions - ultimately resulting in people who are predisposed to certain sexual inhibitions, such as the disgust or shame of incest especially females. But it also seems

that Freud's reasoning behind his theories are stretching to connect between what is societally and naturally instilled. In some cases, such as his reliance on the myth pertaining to incest on page 91, Freud is forced to make certain assumptions to provide justification to his theories. This ultimately indicates that Freud was straining to connect nature and culture in his explanations of the differences of male and female sexuality.