

FREUD'S THEORY OF HYSTERIA: A REPLY TO ASCHAFFENBURG¹

- [1] If I try to answer Aschaffenburg's—on the whole—very moderate and cautious criticism of Freud's theory of hysteria,² I do so in order to prevent the baby from being thrown out with the bath-water. Aschaffenburg, of course, does not assert that Freud's importance ends with his theory of hysteria. But the medical public (psychiatrists included) know Freud mainly from this side of his work, and for this reason adverse criticism could easily throw a shadow on Freud's other scientific achievements. I would like to remark at the start that my reply is not directed to Aschaffenburg personally, but to the whole school of thought whose views and aspirations have found eloquent expression in Aschaffenburg's lecture.
- [2] His criticism is confined exclusively to the role which sexuality, according to Freud, plays in the formation of the psychoneuroses. What he says, therefore, does not affect the wider range of Freud's psychology, that is, the psychology of dreams, jokes, and disturbances of ordinary thinking caused by feeling-toned constellations. It affects only the psychology of sexuality, the determinants of hysterical symptoms, and the methods of psychoanalysis.³ In all these fields Freud has to his credit unique achievements, which can be contested only by one who has never taken the trouble to check Freud's thought-processes experimentally. I say "achievements," though this does not mean that I subscribe unconditionally to all Freud's theorems. But it is also an achievement, and often no small one, to propound ingenious problems. This achievement cannot be disputed even by Freud's most vigorous opponents.
- [3] To avoid being unnecessarily diffuse, I shall leave out of account all those points which are not affected by Aschaffenburg's criticism, and shall confine myself only to those it attacks.
- [4] Freud maintains that he has found the root of *most* psychoneuroses to be a psychosexual trauma. Is this assertion nonsense?
- [5] Aschaffenburg takes his stand on the view, generally accepted today, that hysteria is a psychogenic illness. It therefore has its roots in the psyche. It would be a work of supererogation to point out that an essential component of the psyche is sexuality, a component of whose extent and importance we can form absolutely no conception in the present unsatisfactory state of empirical psychology. We know only that one meets sexuality everywhere. Is there any other psychic factor, any other basic drive except hunger and its derivatives, that has a similar importance in human psychology? I could not name one. It stands to reason that such a large and weighty component of the psyche must give rise to a correspondingly large number of emotional conflicts and affective disturbances, and a glance at real life teaches us nothing to the contrary. Freud's view can therefore claim a high

degree of probability at the outset, in so far as he derives hysteria primarily from psychosexual conflicts.

- [6] Now what about Freud's particular view that all hysteria is reducible to sexuality?
- [7] Freud has not examined all the hysterias there are. His proposition is therefore subject to the general limitation which applies to empirical axioms. He has simply found his view confirmed in the cases observed by him, which constitute an infinitely small fraction of all cases of hysteria. It is even conceivable that there are several forms of hysteria which Freud has not yet observed at all. Finally, it is also possible that Freud's material, under the constellation of his writings, has become somewhat one-sided.
- [8] We may therefore modify his dictum, with the consent of the author, as follows: An indefinitely large number of cases of hysteria derive from sexual roots.
- [9] Has anyone proved that this is not so? By "prove" I naturally mean applying Freud's psychoanalytic methods and not just carrying out a rigorous examination of the patient and then declaring that nothing sexual can be found. All such "proofs" are of course worthless from the start. Otherwise we would have to admit that a person who examines a bacterial culture with a magnifying-glass and asserts that there are no bacteria in it is right. The application of psychoanalytic methods is, logically, a *sine qua non*.
- [10] Aschaffenburg's objection that an entirely traumatic hysteria contains nothing sexual and goes back to other, very clear traumata seems to me very apt. But the limits of traumatic hysteria, as Aschaffenburg's example shows (flower-pot falling followed by aphonia), are very wide. At that rate countless cases of hysteria could be put into the category of "traumatic" hysteria, for how often does a mild fright produce a new symptom! Aschaffenburg will surely not believe that anyone can be so naïve as to seek the cause of the symptom in that little affect alone. The obvious inference is that the patient was hysterical long before. When for instance a shot is fired and a passing girl gets abasia, we can safely assume that the vessel, long since full, has merely overflowed. No special feat of interpretation is needed to prove this. So these and a legion of similar cases prove nothing against Freud.
- [11] It is rather different in the case of physical traumata and hysterias about insurance money. Here, where the trauma and the highly affective prospect of money coincide, an emotional situation arises which makes the outbreak of a specific form of hysteria appear at least very plausible. It is possible that Freud's view is not valid in these cases. For lack of other experiences I incline to this opinion. But if we want to be absolutely fair and absolutely scientific, we would certainly have to show first that a sexual constellation really never did pave the way for the hysteria, i.e., that nothing of this sort comes out under analysis. At any rate the allegation of traumatic hysteria proves, at best, only that not all cases of hysteria

have a sexual root. But this does not controvert Freud's basic proposition, as modified above.

[12] There is no other way to refute it than by the use of psychoanalytic methods. Anyone who does not use them will never refute Freud; for it must be proved by means of the methods inaugurated by him that factors can be found in hysteria other than sexual ones, or that these methods are totally unsuited to bringing intimate psychic material to light.

[13] Under these conditions, can Aschaffenburg substantiate his criticism?

[14] We hear a great deal about "experiments" and "experiences," but there is nothing to show that our critic has used the methods himself and—what is more important—handled them with certainty. He cites a number of—we must admit—very startling examples of Freudian interpretation, which are bound to nonplus the beginner. He himself points out the inadequacy of quotations torn from their context; it should not be too much if I emphasize still further that in psychology the context is everything. These Freudian interpretations are the result of innumerable experiences and inferences. If you present such results naked, stripped of their psychological premises, naturally no one can understand them.

[15] When Aschaffenburg says these interpretations are arbitrary and asserts that other interpretations are just as possible, or that there is absolutely nothing behind the facts in question, it is up to him to prove, by his own analyses, that such things are susceptible of altogether different interpretations. Then the matter would be quickly settled, and everyone would thank him for clearing up this question. It is the same with the question of "forgetting" and other symptomatic actions which Aschaffenburg relegates to the realm of mysticism. These phenomena are extraordinarily common; you meet them almost every day. It is therefore not too much to ask a critic to show by means of practical examples how these phenomena can be traced back to other causes. The association experiment would provide him with any amount of material. Again he would be doing constructive work for which one could not thank him enough.

[16] As soon as Aschaffenburg meets these requirements, that is to say, publishes psychanalyses with totally different findings, we will accept his criticism, and then the discussion of Freud's theory can be reopened. Till then his criticism hangs in mid air.

[17] Aschaffenburg asserts that the psychoanalytic method amounts to auto-suggestion on the part of the doctor as well as the patient.

[18] Apart from the fact that it is incumbent on a critic to demonstrate his thorough knowledge of the method, we also lack the proof that the method is auto-suggestion. In earlier writings⁴ I have already pointed out that the association experiment devised by me gives the same results in principle, and that psychoanalysis is really no different from an association

experiment, as Aschaffenburg himself says in his criticism. His assertion that the experiment was used by me in one case only is erroneous; it was used for the purpose of analysis in a great number of cases, as is evident from numerous statements in my own work and from the recent work of Riklin. Aschaffenburg can check my statements and those of Freud at any time, so far as the latter coincide with my own, by experiment, and thereby acquire a knowledge of the exact foundations of psychoanalysis.

[19] That my experiments have nothing to do with auto-suggestion can easily be seen from their use in the *experimental diagnosis of facts*. The step from the association experiment, which is already pretty complicated, to full psychoanalysis is certainly a big one. But, by thorough study of the association experiment—to the development of which Aschaffenburg himself has made outstanding contributions—one can acquire invaluable insights which prove very useful during analysis. (At any rate this has been so with me.) Only when he has gone through this arduous and difficult training can he begin, with some justification, to examine Freud's theory for evidence of auto-suggestion. He will also have a more sympathetic insight into the somewhat apodictic nature of Freud's style. He will learn to understand how uncommonly difficult it is to *describe* these delicate psychological matters. A written exposition will never be able to reproduce the reality of psychoanalysis even approximately, let alone reproduce it in such a way that it has an immediately convincing effect on the reader. When I first read Freud's writings it was the same with me as with everybody else: I could only strew the pages with question-marks. And it will be like that for everyone who reads the account of my association experiments for the first time. Luckily, however, anyone who wants to can repeat them, and so experience for himself what he did not believe before. Unfortunately this is not true of psychoanalysis, since it presupposes an unusual combination of specialized knowledge and psychological routine which not everyone possesses, but which can, to a certain extent, be learnt.

[20] So long as we do not know whether Aschaffenburg has this practical experience, the charge of auto-suggestion cannot be taken any more seriously than that of arbitrary interpretation.

[21] Aschaffenburg regards the exploration of the patient for sexual ideas as, in many cases, immoral.

[22] This is a very delicate question, for whenever morals get mixed up with science one can only pit one belief against another belief. If we look at it simply from the utilitarian point of view, we have to ask ourselves whether sexual enlightenment is under all circumstances harmful or not. This question cannot be answered in general terms, because just as many cases can be cited for as against. Everything depends on the individual. Many people can stand certain truths, others not. Every skilled psychologist will surely take account of this

fact. Any rigid formula is particularly wrong here. Apart from the fact that there are many patients who are not in the least harmed by sexual enlightenment, there are not a few who, far from having to be pushed towards this theme, guide the analysis to this point of their own accord. Finally, there are cases (of which I have had more than one) that cannot be got at at all until their sexual circumstances are subjected to a thorough review, and in the cases I have known this has led to very good results. It therefore seems to me beyond doubt that there are at least a great many cases where discussion of sexual matters not only does no harm but is positively helpful. Conversely, I do not hesitate to admit that there are cases where sexual enlightenment does more harm than good. It must be left to the skill of the analyst to find out which these cases are. This, it seems to me, disposes of the moral problem. "Higher" moral considerations derive all too easily from some obnoxious schematism, for which reason their application in practice would seem inopportune from the start.

[23] So far as the therapeutic effect of psychoanalysis is concerned, it makes no difference to the scientific rightness of the hysteria theory or of the analytic method how the therapeutic result turns out. My personal conviction at present is that Freud's psychoanalysis is one of several possible therapies and that in certain cases it achieves more than the others.

[24] As to the scientific findings of psychoanalysis, nobody should be put off by seeming enormities, and particularly not by sensational quotations. Freud is probably liable to many human errors, but that does not by any means rule out the possibility that a core of truth lies hidden in the crude husk, of whose significance we can form no adequate conception at present. Seldom has a great truth appeared without fantastic wrappings. One has only to think of Kepler and Newton!

[25] In conclusion, I would like to utter an urgent warning against the standpoint of Spielmeier,⁵ which cannot be condemned sharply enough. When a person reviles as unscientific not only a theory whose experimental foundations he has not even examined but also those who have taken the trouble to test it for themselves, the freedom of scientific research is imperilled. No matter whether Freud is mistaken or not, he has the right to be heard before the forum of science. Justice demands that Freud's statements should be verified. But to strike them dead and then consign them to oblivion, that is beneath the dignity of an impartial and unprejudiced scientist.

[26] To recapitulate:

- (1) It has never yet been proved that Freud's theory of hysteria is erroneous in all cases.
- (2) This proof can, logically, be supplied only by one who practises the psychoanalytic method.
- (3) It has not been proved that psychoanalysis gives other results than those obtained by

Freud.

(4) It has not been proved that psychoanalysis is based on false principles and is altogether unsuitable for an understanding of hysterical symptoms.