

PSYCHOLOGY

IS PSYCHODYNAMIC PSYCHOLOGY UNIVERSALLY ACCEPTED?

Totem and Taboo (1913) is a book Freud regarded as one of his best. It presents a psychological interpretation of the life of primitive peoples. It employs the concepts of psychoanalysis, but, like other books of the time, is also influenced by evolutionary thinking, not just Darwin's theory of biological evolution but the general ideas of intellectual and social evolution as well. In it, Freud accepts the opinion of his age that it is not just our physical selves which are products of evolution; he also adopts the idea, shared by Tylor and Frazer, that we have also evolved intellectually and observes that our social institutions, like our animal species, have traced an unsteady but still upward line of progress. As a result, he argues, just as we find clues to the personality of individual adults in their earlier character as children, so we find in the character of past cultures important clues to the nature of civilization in the present. This past, moreover, includes not just our civilized ancestors like the Greeks and Romans but (now that Darwin has shown the connection) even prehistoric cultures and peoples, those communities of humans who first descended from their animal ancestors.

With these things in hand, Freud turns next to two practices of primitive peoples which strike modern minds as especially strange: the use of animal "totems" and the custom of "taboo." Tylor, Frazer, and other anthropologists of that time were fascinated by these traditions, as we have noticed. In the first case, a tribe or clan chooses to associate itself with a specific animal (or plant), which serves as its sacred object, its "totem." In the second, some person or thing is called "taboo" if a tribe wants to declare it "off limits" or forbidden. According to the oldest and strongest known taboos, most early societies seem to have strictly prohibited two things. First, there could be no incest; marriage must always be "exogamous," that is, outside the immediate family or clan. Among primitives there is almost always what Freud calls a "horror of incest." Second, there could be no killing or eating of the totem animal; except on certain rare ceremonial occasions, when this rule was solemnly broken, eating the "totem" was also "taboo." Third--and here Freud goes beyond other theorists--there could be no point in making taboos, in publicly disallowing these things, unless somehow, at some time, people actually wanted to do them. Evidently, these are crimes that people did try to commit. But if so, why make them crimes in the first place? Why make everyone miserable by creating rules that no one really wanted to keep?

Here in specific form we meet the kind of question that does not appear in the works of theorists like Tylor and Frazer. From their intellectualist position, human religious behavior is a conscious **endeavour**; it represents the effort to use reason to understand the world while, at the same time, it demonstrates a failure to reason correctly. Is it a mistake to believe in totems and taboos, why should anyone continue to do so? Freud finds the answer in the unconscious. He claims that experience with neurotic patients shows the personalities of both disturbed and normal people alike to be strongly marked by doubtful (by the clash of powerful opposing desires. They want to do certain things, and at the same time they do not. Obsessively neurotic people, for example, will sometimes feel extreme grief when a loved one, a father or mother, dies. Yet on probing the unconscious, we often find that it is not love but guilt and

hate that actually cause their emotion. We discover, says Freud, that the neurotic person unconsciously wants the parent to die, yet (once the death has occurred) goes on to feel intense guilt for having such a terrible wish. To cope with the stress, the neurotic may even project onto the dead person certain negative characteristics, so that the death wish will seem justified. Now, remarkably enough, tribal peoples show just this trait, thinking of their dead ancestors as demons, or "wicked spirits," who deserve their hate. In their use of magic, too, they imagine that the world is just an extension of their own selves. By thinking about the sound of thunder and imitating it, they suppose they can make real rain.

More than anything else in primitive cultures, it is the practices of **tokenism** and taboo that present us with a particularly striking display of psychic ambivalence—one which opens a window on the power of human emotions in the very earliest age of humanity. After all, says Freud, if Darwin is right about our descent from the apes, we should think of the first human beings as living, like their animal ancestors, in "primal hordes". Within these groups there would have been loyalty, affection, and security against danger; for the young males, however, there was also something else to frustration and envy because of the existence of other men. Though they feared and respected their father, they also sexually desired the females, all of whom were his wives. In a turn of events, which occurred many times, the sons ganged up together, murdered their father and consumed his body (since they were cannibals), even as they proceeded to take possession of his wives. At first this primeval murder in the horde brought a sense of joy and liberation, but grave second thoughts soon followed. The sons were overcome with guilt and remorse. Wanting desperately to restore the master they had killed, they found in the totem animal a "**father substitute**" and symbol; they agreed to believe in it, and before it they then swore the oldest of all taboos: "**Thou shalt not kill the totem.**" Over time, this rule was generalized to the entire clan and became the universal commandment against all murder. "**Thou shalt not kill**" thus undoubtedly became the first moral rule of the human race. Eventually Freud believed that in the same way all laws were created from need, gradually at the same time creating bases on which civilization is built and from all the above we understand how in a society totem and taboo eventually are accepted. Even in the most primitive society people obey rules made not as complex as are laws but they work in the same way as laws. For these reasons psychodynamic psychology is universally accepted; it talks about things that one way or another are absolutely correct and exist in all cultures but in different ways each time and on different levels.