

Totem and Taboo (1913): The Fortunate Fall & the Primal Psychoanalytic Myth

“In 1912 I took up a conjecture of Darwin’s to the effect that the primitive form of human society was that of a horde ruled over despotically by a powerful male. I attempted to show that the fortunes of this horde have left indestructible traces upon the history of human descent; and, especially, that the development of totemism, which comprises in itself the beginnings of religion, morality, and social organisation, is connected with the killing of the chief by violence and the transformation of the paternal horde into a community of brothers. To be sure, this is only a hypothesis, like so many others with which archaeologists endeavour to lighten the darkness of prehistoric times—a ‘Just-So Story’, as it was amusingly called by a not unkind critic (Kroeger); but I think it is creditable to such a hypothesis if it proves able to bring coherence and understanding into more and more new regions.”

-- *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* (1922)

Published in 1913, *Totem and Taboo*, Freud’s Ur-myth was composed during a time when Darwin’s natural selection had fallen somewhat out of favor. The recovery of Gregor Mendel’s studies of population genetics would not take place until the 1920s, so the acceptance of neo-Darwinism was yet to come. Many of the non-Darwinian views of the period were models that rejected randomness and looked for some sort of directional value. These theories took a variety of forms from theistic or emergent evolution to orthogenesis to a neo-Lamarckianism that stressed the cross-generational sustaining of acquired characteristics or experiences. Such understandings had wide influence in areas ranging from folklore to philology to ethnology to social psychology, as well as comparative mythology, religion, and ethics. For all these areas, the nature of human origins was of paramount concern, and two questions were basically the same throughout:

1. What conditions make it possible for human culture to change and evolve?
2. Are present “primitive” societies comparable to primal, prehistoric ones?

One of the broadest held assumptions was that indigenous cultures, such as those in Australia, North America, Africa, or Micronesia, were less civilized, more child-like, and therefore, vestigial holdovers of prehistoric human cognition and socialization. Thus, it should not surprise us that Freud held such ideas, ones we would now consider untenable. What is, perhaps, more problematic is the manner in which in creating a primal psychoanalytic myth, Freud creates a “fortunate fall” of sorts in which the development of ethics, conscience, religion, the social compact, and neurosis can be explained by a purely human (or even pre-human) murderous event. Authority and rebellion become the center of human civilization, as well as individual (masculine) psychological development. The genesis patricide becomes the beginning of character and individualization.

Freud’s Sources

Freud’s principle anthropological sources shape *Totem and Taboo* in a number of ways. For one thing, they give the book an interest for a larger audience than that of psychoanalytic practitioners. Likewise, they also shape the readers’ imagination, helping to make a number of Freud’s essential analogies believable; they also give his claims authority, i.e. the veneer of objectivity and science. And they function as his primary evidence; they become the data that his theory must explain. The five principal authors are:

- James G. Frazer, *Totemism and Exogamy* (1910); *The Golden Bough*
- E. B. Taylor, *Primitive Culture* (1899)
- Andrew Lang, *Study in the Method of Totems* (1911)
- William Robertson Smith, *Religion of the Semites* (1894)
- W. M. Wundt, *Myths and Religion* (1906); *Elements of the Psychology of the Races* (1912)

Exploratory Questions

- How much can we actually know about the prehistoric past?
- Is there any tenable relationship between current cultures and the prehistoric or ancient past?
- Can cataclysmic events in the human past be absorbed into the consciousness of later generations?
- How important is ethnology to understanding human psychology?
- Can our myths and cultural practices tell us anything about our psyches?
- Can we justly hold that we can understand and norm the thought-processes of another culture or another era in history?
- Can psychoanalysis be used as a form of cultural explanation and critique?

Discussion Questions

Essay I. “The Savage’s Dread of Incest” [First published in March 1912 in *Imago*]

1. Is Freud justified in drawing an analogy between the behavior and beliefs of neurotics and that of indigenous societies? (775ff.)
2. What kind of broad conclusions does Freud draw from the various incest taboos he discusses?
3. Are mother-in-law jokes vestigials of taboo avoidance rituals? (786)
4. How does he extrapolate from the Oedipal Complex to incest taboos?

Essay II. “Taboo and the Ambivalence of Emotions” [Read before the Vienna Psychoanalytical Society in May 1912]

1. Why does Freud follow those who place taboo in a “pre-religious” period of pre-history? (789ff.)
2. Why does he also speculate that taboo may be at the heart of ethical imperatives? (792)
3. How does Freud follow Wundt in identifying beliefs in ghosts and demons as projections of human psychology? (794ff.)
4. What parallel does he draw between compulsion neuroses and taboos? (795ff.)
5. Likewise, what parallels does he draw between compulsion disorders and taboos? (799ff.)
6. What key aspects does he draw from ambivalence tendencies? (802ff.)
7. In particular, what does Freud stress about taboo and rulers? (807ff.)
8. How does Freud locate anxiety and compulsion in such taboo ceremonies? (813-14)
9. Why are names (and not speaking them) important in such taboos? (cf. 819)
10. According to Freud why do indigenous people make demons of ones they loved? (821ff.)
11. Why does he argue that taboo is the origin of conscience? (826ff.)

Essay III. “Animism, Magic and the Omnipotence of Thought”

1. What is animism, and why does Freud consider it important to his theory of the history of religious belief? (833ff.)
2. How does he distinguish between sorcery and magic? (835ff.)
3. How does the association of ideas help explain the thought-system of contiguous and imitative magic? How is this related to wish fulfillment? (839ff.)
4. What is “omnipotence of thought”? What makes it an important step in Freud’s argument? (841ff.)
5. Why does Freud draw an analogy between the three-stages of universe-conception, following Taylor, and those of libidinal evolution of the individual? (843-844)
6. Why does Freud reject the idea that animism is a form of early scientific thought? (845ff.)

7. Why does he see early beliefs about the soul as owing something to the latent activity of the unconscious? (847)
8. What is the psychological apparatus for “superstitions”? (850-851)

Essay IV “The Infantile Recurrence of Totemism”

1. Look over Reinach’s “catechism of totemism” (853). What does Freud find valuable about it? How does it compare with the three distinctions that Frazer makes? (854)
2. What makes it important that Freud (following Wundt) establish a developmental history of totemism? (857ff.)
3. What does Freud reject about nominalist theories of totem? (859ff.) about sociological theories? (862ff.) about previous psychological theories? (864ff.)
4. Why does Freud consider the incest dread important? (869)
5. Likewise, why is Darwin’s hypothesis of a small “primal horde” necessary for Freud’s argument? (871ff.)
6. Why does he consider the fear of castration and the Oedipus Complex necessary elements of this developmental model? (873ff.)
7. How does Robertson Smith’s theory of the totem feast help buttress Freud’s primal genesis myth? (877-882)
8. Read through the actual myth from 883-887. What are your initial impressions of the story? Do you find it convincing?
9. How does Freud try to explain the origins of religion, especially that of a sky father, using his primal story? (887-891)
10. How does he employ the myths of Orpheus and Oedipus to “explain” Christianity? (892-897) How would you respond to him?

Criticisms of *Totem and Taboo*

There are quite a few dismissals of Freud’s book, so the following are just a few examples. In general, criticisms of Freud’s totemism from within the field of anthropology argue that he has overlooked key elements of the ethnological data. Criticisms from the fields of theology and philosophy point out that he tends to run rough-shod over counter-evidence, or that his broader psychoanalytical theory is apt to overlook other important aspects of the picture.

- *The Problem of Anthropological Diversity*: Franz Boas argued that totemism was too diverse in practice to draw broad generalizations that Frazer, Freud, and others were drawing. In particular, he argued that because of its diverse social uses and variety of forms, it was impossible to try and uncover an origin. Boas went so far as to suggest that the general category of “totem” only existed in the minds of ethnologists attempting to study it in the field because they were imposing a Western notion of “cultural history” on cultures that did not see things in this way.
- *A Question of Anthropological Structuralism*: Claude Levi-Strauss, *Totemism* (1958) concluded that totemism as a historical process does not really exist, at least in the forms for which Freud was arguing. Instead, totemism is a cultural category of thought created to help distinguish nature and culture and, thereby, distance the “primitive” from the “civilized.” In practice totemism is really just the associative power of the human mind to draw analogies and comparisons with the non-human world. It represents one way that people of all cultures make abstractions. There is nothing “primitive” of “less civilized” about it.

- *A Symptom of Historical Desacralization*: Freud is clearly participating in a nineteenth-century theory of history, fathered by Comte and set forth by E. B. Tylor; namely, humanity is moving through evolutionary developmental phases of animism, religion, and science. Freud's (and Comte's and Tylor's) theory is itself a positivist myth. Rather than explaining the origin of religion, Freud simply inscribes it in a new mythos, yoking together his psychoanalytical topography of narcissism, object-choice, and reality principle with a structure of human civilization.
- *The Practice of Phallogocentrism*: Freud's gender (or sexual) blindness to the normative experiences of women is clearly a problem in *Totem and Taboo*. The Ur-myth of brothers who murder their father is the central genesis act, and women (sisters) are only considered as a problem for them afterwards and thus the formation of the incest taboo. Freud does admit that the Great Mother myth belongs, and he addresses it in ways in his *Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of Childhood*; however, the overall assumption that the experience of men is the central matter of civilization is highly problematic.

Alternate Models

Rene Girard—*Mimetic Theory*: Girard argues that human violence arises not because of a scarcity of resources, but because people naturally imitate one another and, thus, suffer envy and rivalry. Humans desire to be (like) each other and thus control what each other has. Girard also holds that the myths and religions of global humanity reveal a foundation act of collective violence in which one member of the community is persecuted as the scapegoat for the community's angry divisions. The scapegoat takes on the divisions of the people in order to expunge the contagion of their envy and hatred. Girard saw this as the foundational basis for ancient religion, and in particular began to hold that the sacrifice of Christ not only represented the culmination of this trend in history by revealing the true nature of sacrifice, but also told the truth that the victim is innocent and the mob always seeks to cover its collective guilt over with a lie.

C. S. Lewis—*Christ the True Myth*: Lewis, like other Christians of his generation (e.g. G. K. Chesterton, J.R.R. Tolkien, David Jones, Christopher Dawson), held that the dying god myths of world religion were preparatory for the coming of the actual real God into human history in ancient first-century Palestine. Working from a typological approach, Lewis and others reversed the claims of Frazer (and Freud) in arguing that rather than ancient myths showing that the Atonement of Christ is only one more example of a common human approach, they actually show the providence of God in preparing human imaginations for the actual truth that would happen in history and not just in a mythic time.

Jacques Lacan—*The Name of the Father*: Lacan reworks the Oedipus Complex into a broader linguistic picture of human development. The child desires to be the central love-object of the nurturer (typically the mother), and the child learns to accept that this is not possible (a "castration" of sorts symbolically). The father's law (an Other's more distant meaning) makes possible the child's entrance into the larger objective world of symbolism. This happens because the father becomes the representative of the social nomos of another world beyond the immediate mother-child relationship. Within Lacan's system there are three fathers: the Real Father, the Imaginary Father, and the Symbolic (i.e. Name) Father. The child learns to interact with and master the social codes and cultural tools of the larger world, and this is the normal process, for we all learn to pursue desire within the permissions of the (divine) Other.

Ernst Cassirer—*The Myth of the State*: Cassirer argues that myth is its own form of human thought, a form of symbolic world building, and of inquiry into the physical world. For Cassirer, moreover, myths

are the basic building blocks of human cognition—the original Gestalt. Our consciousness grasps not in terms of strict logical propositions, but in the symbols of mythic thought, which present themselves directly to us. Myths provide us forms of thought, of intuition, and of social life—they are the basic means by which we take things to be true. They allow us to associate things at all, while scientific claims of causation limit us to only specific delineations between one cause and one effect.