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Questioning Truth from within the Austro-Hungarian Empire:

A Functional Analysis of the Ideas of Mach and Freud

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History 231: Western Thought Since the Renaissance

Professor Edward Jurkowitz

Questioning Truth from within the Austro-Hungarian Empire:

A Functional Analysis of the Ideas of Mach and Freud

The ubiquity of Sigmund Freud's concepts in today's world should speak to the greatness of his ideas, but upon close examination these ideas are anything but ingenious and have been attached inappropriately to contemporary society. The multitude of other Austrian thinkers who emerged in response to the consolidation of eleven national groups into the Austro-Hungarian Empire ought to be more intimately inspected, for they certainly produced noteworthy concepts and ideas. The improbability of reaching a truth on which this entropic amalgamation of peoples could agree led numerous thinkers to ponder the authenticity of established principles and of truth itself. In the wake of the incommensurability faced between cultures, Ernst Mach and Sigmund Freud both questioned the plausibility of truth and offered ways to help people approach a purely true notion. Whereas Mach courageously presented a way to more precisely measure truth, Freud arbitrarily categorized the fragments of the mind and thereby attempted to limit that which he claimed has no limitations. Freud did not advance society toward truth; he made approaching truth more difficult. This contradiction within Freud's idea should be taken seriously given his present-day omnipresence. Mach's reasonable ideas ought to be preferred over Freud's contradictions, for Freud's conception of the mind leaves holes and deplorable gaps which are left for future generations to fill. Unambitious and unoriginal, Freud's ideas have been allowed to inundate contemporary society only because of their flawed, accommodating nature. The more heroic ideas of Mach, on the

other hand, are left floating in man's stream of consciousness. Mach's proposals, then, ought to be rescued from this infinity.

Mach and Freud each questioned the definability of truth. Mach, a physicist, doubted the feasibility of the accepted scientific method, the process by which scientists obtain truth. He believed in a monistic philosophy of science and thought and, despite seemingly overwhelming evidence to support an accepted theory, was reluctant to acknowledge many presupposed notions as truths. In fact, Mach spent much of his time skeptically speculating upon assorted hypotheses and their evolutions. He hoped that, by exploring the errors of previous researchers, others might realize the artificiality of all theories. According to Mach, most notions have been inherently based upon analogies, not facts. As Mach sees it, a man who has been affected by circumstantial sensations may notice others who behave in a manner analogous to himself and thus suppose that the effects of such sensations attach themselves in the same way as he observed these feelings to be attached to himself. Mach argues that this man "does not perceive the sensations of his fellow-men or of animals but only supplies them by analogy" (34). Analogy, which may be used in sociology, cannot be applied to science, for if this were allowed a scientist could come to obviously erroneous assumptions. For example, it could then be hastily concluded that if a wire possesses all of the properties of a conductor charged with an electric current, except one which has yet to be demonstrated, then the wire possesses this one property as well. Man can infer from the behavior of men, yet assumption "is unnecessary, and in science leads into a maze of error" (34). Basically, Mach wished to prove that, in creating contemporary notions, variables like an object's perception of sensations have been overlooked or assumed insignificant. To identify these

disregarded variables nullifies the veracity of such notions. Mach thus draws attention to man's tendency to *assume* truth; man is content in assuming rather than knowing exactly whether or not the wire actually possesses all traits required of a charged conductor of electricity.

Freud also doubted the existence of truth, but he is not unique in his ideas. As a psychologist, Freud questioned a truth that pervades a range of fields—that of a unified mind. He claimed that the philosophers of the Enlightenment based their “truthful” deductions on the assumed existence of a unitary self. Freud, though, makes no such assumption. He instead steals from William James’ concept of the “stream of consciousness.” This concept, made famous by the literature of Virginia Woolf and James Joyce, asserts that the only truth of the human mind is found in its perpetually changing nature. Freud similarly claims that “psycho-analysis cannot accept the view that consciousness is the essence of mental life, but is obliged to regard consciousness as one property of mental life, which may co-exist along with its other properties or may be absent” (697). The unitary self of the Enlightenment is a chimera. Freud goes on to describe the infinite nature of the mind, but his ideas are uninteresting and highly plagiaristic of James. Suffice it to say that Freud rejected the common “truth” of the unitary self.

While both thinkers acknowledged the hydra man faces in determining truth, neither offers a universal solution to this philosophical dilemma. Instead, each offers a way to help alleviate some of the difficulty exhibited in their respective fields in reaching truth. Mach calls for a dismissal of a scientific method that relies on the notion of cause. This rejection is less nihilistic than it would seem because, while he denounces the most

widespread method of obtaining knowledge, he proposes the viability of recognizing relationships as a function of various effects. A confusing dualism has arisen due to man's naïve vision of cause and effect as a veritable means by which to describe an occurrence. "For this reason I made the attempt long ago to substitute the notion of function for the notion of causes," Mach comments (543). This multivariable regression analysis subsumes cause and effect yet is wary of the degeneracy attributed to humble examination. In simple cause and effect, A can explain α ; if a man slips on a banana peel, one can identify a single cause of this embarrassing situation. Mach argues that effects do not have one cause. Rather, they require a host of phenomena; the letters $A-F$ might more accurately describe the causes of α . In fact, the alphabet might even not contain enough characters to maintain this analogy. The weather at that moment (B), the type of shoes the man wears (C), the age of the banana peel (D), the material of the pavement (E), those who were present to witness this hilarity (F): all could contribute to the man's disgrace and must be taken into account when analyzing what caused what. Functions set forth the interdependence of *many* elements or phenomena and are thus to be preferred over simple cause and effect when determining a law of causality.

James did not bother to attempt to build a way to prove truth. Coincidentally, neither does Freud. Instead, Freud attempts to lessen the difficulty of measuring a mind by grouping the mind into three distinguishable divisions—the ego, the super-ego, and the id. Since the "stream of consciousness" requires an infinite divisibility of the self, Freud regresses from James's theory, and Freud's efforts are vain attempts to limit something he argues as having a limitless, infinite nature. He claims his three interdependent segments of the brain can generate every possible situation in which the

mind could find itself. Hence, taken generously, Freud's fragmentation of the mind is an attempt to fragment infinity.

Both Mach and Freud seem to contradict themselves with their own ideas. Mach realized this but Freud did not. Mach's supporting of functional analysis *seems* contradictory to his belief in the infinite nature of things. If humans may not perceive the effect sensations have on things other than themselves, then it is impossible to ascribe cause to an effect even with functional examination; thus, a reevaluation of the scientific method might seem pusillanimous—a removal of the hopeless system altogether should be preferred. Given the current immeasurability of the size of the universe and the unknown lurking variables which inhabit it, Mach's new scientific method *is* as uncertain as univariable analysis. But Mach recognizes that functional analysis will not result in truth. As Mach divulges, “[r]elations of dependence are not in all cases sufficiently simple and determinable to be capable of mathematical statement” (Becher 544). Seeing this, Mach acknowledges several commonly overlooked factors in determining the measure of truth—most notably time, space, and the psyche. For instance: the man and his banana peel. What is the source of this mishap? The banana peel? Certainly not. The ascription of a single cause A to an effect α , again, is arbitrary, ambiguous, and fatuous in the extreme, and one must take into account through functional analysis such obvious factors as those aforementioned. But, along with the aforementioned causes $A-F$, how has the unfavorable time at which the man came walking toward the peel affected the situation? What degree of influence had put the fateful position of both banana peel and man on an identical plane and path? And is there a subconscious hunger for castigation within the man that might have coerced him to misstep onto the peel and thus meet his

downfall? This slippery situation requires in-depth study; functional investigation is not for the idle apathetic. Unfortunately, Mach does not offer any more helpful hints that simplify the Herculean task required of determining a logical connective, but he does issue a call-to-arms to scientists to immerse themselves in endeavors so great: “[T]he search for such dependences remains the aim of all scientific inquiry” (Becher 544).

Freud did not recognize his self-contradiction; thus, his ideas hardly hold water. If what Freud did could be considered an attempt to define three types of infinity, what then is the nature of infinity? Does infinity have an infinite number of parts, themselves infinite with an infinite number of parts, and so on? Can infinity breed infinity? One might as well argue that infinity has two infinite genders, each with infinite reproductive organs that are themselves infinitely infinite in infinity! Ludwig Wittgenstein, an Austrian from the same period as Freud and Mach, answers that infinity is simply infinity; it can have no parts.

Does the relation $m = 2n$ correlate the class of all numbers with one of its subclasses? No. It correlates any arbitrary number with another, and in that way we arrive at infinitely many pairs of classes, of which one is correlated with the other, but which are never related as class and subclass. Neither is this infinite process itself in some sense or other such a pair of classes ... In the superstition that $m = 2n$ correlates a class with its subclass, we merely have yet another case of ambiguous grammar. (465)

So, if infinity can have no subclass, the mind can have no ego, super-ego, and id. Psychoanalysis based upon these categorizations is based upon false notions.

That Mach and Freud each came to the conclusion that a pursuit of truth is exceptionally tricky is typical of thinkers of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. This nihilism, in its rejection of preconceived truth, hoped to eradicate heightened discrepancies between the eleven resentful national groups vying for control by proving the simple fact that a true agreement is impossible. In the relating of Mach and Freud's ideas to this social scene, the practicability of Mach and the childishness of Freud are clear. Applying Mach's idea of functions and the many variables that affect a cause, members of opposing cultures are urged to meet with each other and carefully, through deconstruction, determine and observe the perspective with which the other views the world. Through this understanding, it is hoped that sympathy will show itself and coexistence will then be conceivable. Mach clearly wanted a unified Austro-Hungarian state. Applying Freud's haphazard method of categorizing something, in order to delay the immediacy of its dilemma, the people of Austria-Hungary are to be split into eleven distinctive cultural sections and the problem of racial intolerance is neglected, pushed aside for future generations to attend to. In this situation, no understanding of other cultures would occur, and man would inevitably be forced (presumably by urban sprawl within internationally-acknowledged boundaries) to face the same problem again. Unfortunately, World War I interrupted any hope of implementing tactics similar to either of these ideas. In the end, the eleven cultures of Austria-Hungary were given a third option—independence. Although this avoided the egalitarian condition of heightened racial consciousness previously required in the Empire, the disparate groups were left in peace to decide for themselves their own public policies and truths. It is not

ignorant to suggest, though, that Mach's integrating idea of multiple perspectives might have helped to preserve Austria-Hungary.

Freud's ideas should not be able to have the influential magnitude they hold today; they leave the reader questioning even these exact ideas themselves. If Freud created classes of infinity, can there be classes of the ego, the super-ego, and the id? Can there be classes of these classes? Classes of these? And so on? The reader will continue until, in an apocalypse of perpetual questions, he is found with a philosophical Gordian knot. Mach ought to have a more famous name than Freud, for while both questioned established truths, Mach's ingenious ideas can boast of what Freud's ideas lack: an authentic foundation on reason and applicability in the real world.

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