

Lecture #9: Psychoanalysis & Existentialism

September 3, 2008

The Players

1. Ernest Becker

- Trained in Cultural Anthropology
- Broad-minded interdisciplinary thinker
- Sought at new science of man at the interface of humanities, social sciences, and psychology.
- Controversial thinker, gypsy scholar.
- Died at 49, two months before winning the Pulitzer for *The Denial of Death*
- Sequel, *Escape from Evil* which discusses social-cultural matters.

2. Sigmund Freud

- Founder of *Psychoanalysis*
- Best known for his theories of the unconscious mind
- Originally studied physiology and medicine
- Worked on a theory of physiology called “psychodynamics,” first posed by von Bruke, one of the major theorists of thermodynamics, who proposed that living creatures were dynamical systems governed by the laws of physics and chemistry.
- Began practicing neurology, but transitioned into psychotherapy, eventually developing the techniques and theories of psychoanalysis.

3. Otto Rank

- One of Freud’s students and closest collaborators
- Wrote, edited journals, managed Freud’s publishing house, practiced therapy

- Left Freud's circle in 1926 after being accused of an "anti-Oedipal heresy" for introducing pre-Oedipal psychological factors in *The Trauma of Birth*
 - Widely considered a precursor to existential psychology.
4. Kierkegaard, you know already

The Problem

1. The Absurd Tension at the Core of Human Beings
 - Creatureliness, animal nature, physical body
 - Finite, weak
 - Death
 - Symbolic, intellectual nature
 - Freedom, possibility
 - Meaning
2. Connection to Existentialism
 - Facticity vs. Transcendence
 - Finite/temporal vs. infinite/eternal
 - Thrownness vs. Freedom
3. Gods who shit
 - A gross contradiction
4. The Terror of Death

The Solutions

1. Self-repression
 - We construct defensive mechanisms to deny our mortality
 - Not a part of mental illness, necessary in some way to coping
 - Something we begin pre-reflectively
2. Cultural repression
 - Culture provides ways of building up a defense against the awareness of our mortality
3. Heroism

- Heroism is our answer to our internal contradiction

4. Problematic solutions

- Disconnection from our finite nature, delusions of grandeur
- Denial of our possibility, depression
- Lost in our defense mechanism, drugs, drinking, and shopping

5. Science and Religion