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reflection

The Psychopathology of Everyday Life, Sigmund Freud

Jeremy Holmes

Joyous is not a word normally associated with Freud despite being the true meaning of his name. But *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* fully deserves the epithet: a glorious collection of anecdotes, spoonerisms, lacunae, 'speech blunders' and odd actions – revealing, he argues, the cauldron of repressed feelings lurking below consciousness.

The book belongs to Freud's middle period, while still a passionate clinician reveling in free-associationism, and relatively unencumbered by meta-psychology. Written in 1901, published in 1904, it was first translated into English by Brill in 1914. 'Fehlleistungen' was changed by Strachey from Brill's 'faulty action' to the pseudo-medical 'parapraxis'. The 'Freudian slip', with its double entendre of a revealing/concealing female undergarment, appeared in 1959.

The Psychopathology of Everyday Life reveals Freud at his most scintillating. Many examples come from his own life, professional and personal. We learn of his marital tiffs; his daughter's life-threatening illness; sexual attraction to a younger woman; omitting to pay bills and losing his keys; rivalry with colleagues; and, despite his famed photographic memory, forgetting the name of a famous Renaissance painter, Signorelli. He touchingly exposes his professional failures: an analysand's suicide; patients he mis-diagnosed with 'hysteria' who had a brain tumour or multiple sclerosis.

Freud's mission is threefold: (1) to illustrate the continuity between normality and pathology, counteracting the prevalent view of mental illness as manifestation of 'degeneracy'; (2) following *The Interpretation of Dreams*, to show that 'dream-life' continues during the day; (3) to convince that 'faulty action' – including speech – is 'motivated' by warded-off affective states: 'forgetting in all cases is proved to be founded on a motive of displeasure'. It is not the feelings in themselves that are 'displeasurable'. Sexuality, and the desire for fame and recognition, are no less unconsciously 'motivating' than resentment, shame and disappointment. Displeasure lies in the anxiety associated with such feelings. Parapraxis arises out of what we now see as 'affect phobia'.

But was Freud right? True, scientific curiosity does not shy away from the everyday. Darwin learned as much from the worms in his Down House garden as from Galapagos finches. Freud argues for everyday material's 'admission' to science, subject to 'stricter methods of verification'. He is in awe of 'the great Darwin's' practice of noting examples which ran counter to his theories, fearing that wish-fulfillment would otherwise suppress them. Sadly, Freud fails to apply these strictures to himself. There are few if any black swans in *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*; psychic determinism rules.

We know now that many slips are unmotivated, flowing from 'banalisation', verbal typos and ingrained habit. But parapraxes are also undeniable. What primary school child has, to their horror, not called mistakenly their teacher 'Mum'? Male subjects given verbal tasks by scantily clad female psychologists tend to produce unwitting sexual innuendos. Avoidantly attached individuals have high cortisol levels, suggesting suppressed attachment needs; when subject to 'cognitive load', for instance in Stroop tests, the need for security parapraxically reveals itself.

A century on, Freud's ode to psychoanalytic joy has lost none of its freshness and relevance: essential reading for all would-be wise and witty psychiatrists.

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