

THE FREUDIAN WISH AND ITS PLACE IN ETHICS

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The Freudian Wish and Its Place in Ethics by Edwin B. Holt

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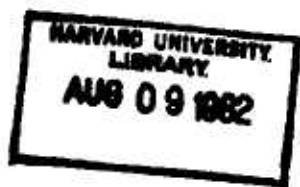


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PREFACE

THE problem of good conduct, both in practice and in ethical theory, ought to receive some clarification, one would suppose, from a science that studies the mind and the will in their actual operation. If in the past psychology has not materially contributed to this problem, it is possibly owing to the incompetence of psychology to tell us much that is either true or useful about the essential nature of mind or will, or of the soul. I believe that such has been the case, and that now for the first time, and largely owing to the insight of Dr. Sigmund Freud, a view of the will has been gained which can be of real service to ethics. In presenting this I shall disregard the current comments on Freud, which have become so familiar, for he deserves neither the furious dispraise nor the frantic worship which have been accorded him. He is a man of genius, simply, more sagacious and more perspicacious than his detractors and far more sane than many of his followers. In my opinion both of these have failed to emphasize that for which Freud is most significant.

The idea has gone abroad that the term 'Freudian' is somehow synonymous with 'sexual,' and that to read Freud's own works would be fairly to immerse oneself in the licentious and the illicit. This belief, which makes the mention of Freud so alluring to some and so disconcerting to others, is as ill-founded as it is widespread. It is true that the unco prudish would experience a *mauvais quart-d'heure* if they ever permitted themselves to read Freud on the source and significance of prudishness, but it is also true that the pruriently curious would be baffled to the point of tears if they were to search in Freud for a stimulus to their own peculiar type of imagination. In short, this talk of the 'sexual' in connection with Freud is merely another instance of that infallible instinct of the cheap press and the vulgar mind to seize on unessentials, whether for praise or for blame, and to leave the main fabric unscanned.

Now Freud's contribution to science is notable, and in my opinion epoch-making, for a reason which has hardly ever been mentioned. And this reason is that he has given to the science of mind a 'causal category': or, to put it less academically, he has given us a key to the explanation of mind.

It is the first key which psychology has ever had which fitted, and moreover I believe it is the only one that psychology will ever need. Although of course these two statements would be savagely disputed by the comfortably established professors of an earlier school, who are a bit mystified by Freud and suffer from the uncomfortable apprehension that he is doing something to them; they know not quite what. And in fact he is, for he is making them look hopelessly incompetent. This key to the mind, which Freud calls the 'wish,' is the subject of the present volume. And we shall consider more particularly the bearing which this wish-psychology may have on ethics. For this is a matter which Freud himself has said little about, and one which affords, I think, very interesting and practically useful conclusions.

In the Supplement is reprinted a short paper, which first appeared in the *Journal of Philosophy, Psychology, and Scientific Methods*, and which undertakes to show the cardinal importance of this same 'wish,' there, however, called the 'specific response relation,' in the general field of psychology.

E. B. H.