

One hundred years ago

Zur Psycho-pathologie des Alltagsleben [The Psycho-pathology of Everyday Life]. By Prof. S. FREUD. 2nd Edition. Berlin: Karger, 1907. Pp.132, 8vo. Price mk. 3.50.

In this volume (which is enlarged from a pamphlet published several years ago) Prof. Freud discusses such problems as the causes of forgetfulness (more especially in the case of fairly familiar facts), lapses of speech and of action, and, more generally, the significance of trifling, involuntary, even unconscious actions and words as the expression of underlying and suppressed thoughts. The great actress, Eleanora Duse (the author mentions), when representing the part of a wife who is about to be unfaithful to her husband, mechanically plays with her wedding-ring, removing it, replacing it, removing it; the ring automatically becomes the symbol of the wife's fidelity.

All their lives, Freud believes, people are similarly revealing their secrets in an automatic manner, and the skilful physician of the mind is he who has trained himself to read the automatic language.

The general principle underlying all such phenomena is that imperfectly repressed psychic material, even though pressed out of consciousness, is still not deprived of every means of outward expression. A process goes on somewhat similar to that which, in a previous volume, Freud has sought to trace in dreams, real feelings and ideas being mechanically translated into new and perhaps trifling forms. In this way, Freud believes, all sorts of secret and even unacknowledged preoccupations and wishes, sometimes of a sexual character, become transformed into an entirely different shape, which may, however, be traced back to their real source by careful psycho-analysis, because there are always links of connection. These involuntary words and actions of ordinary life are thus

formed in exactly the same way as Freud believes that the symptoms of hysteria and obsessional neuroses are built up; "the boundaries between the normal and the abnormal nervous state are fluctuating, and we are all a little 'nervous.'"

Freud makes little reference to the work of other psychologists who have sought to elucidate the phenomena, as, for instance, to the American psychologists who have investigated lapses. He works out his own ideas, relies on his own observations, and adds to the interest of his book by the frankness with which he treats himself as a case for demonstration. Some of his demonstrations, as of a wrong word which persistently presents itself to the mind in place of the right word which cannot be recalled, though highly ingenious and elaborate, at times carry conviction. The author's faith in his method leads him to apply it to phenomena which usually receive a quite different kind of explanation. For instance, he believes that the illusion of false recognition, by which we seem to recognise a place we have never before seen, is not really an illusion at all; it is "the reminiscence of an unconscious day-dream," more especially when associated with some emotionally disturbing event.

There can be no doubt about the truth of the general principle on which Freud lays stress, that even the most trifling actions have a meaning, and are not without cause. Sometimes, also, the explanations reported by Freud in special cases are so adequate and apparently so demonstrable by independent evidence, that we cannot refuse to admit them. But in many cases, and especially when no independent evidence is available, doubt is inevitable, because other explanations suggest themselves. Thus, Freud is staying at an hotel where a young man, awaiting the arrival of his wife, seeks his society; a day or two later the wife arrives; Freud's society presumably becomes

unnecessary, but the husband introduces the wife, and casually invites Freud to join the couple at their breakfast table; when, however, Freud arrives the third chair is occupied by the husband's overcoat. Freud argues that the coat has been placed there automatically, as the expression of a concealed feeling that the professor's society is no longer welcome. That is possible, but it is also true that, in the absence of any kind of feeling, conscious or unconscious, the husband, with thoughts centred on his newly-arrived wife, might still fling his coat on the one available chair. I go to a locked drawer and automatically select from the bunch the wrong key. There is a reason for that wrong selection. But the reason is not, as Freud might be inclined to suppose, any secret emotion or desire, sexual or other; the wrong key I have automatically selected simply happens to be the key that I have lately most frequently required, – that is to say, my action has been determined by the general tendency of nervous action to flow in the direction of least resistance, in the channel formed by habit.

Thus automatic actions are not always due to latent specific causes, but often to latent general causes. And in every particular case we have the problem of deciding between the possible specific cause and the perhaps more probable general cause.

Such criticism, however, by no means destroys the interest and value of Freud's work, which cannot fail to be attractive to those whose business it is to search beneath the surface of human speech and human conduct for underlying causes.

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REFERENCE

Journal of Mental Science, October 1907, 830–832.
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 doi: 10.1192/bjp.191.6.566