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FRSxxx
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Tu., Th. 11-12:20
Green Hall, 0-N-2

FREUD ON THE PSYCHOLOGY OF ORDINARY MENTAL LIFE

When we laugh at an incredibly funny joke, what, exactly, are we laughing at, and why is it laughing that we do? How do we come to be engrossed in a novel? Given that the characters are nothing to us--they are neither relatives nor friends, and they are not real--why do we care what happens to them? How does it come about that perfectly rational people sometimes succumb to moments of magical thinking, and which aspects of our psychological makeup might explain both the pervasiveness and tenacity of religion in human society?

Although he is best known for his elucidation of the unusual in human mental life, Sigmund Freud also attempted to illuminate ordinary human experiences and values, such as people's susceptibility to humor, their capacity to become engrossed in fiction, and their susceptibility to superstition and religion. His insights into the everyday and his sense of where the productive questions lay reveal an incisiveness of argument that defy both earlier and subsequent thought on his topics. The seminar will consider both Freud's accounts of ordinary mental phenomena and his method of inquiry, with the aims of coming to understand some of his seminal thought, learning a powerful method of critical inquiry, and honing fresh ideas about the nature of ordinary mental life and human values.

Readings include original works by Freud and a few brief selections by other authors whose work provides useful material for comparison. The seminar, which will meet in two 80-minute classes per week, is organized to allow for maximal play of students' own ideas and their development of Freud's technique of identifying and unpacking anomalies as a method for investigating human mental life.

Reading List

S. Freud:

“Creative writers and daydreaming” (1908), “Psychopathic characters on the stage” (1906) “On transience” (1916), “The ‘Uncanny’” (1919), “A disturbance of memory on the Acropolis” (1936), The psychopathology of

everyday life (1901), Totem and taboo (1913), Jokes and their relation to the unconscious (1905), “Humor” (1927), Group psychology and the analysis of the ego (1921), The future of an illusion (1927), “Thoughts for the times on war and death” (1915).

Other authors:

A. Graham, Disputers of the Tao (excerpt only: 1989). S. Brent, “Puns, metaphors, and misunderstandings in a 2-year-old’s conception of death” (1977). Recommended: S. Sugarman, Freud on the Acropolis: Reflections on a paradoxical response to the real (1998).

All books are available at Labyrinth Books. Papers and the excerpt from A. Graham’s book are available in a reader from Pequod. All readings are available on reserve at Firestone Library

Writing Assignments

Under the instructor’s guidance, students will work toward a short seminar paper (approximately 8 pages), to be submitted at the end of the term, on a topic of their own choosing and drawn from the course reading. Typical papers will identify a behavior or experience of ordinary mental life that, upon inspection, eludes explanation. Students will generate and evaluate “common-sensical” hypotheses to account for the behavior, try to repair any difficulties that emerge, and then formulate an account in the spirit of Freud’s analyses. They will then evaluate their Freud-style account, delineate any remaining questions, and, if it is appropriate, provide notes toward an alternative account.

Students will also complete each of 10 one-page reflection papers in conjunction with each of the ten topics of the course. Papers will respond to the topic, based upon students’ own intuitions, *before* students read the relevant assignments from Freud. Papers will serve as the basis for a single 80-minute session devoted to analysis of the topic, again independently of Freud’s (direct) contribution. One or more class meetings covering Freud’s texts will follow. (See the attached course outline for a listing of topics and the schedule of open-discussion and reading-based sessions.)

Course Outline

I. Aesthetic Experience

Topic 1: Our Capacity to Become Engrossed in Art and Narrative

Class 1 (9/17): Discussion

Class 2 (9/22): S. Freud, “Creative writers and daydreaming” (1908)
S. Freud, “Psychopathic characters on the stage” (1907)

Topic 2: Transience

Class 3 (9/24): Discussion

Class 4 (9/29): S. Freud, “On transience” (1916)

Topic 3: The Experience of the Uncanny

Class 5 (10/1): Discussion

Class 4 (10/6): S. Freud, “The ‘Uncanny’” (1919)

Topic 4: The Encounter with the Real

Class 7 (10/8): Discussion

Class 8 (10/13): S. Freud, “A disturbance of memory on the Acropolis” (1936)

II. Mental Products of Ordinary Life

Topic 5: Mental Glitches of Everyday Life (tip of the tongue, verbal slips, forgetting intentions)

Class 9 (10/15): Discussion

Class 10 (10/20): S. Freud, The psychopathology of everyday life (1901): Chapters I, [V], VII, [VIII] (“The forgetting of proper names,” “Slips of the tongue,” “The forgetting of impressions and intentions,” “Bungled actions”)

Class 11 (10/22) S. Freud, Chapter XII, The psychopathology of everyday life (1901):
“Determinism, belief in chance and superstition—some points of view”

from A. Graham, Disputers of the Tao, on “synchronicity” and “The Yi,” in particular, p. 368 on “synchronicity.”

Topic 6: Magic and Superstition

Class 12 (10/27): Discussion

Class 13 (10/29): S. Freud, Preface and Ch. III, “Animism, magic, and the omnipotence of thoughts,” in Totem and taboo (1913)

Fall Break (10/31-11/8)

Topic 7: Jokes, Humor, and the Comic

Class 14 (11/10): Discussion

Class 15 (11/12): S. Freud, Jokes and their relation to the unconscious (1905), Part A

Class 16 (11/17): S. Freud, Jokes and their relation to the unconscious, Part B

Class 17 (11/22): S. Freud, Jokes and their relation to the unconscious, Part C, Ch. VII
S. Freud, “Humor” (1927)
S. Brent, “Puns, metaphors, and misunderstandings in a two-year-old’s conception of death”

III. Group Psychology

Topic 8: The Group Mind and the Mind in Groups

Class 18 (11/24): Discussion

Thanksgiving Break (11/26-11/29)

Class 19 (12/1): S. Freud, Group psychology and the analysis of the ego (1921), Ch.1-6

Class 20 (12/3): S. Freud, Group psychology and the analysis of the ego, Chapters 7-12

Topic 9: Religion

Class 21 (12/8): Discussion

Class 22 (12/10): The future of an illusion

Topic 10: The Fear of Death

Class 23 (12/15): Discussion

Class 24 (12/17): S. Freud, "Thoughts for the times on war and death" (1915)

S. Freud, "Inhibitions, symptoms, and anxiety" (1926), Chapters VII and VIII, on the fear of death

E. Einstein, S. Freud, "Why war?" (1936)