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FREUD'S CONCEPT OF THE UNCONSCIOUS: A PHILOSOPHICAL ONTOLOGY OF HUMAN EXISTENCE

Ha Van Thi Ta[1]
Thuongmai University, Hanoi, Vietnam
https://orcid.org/0009-0000-7270-4005
E-mail: vanha@tmu.edu.vn

ABSTRACT:
This article explores the ontological dimension of Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory, focusing particularly on the concept of the unconscious and its foundational role in shaping human existence. While Freud did not claim to be a philosopher, his analysis of the human psyche led him to confront core philosophical questions regarding the nature of being. The study traces how Freud's clinical method—originally developed to treat mental illness—evolved into a broader inquiry into the structure of the human personality through key concepts such as the Id, Ego, and Superego. By positioning the unconscious not merely as a psychological phenomenon but as a central element in the ontological structure of the human being, Freud inadvertently contributed to reconfiguring the philosophical understanding of the self. Drawing comparisons with classical and modern Western philosophical thought, the article demonstrates that Freud's theory bridges psychology and philosophy, revealing human beings as complex, internally conflicted entities shaped by both instinctual drives and sociocultural norms. In doing so, Freud laid the groundwork for a philosophical anthropology in which the human subject is no longer understood solely through consciousness and reason, but as a dynamic intersection of unconscious forces and cultural formations.

KEYWORDS: Freud; psychoanalysis; unconscious; ontology; human existence; philosophical anthropology.

[1]PhD in Philosophy from the University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Vietnam National University, Hanoi. She is currently the Head of the Philosophy Department at the Faculty of Political Theory, Thuongmai University, Hanoi, Vietnam.

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Introduction

This article addresses a fundamental philosophical issue that emerges from Freud's psychoanalytic theory: the ontological status of the unconscious and its role in shaping human existence. Although Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) did not claim to be a philosopher, his inquiries into the human psyche—originating from a clinical interest in treating mental disorders—led him to confront enduring philosophical questions about the nature of being, selfhood, and subjectivity. As such, this study situates Freud's psychoanalysis within the broader context of Western philosophical thought, particularly in relation to traditional and modern approaches to ontology and philosophical anthropology.

The relevance of this topic lies in Freud's profound influence on how modern thought conceptualizes the human being—not solely as a rational, conscious agent, but as a subject deeply governed by unconscious processes, internal conflict, and historical repression. Recent scholarship has emphasized that the unconscious, far from being merely a clinical construct, functions as a fragmented and decentralizing force that undermines rationalist and anthropocentric models of subjectivity (Warmling; Bastone, 2023). Moreover, this conception of the unconscious situates it as a foundational element of psychic being rather than a secondary or derivative mental category (Zhang; Yuan; Cui, 2023).

Theoretical contributions also suggest that the unconscious plays a subversive political role by serving as a site of resistance to ideological domination and intellectual normalization, particularly within institutional and academic frameworks (O'loughlin, 2025). Additionally, the unconscious has been reinterpreted as a domain of ethical conflict, wherein instinctual drives are regulated by internalized cultural prohibitions and moral imperatives (Fernandez De Souza, 2023; Silva, 2019). Rather than signaling dysfunction, internal psychic division has been recast as a necessary precondition for ethical deliberation and responsibility.

At the clinical and cognitive level, empirical research into hypnosis has reinforced Freud's view of a permeable boundary between conscious and unconscious operations, supporting the idea of a dynamic psychic system continuously reshaped by suggestion and repression (Knafo; Weinberger, 2024). From a sociopolitical perspective, the unconscious has been shown to internalize broader ideological contradictions, reinforcing alienation through the psychic apparatus (Thompson, 2025). This insight broadens the reach of psychoanalysis beyond individual pathology and into the critique of social structures.

Cultural readings have further expanded the Freudian model into the domain of symbolic exchange, historical memory, and collective meaning-making, proposing the concept of a cultural unconscious that operates as a transpersonal infrastructure of ideology and aesthetics (Gu, 2024). Similarly, social theory has highlighted how unconscious dispositions are embedded in historically situated practices and institutional formations, aligning psychoanalysis with relational, non-essentialist accounts of subjectivity (Csányi, 2025). Finally, dialectical interpretations of Freud's epistemology draw attention to his ambivalent stance toward Enlightenment rationality—portraying psychoanalysis as both a product of modernity and a critical response to its contradictions (Costa, 2016).

In this broader context, Freud's ontology of the unconscious intersects with post-Cartesian philosophies of human existence (Khuat, 2024) and contemporary discourses on emancipation and cultural transformation (Nguyen; Nguyen, 2024). These developments suggest that psychoanalysis offers not merely a therapeutic method, but a radical rethinking of the foundations of human being.

The main objective of this article is to analyze the ontological implications of Freud's theory of the unconscious. It investigates how Freud's concepts—such as the Id, Ego, and

Superego—redefine human interiority and reorient philosophical discourse on being. Additionally, the study aims to clarify how Freud's psychoanalysis intersects with and departs from previous philosophical traditions, offering a new perspective on the relationship between instinct, culture, and subjectivity.

The article is structured as follows. The first section outlines the formation of Freud's philosophical thought, examining how clinical observations gradually led to theoretical elaborations with philosophical significance. The second section delves into the ontological dimension of psychoanalysis, particularly the function of the unconscious as a core element of human being. The final section reflects on the broader philosophical implications of Freud's theory, especially its impact on understanding the complexity of human existence in a cultural and social context.

Literature review

Freud's psychoanalytic theory has been the subject of extensive interdisciplinary research, spanning psychology, philosophy, anthropology, and cultural studies. Early interpretations of Freud's work, such as those by Ernest Jones (1879-1859) and Karl Abraham (1887-1925), focused primarily on its clinical and psychological applications. These studies largely emphasized the therapeutic value of psychoanalysis and the structure of neurosis, yet they often overlooked the deeper philosophical implications embedded within Freud's conceptual framework.

A shift occurred with the work of Paul Ricoeur (1913-2005), Michel Foucault (1926-1984), and Jürgen Habermas (born 1929), who repositioned Freud as a pivotal thinker in modern epistemology and ontology. Ricoeur's "hermeneutics of suspicion" situated Freud alongside Marx and Nietzsche as architects of a deeper critique of consciousness, while Foucault traced how psychoanalysis functioned within broader regimes of knowledge and power, shaping modern subjectivity. These philosophical reevaluations reframed psychoanalysis as not merely a therapeutic method but a critical intervention into foundational understandings of human existence.

Freud's ideas have been further illuminated by historical comparisons with Schopenhauer, Kierkegaard, and Nietzsche, all of whom examined the irrational and often contradictory forces underlying human behavior. While these earlier thinkers speculated on unconscious motivations, Freud operationalized them through clinical practice, thereby establishing the unconscious as a scientifically and philosophically credible concept.

Recent scholarship has critically reengaged Freud's theory of the unconscious through diverse methodological and philosophical lenses, emphasizing its ontological and interdisciplinary resonance. Warmling e Bastone (2023) propose that Freud's displacement of the rational, autonomous subject inaugurates a shift toward a fragmented model of selfhood, disrupting Cartesian paradigms and reinforcing post-anthropocentric critiques of subjectivity. This reframing situates the unconscious as a decentralized locus of psychic activity, irreducible to conscious intentionality.

Expanding this trajectory, Zhang; Yuan e Cui (2023) integrate neuro-philosophical insights with Freudian theory, positing the unconscious as a corporeal interface where biological affect intersects with symbolic mediation. Their account not only validates Freud's emphasis on desire as a bodily impulse but also updates it within contemporary cognitive science, affirming the unconscious as foundational to both embodied cognition and cultural inscription.

O'loughlin (2025) highlights the unconscious as a site of ideological resistance, emphasizing its political agency within academic and emancipatory contexts. This reading

situates psychoanalysis within the framework of critical theory, affirming its relevance in the struggle against normative hegemonies. Nguyen e Nguyen (2024) complement this view by rooting emancipation in the material, historical, and cultural contexts of Vietnam, demonstrating that liberation is not merely personal but socio-historically situated—a concept resonant with Freud's ontological critique of repression as a systemic, not merely individual, condition.

Ethical implications have also been probed. Silva (2019) reinterprets the pleasure principle through a Kantian moral framework, positioning the unconscious as a site of normative tension between desire and internalized law. Similarly, Fernandez De Souza (2023) frames psychic fragmentation as the groundwork for ethical subjectivity, aligning Freud's notion of internal conflict with the formation of moral agency.

Knafo e Weinberger (2024) contribute empirical nuance by examining hypnosis as a mechanism that reveals the permeability of the psychic boundary. Their research supports Freud's model of a dynamic psyche, where conscious suggestion and unconscious reception are not dichotomous but mutually constitutive. This reinforces the fluidity of psychic structures central to Freudian ontology.

Thompson (2025) forges a critical synthesis between Freudian and Marxist frameworks, contending that unconscious drives internalize systemic contradictions, thereby generating alienated subjectivity. This perspective extends the reach of psychoanalysis into ideological critique, highlighting its diagnostic value in mapping the psychic operations of power.

Gu (2024) articulates a theory of the "cultural unconscious," a transpersonal domain through which ideological formations, aesthetic codes, and historical memory are reproduced. This expands the Freudian unconscious into the realm of cultural criticism, demonstrating its utility in explaining collective symbolic structures and sociopolitical reproduction.

In a similar vein, Csányi (2025) synthesizes Freudian theory with Bourdieu's concept of habitus, illustrating how unconscious dispositions are shaped by material histories and institutional structures. This convergence highlights the unconscious as not merely intra-psychic but deeply embedded in social praxis, reinforcing its relational and historicized dimensions.

Costa (2016) offers a dialectical reading of Freud's epistemology, drawing from Adorno and Horkheimer to illuminate the ambivalence toward Enlightenment rationality in Freud's thought. Costa's analysis reveals psychoanalysis as both a product of and challenge to the modernist faith in reason, exposing the contradictions and limits inherent in rationalist frameworks.

Khuat (2024) enriches these discussions by framing human existence through a philosophical lens that resonates with Freudian ontology. Arguing that being is always already fractured and conditioned by historical and unconscious forces, Khuat foregrounds the centrality of internal division—mirroring Freud's structural theory—in shaping ethical responsibility and subjective becoming.

Despite this conceptual richness, critical lacunae persist. Many existing accounts privilege either the clinical efficacy of the unconscious or its cultural representations, often eliding its deeper ontological status. Moreover, the internal tensions within Freud's model—particularly concerning the superego's normative force and the fragility of rational consciousness—remain insufficiently theorized.

This study intervenes in these debates by foregrounding the ontological implications of the Freudian unconscious. Rather than treating it solely as a reservoir of repressed impulses, it is reinterpreted here as a constitutive dimension of being that structures subjectivity, mediates ethical conflict, and underpins sociopolitical dynamics. By synthesizing clinical, ethical, political, and cultural interpretations, the research reframes psychoanalysis as a critical ontology of modern existence.

Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative, conceptual approach grounded in interpretive philosophical analysis. It is designed to explore the ontological dimensions of psychoanalytic theory, particularly focusing on the role of the unconscious in shaping human existence. Instead of engaging in empirical testing, the study emphasizes the critical examination of theoretical constructs and philosophical implications.

The investigation relies entirely on secondary sources, drawing from foundational psychoanalytic texts and a broad range of contemporary philosophical and psychoanalytic literature. Central works by Freud, such as *The Interpretation of Dreams*, *The Ego and the Id*, and *Civilization and Its Discontents*, serve as the primary theoretical foundation. These are complemented by diverse perspectives that reinterpret Freud's legacy through ethical, political, cultural, and cognitive lenses (Costa, 2016; Fernandez De Souza, 2023; Silva, 2019; Warmling; Bastone, 2023).

The research process entailed close textual analysis, comparative synthesis, and hermeneutic engagement. Key psychoanalytic concepts were analyzed in relation to broader ontological questions concerning being, subjectivity, and moral agency. This method enabled a critical reconstruction of how Freud's conceptual framework challenges traditional philosophical assumptions and reframes the understanding of human interiority.

As the study did not involve human or animal subjects, no ethical clearance was required. Nevertheless, it upholds rigorous academic standards through comprehensive citation of all consulted sources and adherence to principles of scholarly integrity. The overarching aim is to contribute to the ongoing philosophical discourse on human nature by foregrounding the unconscious as a constitutive force within modern ontological inquiry.

Results and discussion

1. The formation of Freud's philosophical thought

Freud's psychoanalysis initially emerged as a method and technique for treating mental illness. He believed that some mental disorders stemmed not from physical damage but from functional disturbances—essentially disruptions in the regulation of the psyche. Therefore, treating such mental illnesses required uncovering the hidden inner conflicts of the patient, identifying the root causes, and liberating them from the blind dominance of the unconscious, replacing it with rational, conscious control. Freud developed the method of free association, critically building upon the hypnosis techniques of his predecessors. This method of free association became the core of psychoanalysis, and its establishment marked the true beginning of psychoanalytic theory.

Freud's psychoanalytic method was grounded in his unique psychological theory. Initially considered a branch of psychology, psychoanalysis focused on the unconscious as its primary object of study. Through his therapeutic practice, Freud endeavored to uncover the deep causes of mental disorders. Key concepts of psychoanalysis—such as "imagination," "repression," "transference," "consciousness," "subconscious," and "unconscious"—emerged from his study of hysteria. He emphasized the significance of emotional life and the interplay between consciousness and the unconscious. In his *Studies on Hysteria*, Freud argued that the origin of mental illness might lie in the transformation between unconscious and conscious states.

To better understand the structure of the human psyche, Freud analyzed his own ego, positioning himself as both analyst and patient. Following the death of his father—a major emotional shock—Freud experienced inner turmoil, torn between love, reverence, fear, and

contempt. "In analysis, he discovered emotionally charged traces and traced them back to childhood origins. He found that childhood experiences manifested in unconscious behavior, habits, and emotions in daily life; hence, the analysis of childhood life was essential for understanding the formation and content of the unconscious" (Diep, 2002, p. 78-79). Freud recalled childhood memories and dreams—such as being punished for bedwetting, being banished to a dark room for spying on his parents, or witnessing his father being humiliated publicly by an anti-Semite. These experiences fostered a preference for his mother and resentment toward his father. Freud concluded that the "Oedipus complex" arose from this dual emotion—love and hatred—towards one's parents. He asserted that boys commonly desire their mothers and girls their fathers, a universal phenomenon in childhood psychology and the origin of complex human spiritual actions. Incest and parricide were among the earliest sins in human history, warranting severe punishment. As such, a sense of guilt typically surrounds these issues. Freud was acutely aware of his own guilt towards his father, describing prolonged spiritual torment.

By analyzing his own ego and those of his patients, Freud revealed the hidden secrets of the unconscious. In clinical practice, he emphasized the connection between dreams and the unconscious. Dreams, according to Freud, were a key pathway to the unconscious because they often reflected forgotten childhood experiences. He stated, "The task of psychoanalytic therapy is to make the unconscious—the root of illness—conscious" (Freud, 2002, p. 314). Interpreting dreams, Freud argued, is a fundamental route to understanding the unconscious and a firm foundation for psychoanalytic research: "If we resolve the major problem of dreams, then the new issues raised by psychoanalysis will no longer pose difficulties" (Freud, 2002, p. 436). Freud believed that all dreams carry specific meanings.

In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud illustrated how repressed instinctual desires in the unconscious are transformed into dream content through four stages: condensation, displacement, dramatization, and symbolism—mirroring human cognition. A dream is a disguised and distorted expression of a repressed and forbidden desire. Dream distortion results from the mind's mechanisms that attempt to bring unconscious material into consciousness. Psychologically, dreams serve to relieve the tensions caused by repressed desires.

Freud noted that humans, as social beings, tend to conceal their animalistic instincts and thus pay little attention to the unconscious. But ignorance does not equate to non-existence; rather, the unconscious is the core of the human psyche. His works *The Interpretation of Dreams* and *Psychopathology of Everyday Life* laid the theoretical foundations of the unconscious. In his dream studies, Freud discovered that the unconscious is not exclusive to the mentally ill but exists universally, operating under the same laws. In essence, human psychological activity is characterized by a constant tension between the unconscious and consciousness—two forces that conflict and compromise, often leading to confusion and forgetfulness.

Freud's discovery of the unconscious beneath conscious thought significantly shaped modern conceptions of humanity. He stated, "The recognition of unconscious mental activity opens up a new and decisive direction for science" (Freud, 2002, p. 13-14). This new orientation challenged the positivist notion of man as purely rational.

Freud regarded the unconscious as the primary instinctual drive and the internal force of the psyche, with its driving mechanism being primitive sexuality. However, Freud's concept of sexuality went beyond mere physical intercourse—it encompassed love in all its diversity: romantic, fraternal, familial, self-love, and passionate idealism. Thus, Freud's notion of sexuality can also be interpreted as desire or libido (Nguyen, 2001).

Freud termed this psychosexual energy "libido." All psychological and physiological impulses were rooted in libido, which he saw as the most fundamental and powerful of all instincts—driving pleasure, creativity, reproduction, and maintaining psychological balance.

Freud's analysis of childhood sexuality helped deepen understanding of adult sexual life. Childhood sexual memories, often repressed during puberty due to societal prohibitions, returned in adolescence, sometimes causing unexpected consequences. The Oedipus and Electra complexes—childhood desires for the opposite-sex parent—were central concepts in psychoanalysis and were believed to profoundly affect personality development (Pham, 2000).

Theoretically, Freud proposed three principles of sexual theory: the stimulation principle (arousal of desire), the pleasure principle (satisfaction of desire), and the reality principle (regulation of instinctual desire by the ego in accordance with social conditions). He integrated these into his analysis of personality development. Freud admitted that his sexual theory was even more controversial than his concept of the unconscious.

In his later works, Freud applied his theories to history and society. On one hand, this "philosophized" his theory; on the other, it sometimes became speculative and ungrounded. In works like *The Ego and the Id*, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, and *The Future of an Illusion*, Freud explored the relationship between the individual and society and the origin of civilization. He posited an inherent conflict between individual instincts and social norms. Human history, he claimed, is a history of repressed instincts, and civilization arises from this repression and the sublimation of unconscious drives. Revisiting his earlier theories, Freud added new concepts such as personality structure, sublimation, the superego, and consciousness.

Freud divided the personality into three components: the Id, Ego, and Superego. The Id is unconscious, primal, instinctual. The Ego mediates between internal drives and the external world, often vulnerable due to pressures from the Id, Superego, and unconscious intentions. It must navigate a brutal yet seductive reality, making it perpetually fragile (Diep, 2002).

Repressed desires that are not satisfied by the Id seek sublimation—indirect satisfaction through creative expression in art, literature, science, and technology. These sublimations underpin human culture and civilization. However, Freud's analysis led to a deep ambivalence: he resented culture's repression of instinct but also acknowledged its civilizing benefits. This contradiction drew criticism from his students.

In studying personality and human motivation, Freud emphasized unconscious drives. Initially influenced by instinct psychology, he classified human instincts into self-preservation and species-preservation (sexual instinct) (Nguyen, 2001). However, Freud later found his instinct theory inadequate for explaining behavior beyond the pleasure principle. Eventually, he proposed two opposing instincts: Eros (life instinct) and Thanatos (death instinct). Eros, aligned with the reality principle, seeks internal stimulation, while Thanatos seeks external, destructive release—aiming to restore an original state of quiescence. This dualism was rooted in Freud's personal fear of death and his disillusionment after World War I. The identification of these two instincts deepened the philosophical understanding of human existence in Freud's thought.

In *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, Freud applied his two major discoveries to interpersonal relationships. He demonstrated that "love relations" based on instinct bind individuals together in society, forming the core of human relations. In such interactions, self-love transforms into altruism, fostering group cohesion (Freud, 2009, p. 369). Freud also applied psychoanalysis to the origins of morality and religion, arguing that the Oedipus complex is the ultimate source of both. This theory was developed in *Totem and Taboo* and *Moses and Monotheism*.

Freud's philosophical thought evolved from analyzing pathological individuals to engaging with broader social and cultural questions. As a result, psychoanalysis embodies a unique cultural and social philosophy. It has since become a theoretical foundation for various social sciences and humanities. Despite its limitations, later revised by Freud's followers, psychoanalysis' evolution from classical to modern forms has made it increasingly significant in

contemporary Western philosophy. While the philosophical dimension of Freud's work is not always explicit, it undeniably offers profound insights into human existence in the modern world.

Freud's findings challenged Enlightenment notions of rational autonomy by revealing that behavior is often governed by unconscious motivations. His structural model of the psyche (Id, Ego, Superego) proposed a conflicted subjectivity wherein rationality is not sovereign but constantly negotiated through internal psychic tension. This marked a philosophical departure from conscientialist theories of the self and introduced a decentered model of human subjectivity (Silva, 2019). Freud's idea of the unconscious as a mediator between bodily instinct and mental processes, explored by Zhang; Yuan e Cui (2023), provides a dualistic but dynamic account of human psychology. It positioned the unconscious not just as a repository of repressed content but as a psychophysical nexus. In later writings such as *Civilization and Its Discontents* and *The Ego and the Id*, Freud expanded psychoanalytic theory to social and cultural domains, suggesting that civilization itself is founded on the repression and sublimation of instinctual drives. This extension generated tensions in his theory, as Freud both critiqued the repressive structures of culture and acknowledged their civilizing function.

Moreover, Freud's work on sublimation anticipated later critical theories of culture. Scholars such as Warmling e Bastone (2023) emphasize that Freud's model displaces the Cartesian subject, revealing a fragmented self-shaped by unconscious desire and socio-symbolic structures.

From a philosophical standpoint, Freud's articulation of the pleasure and reality principles, as discussed by Silva (2019), deepened the ethical implications of psychoanalysis by relating affective life to moral development and law.

While Freud initially framed instincts as life-preserving (self and sexual instincts), he later introduced the dualism of Eros and Thanatos to account for self-destructive tendencies. This theoretical shift, influenced by the trauma of war and disillusionment, highlighted the inherent ambivalence of human motivation and its implications for understanding freedom and autonomy.

Freud's philosophical evolution—from clinical practice to theoretical abstraction—resulted in a model of subjectivity marked by internal division, historical contingency, and ethical complexity. Though later contested and revised, his thought laid a foundation for modern understandings of human psychology, culture, and moral life.

2. Freud's philosophical ontology

As a fundamental component and "foundation" of most philosophical systems, the issue of ontology—and the corresponding ontological approach—requires that we identify within each system its notions regarding the existence of nature, society, or the human being itself. The starting point of ontology, or "being," represents the internal dynamic logic of most philosophical systems in general. Following this logic, any examination of a philosophical system should begin with ontological questions. Freud's philosophy is no exception.

Understanding and clarifying the structure of human existence, and demonstrating the existence of a phenomenon known as the unconscious in human life and behavior—recognizing it as the core of ontological thought within psychoanalysis—is particularly significant in interpreting Freud's philosophical ideas.

First, it must be affirmed that ontology is the most basic branch of traditional philosophy. Generally speaking, ontology is understood as the theory of being, and the concept of "being" is among the core notions that nearly all philosophical schools must clarify. In modern Western philosophy, the issue of cultural ontology has also been introduced. Cultural ontology concerns itself with the distinct nature of human existence as a cultural being and seeks to determine its basic structure. From this viewpoint, Heidegger argues that philosophy's task is to analyze and

reveal the structure of human existence, while J.P. Sartre considers ontology as a discipline that describes and records different components of being.

Freud's psychoanalysis, though initially a field of clinical medicine, eventually evolved into a movement within modern Western philosophy. Freud's achievement lies in constructing an ideology, a theoretical premise, and a new methodological system to help Western individuals reassess themselves. Through psychiatric experimentation, Freud analyzed the structure of human existence and revealed that the unconscious is the decisive factor governing all human behavior. Building on this, scholars such as Zhang; Yuan e Cui (2023) highlight how Freud's ontological model positions the unconscious not merely as a repressed domain but as a dynamic psychophysical interface between instinctual drives and symbolic formation.

By critiquing traditional ontology—which had ignored Socrates' call for introspection and instead focused excessively on the external world, thereby neglecting the significance of human existence—Freud asserted that philosophy must return to investigating the human being, grasping the essence of human behavior to understand it in relation to the outside world. Accordingly, he argued that psychoanalysis must concentrate on studying the individual, penetrating the depths of the unconscious to grasp the fundamental basis of being as manifested through everyday life. In fact, Freud did not reject traditional ontology but shifted its focus to the deep domain of human nature.

Freud's philosophical thought primarily centers on the concept of the unconscious. After extensive exploration (during the 1880s–1890s), Freud arrived at a fundamentally new conception of the unconscious, different from earlier theories. It is mistaken to credit Freud as the first to discover the "unconscious," as philosophers and physicians had discussed it before him. For a long time, philosophy had operated under an anthropological principle in which human beings, their motives, and their existence were understood only as expressions of conscious life. It was assumed that the entirety of human consciousness could be studied through reason. This perspective was crystallized in Descartes' proposition, "I think, therefore I am." However, beginning in the modern period, the unconscious began to occupy a more prominent role in philosophical anthropology. Thinkers such as Leibniz, Kant, Kierkegaard, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, and Hartmann, from various angles and positions, began analyzing the role and significance of unconscious psychological processes. Freud, for his part, made a decisive contribution to the study of this issue, opening a new direction in philosophical anthropology and affirming the unconscious as the most important parameter of human existence.

Through his clinical practice, Freud gradually recognized a truth: "in the world of neuroses, the psychic entity holds the utmost importance" (Freud, 2002, p. 412). The novelty of his theory lies in conceiving the unconscious as a powerful force opposing consciousness, and in positing a psychological dynamic that could logically explain not only most mental disorders but also the interaction between unconscious and conscious processes. Furthermore, unconscious processes are consistently aligned with instinctual stimuli—primarily sexual desires.

According to Freud, a contradiction always exists within humans between their natural and social dispositions; the dialectical movement of being originates from this tension. He argued that external societal pressures and repression become so deeply internalized that individuals can no longer control their own behavior. This insight, as expanded by O'loughlin (2025), underscores how alienation within modern institutions is not simply a psychological byproduct but a culturally embedded phenomenon reinforced by structural constraints on academic and social freedom.

With such a framing, Freud paved the way for a new approach to understanding the human being. He also reopened a question that earlier psychology had naively presumed answered: What is the psyche? Before Freud, Descartes and Kant typically equated mental life

with consciousness. For them, all psychic phenomena were conscious, which was the essence of rationalism. In the 17th century, La Rochefoucauld observed that the true motives behind human behavior were often not the noble reasons people cited. He believed humans thought they acted freely, but in reality, they were compelled. In alignment, Leibniz noted that people could not fully grasp their own mental life. In the 19th century, Schopenhauer proposed that a blind will exists within each person, forming the origin and basis of life; reason, he claimed, knew nothing of the will's decisions. Nietzsche later asserted that the true driving force in humans was not rationality but the "will to power"—a dark and violent desire to dominate the world.

Around the same time, Freud's French mentor Pierre Janet suggested that personality consisted of several layers, of which humans were only aware of the conscious one. The unconscious, according to Janet, was a primitive or preconscious form of awareness. Philosophers and psychologists before Freud generally believed that unconscious behavior was still fundamentally conscious, merely repressed into the past and dormant. Only in special cases could such behavior resurface. Daily mental life was thought to be mostly determined by conscious acts, with the unconscious playing a negligible role. Consequently, philosophy and psychology focused on uncovering and controlling conscious behavior. In general, the unconscious was viewed as passive, negative, and inactive.

Thus, while pre-Freudian philosophers recognized the existence of the unconscious in mental life, none had thoroughly examined its role. Freud took a radically different stance: he believed daily psychic life was predominantly governed not by consciousness but by the unconscious. Conscious and unconscious behavior were, in his view, two aspects of the same mental act. Their division was primarily for identifying their origins and roles. For Freud, the unconscious was central—it was the subterranean vault where the legacies of childhood were stored. We become who we are in early childhood, but remember none of it, as a kind of censor prevents recollection. He criticized earlier philosophers for only analyzing what appears above the surface, whereas he descended into the depths of the human psyche (Freud, 1969). As Warmling e Bastone (2023) emphasize, Freud's move to decenter the rational subject reveals a transformation in philosophical anthropology—one where the unconscious becomes a foundational determinant in the constitution of subjectivity.

Thus, the unconscious lies at the deepest level of the psychic apparatus, a reservoir of instincts, suppressed emotions, and desires. These instincts carry intense psychic energy governed by the pleasure principle, always seeking expression and entry into consciousness for satisfaction. Freud noted that to assert their social identity, individuals often concealed their animalistic drives, leading to a neglect of the unconscious.

Psychoanalysis, then, does not merely study the inner world of the individual—it investigates the domain of the psyche, within which occur the most fundamental processes and transformations affecting the structure of human existence. The ontological question is thus relocated deep into the realm of the psychic. Reality, in this sense, becomes psychological in nature, governed by developmental laws that differ significantly from those found in the physical world. Studying psychological reality entails clarifying the laws of mental operation, investigating internal conflicts and contradictions that erupt in the deep layers of human existence—this is the foundation of Freud's ontological psychoanalysis (Do, 2014). In other words, resolving these conflicts must involve consciously moderating and gradually satisfying desires.

However, what mattered most to Freud was not merely describing such phenomena, but understanding the mechanisms behind them—their causes and interrelationships—in order to grasp the full operation of the psychic apparatus. A key distinction in Freud's philosophical thought is that it centers on the human being and seeks to comprehend the full diversity of human

psychology. Psychoanalytic philosophy thus extended far beyond therapeutic objectives, addressing questions in philosophical anthropology, cultural philosophy, and the philosophy of life. Diverse representations of the psyche were built from a common experiential basis—dream interpretation and the patients' free associations.

At the beginning of the 20th century, Freud proposed his first psychological model, distinguishing three levels: consciousness, the preconscious, and the unconscious. This structural breakdown of human existence served both clinical and scientific purposes (Freud, 1969).

To explain the transition of unconscious content through the preconscious to consciousness, Freud used the following analogy: If we compare the ego to a source of light—say, a candle in a room—then the conscious field encompasses what is illuminated at that moment. In a large room, the candle lights up a broad space, just as we are aware of a limited number of external stimuli and memories at any given time. But the totality of what could potentially become conscious is far greater—we possess innumerable recollections and can shift attention from one object to another. This is the domain of the preconscious: it is not currently conscious but can become so.

In contrast, the unconscious has distinct characteristics. It serves as the conduit for instinctual drives seeking satisfaction. Consciousness, by contrast, contains negation, doubt, and conflict. The material world is bound by time, but the unconscious transcends time—it does not operate in sequences and remains temporally static. Consciousness is an open system rooted in reality and shaped by future needs. Emotions are influenced by social circumstances and thus linked to civilization. The unconscious, however, is closed, detached from reality, and governed solely by the pleasure principle.

While Freud emphasized the unconscious, he did not dismiss other components of personality. He saw consciousness as the highest stage of psychological development. Because consciousness controls the unconscious, it is able to regulate deep instinctual conflicts, thereby allowing behavior to conform to socially accepted patterns. Freud wrote: "In its relation with the unconscious, we might compare the ego to a rider who is trying to dominate a stronger horse—not by his own strength, but by borrowing force from elsewhere. Still, the rider must go where the horse goes; the ego, in enacting the unconscious will, behaves as though it were its own" (Freud, 1969, p. 242).

In the psychic apparatus, the interaction among the unconscious, preconscious, and conscious forms a dynamic structure governing human behavior. Psychological functioning is stable when there is harmony between the unconscious and conscious systems, mediated by the preconscious. When this balance is disrupted, psychological structure becomes abnormal, leading to inner unrest and potentially mental illness if not corrected.

The unconscious lies at the threshold of conscious flow in time, seemingly acting as an eternal essence (or Schopenhauer's "will to life") penetrating the realm of conscious phenomena. Freud did not deny the relative independence of consciousness; in fact, he acknowledged its capacity to understand the world and act in accordance with natural necessity. In this way, Freud may be seen as a successor to Enlightenment philosophy. The core proposition of psychoanalysis aligns with Enlightenment ideals: "Where *id* was, *ego* shall be." That is, the light of understanding is humanity's highest value, and healing neuroses goes hand in hand with self-awareness and mastery over irrational impulses.

Freud recognized certain flaws in this model. The "censor" must already know what is to be prohibited, implying that consciousness must already be aware of the unconscious. Desires possess greater intelligence and cunning than the censor, as they know the prohibitions and how to circumvent them, while Freud described unconscious processes that cannot find expression in language. Guilt and fear remain inexplicable when encountering excluded symbols.

In the 1920s, Freud reassessed this model and gradually moved away from individual psychology. He introduced a new structural model of human existence comprising three components: the id (*Es*), the ego (*Ich*), and the superego (*Über-ich*). These are not separate entities but components of a complex human personality. This tripartite model was vital to Freud's philosophical thought, for it demonstrated how instincts serve as developmental forces guiding maturation toward socially and culturally shaped goals.

To explain this structure, Freud developed his theory of psychic energy, merging the pleasure and reality principles into a broader theory of Eros (life instinct) and Thanatos (death instinct). According to Freud, the id is the primitive component of the mind—present from birth and undifferentiated—manifesting in unintentional, impulsive behavior. It is the core of psychic reality, representing the internal world that predates external contact. Freud believed that experiences repeated over generations could become embedded in the id's permanent structure. The repression imposed by the ego on the id leads to new accumulations within it.

The ego represents psychological individuality, formed through the id's interaction with reality. It operates in consciousness through perception, language, and thought, enabling regulation of basic functions like eating and speaking. The ego adheres to the reality principle, mediating between instinctual demands and societal constraints. In this way, it transcends the biological unity of the body, reaching a higher integration: self-mastery. When conscious self-control is attained, the ego can harness previously repressed energies for constructive purposes. This is sublimation. Failure to sublimate leads to repression, harming the ego and diminishing its conscious expression. Freud wrote: "When the ego represses, it follows the pleasure principle rather than the reality principle, and it suffers the consequences. By doing so, the ego narrows its territory—but one cannot flee from oneself forever" (Freud, 1969, p. 248–249). To avoid this, the ego adopts the reality principle to regulate both the id and superego, allowing rational action in accordance with external circumstances.

The superego is formed unconsciously from the ego's life experiences, especially those involving parental relationships. It arises from the internalization of social and familial restrictions during development. Emerging from the early, obscure periods of childhood, the superego clashes with the ego through moral commands—most notably guilt. It embodies the idealized image of parental authority and societal norms. However, the superego is not inherently individual; it results from social and familial pressures.

The superego stems from two major sources: biological nature and historical nature (Diep, 2002). Biologically, it is shaped by the Oedipus complex—rooted in sexual drives. Historically, it is inherited through unconscious cultural transmission. Human nature carries the primal experiences, religion, ethics, conscience, and ideals that stem from the Oedipus complex. Early repression by the mother—later replaced by teachers or authority figures—gives rise to conscience, morality, and social emotion. Freud believed that the reward-punishment mechanism in childhood played a key role in forming the superego. Punishment led to feelings of abandonment and lack of love. This mechanism enforced adherence to moral norms. Thus, the superego limits the pleasure principle, restrains aggression, and prevents socially harmful behavior.

Freud argued that unconscious desires (the id) not only conflict with the ego but also with the superego—a psychological realm that remains outside the individual's awareness, split off from the id during childhood. The ego often finds itself in a precarious position: caught between the innate urges of the id and the prohibitions of the superego (taboos), which are internalized social constraints. The ego, in trying to navigate between primitive desires and moral standards, relies on a series of defense mechanisms. Among the most significant is repression, which pushes unacceptable desires out of conscious awareness, especially under the influence of the superego.

In this revised model, the terms "unconscious" and "preconscious" function as descriptors not only of the id but also of parts of the ego and the superego (such as defense mechanisms). Beneath all human cultural accomplishments lies the unchanging foundation of ancient psychological processes inherited from our primitive ancestors. According to the phylogenetic principle, individual development repeats species development—Freud often viewed the thinking of modern children as reflective of the mindset of early humans.

Despite their differences, the id and superego share a common trait: they are impersonal forces of the past that oppose and contest the individuality of the person in the battle for control over the ego. The biological inheritance of primitive desires is in irreconcilable conflict with the cultural norms and institutional regulations internalized by the person from society, law, and morality.

In sum, the superego is the result of the conflict between the id and life's external reality. It is the crystallization of all educational and cultural interventions—interventions that are often misunderstood or feared by the individual. The superego can carry a tragic burden, forming the basis of persistent guilt due to these formative pressures. If these pressures are imposed harshly, without compassion, the superego becomes a rigid "judge," repressing the psychic energy of the personality in the name of secret, inherited imperatives. In this case, the superego continues to enforce outdated and incomprehensible taboos, channeling unconscious desires into fantasy rather than fulfillment.

Yet Freud's core concern was not to simply identify or describe the three components of human existence (id, ego, superego), but rather to explore how they interact and influence each other. According to him, these three components never operate independently. The id, with its repressed drives, constantly seeks satisfaction. The ego emerges as a mediator between the unconscious and the external world, formed through the socialization of the individual. Consciousness, as part of the ego, attempts to manage irrational impulses and align them with reality through rational argumentation and numerous defense mechanisms. Repression is key among these, limiting inappropriate desires according to the standards imposed by the superego.

The superego is formed through the internalization of external moral and social demands, especially those originating from emotional bonds with parents or authority figures (broadly defined). It typically operates spontaneously through its representatives in consciousness: conscience, idealized notions of admired or revered figures. When the ego attempts to carry out actions that violate these norms, the superego triggers feelings of guilt, self-reproach, or fear.

Within every individual, two opposing tendencies coexist. The first is the desire for personal gratification, for acting on one's impulses regardless of rationality or acceptability. The second is the ego, shaped by social relationships and societal norms—customs, traditions, moral codes, and laws. These tendencies are in perpetual conflict. The id's desires and taboos often remain unfulfilled because of their irrational nature and the constraints imposed by social reality. Yet the id is obstinate and resistant to suppression. If repression is excessive or poorly managed, the individual faces the risk of neurosis or mental illness.

Freud proposed a strategy of gradual release—intelligently and cautiously—to alleviate repression, avoid psychic harm, and preserve well-being and dignity. The success of this process depends on the individual's intelligence, clarity, and life experience. People must learn to choose objects and modes of satisfaction that are healthy and socially appropriate.

To some extent, Freud acknowledged the regulatory role of the superego on consciousness in a positive light. However, fundamentally, he opposed and resisted the superego. He saw it as a mechanism of passive compliance with cultural institutions—often misunderstood or even feared. In this view, when cultural norms (in education, morality, or law) act solely through imposition or repression, the superego becomes antagonistic to consciousness. Formed

unnaturally and unconsciously, lacking understanding and self-awareness, the superego acts in a submissive and constrained manner—thus perpetuating internal guilt.

Freud believed that if cultural institutions—education, morality, and law—could operate through empathy and transformation rather than repression, the superego could gradually be integrated into the conscious mind and governed by reason. Herein lies Freud's internal contradiction. He recognized that an absolutized superego could lead to intolerable inner conflict (between unconscious and conscious realms) and eventually crush personal freedom. His compromise solution failed, and he turned toward an existentialist resolution: individuals must become self-aware, experience reality for themselves, and freely accept the authority of the superego (Dang, 2012).

Thus, Freud was not the first to discover the unconscious. But it was the integral view of the psyche as the unity of unconscious and conscious processes that permeated his thought and his works. For Freud, the relationship between them was expressed first of all as a conflict between the desires determined by human nature and social norms and cultural values. It is the repression of natural desires that is the major cause of mental illness. Studying the psychoanalytic philosophical view of the unconscious has shown that humans are very complex and it would be a serious mistake to consider them as conscious and purely rational beings. Because humans tend to deceive themselves unconsciously. Freud's concept of human existence opened up a new approach and overcame the limitations of the superficial rationalist concept of human nature.

Conclusion

This study has examined the ontological implications of Freud's theory of the unconscious, positioning it as a foundational element in the philosophical understanding of human existence. Freud, though trained as a clinician and not formally a philosopher, developed a model of the psyche that transcended medical contexts and entered the realm of philosophical inquiry. His conceptualization of the unconscious challenged the traditional rationalist notion of the self by revealing that human behavior is largely shaped by unconscious drives in conflict with social norms.

The central finding of this research is that Freud's structural model of the psyche—comprising the Id, Ego, and Superego—redefines human subjectivity not as a product of conscious reason alone, but as a dynamic interplay of instinctual, rational, and moral forces. This reconfiguration offers an alternative to classical ontology, inviting a view of the human being as a psychologically and culturally embedded entity. Freud's ontology is thus one in which unconscious processes are not peripheral but essential to understanding human agency, identity, and existential struggle.

These insights also highlight the broader significance of Freud's work: his theories laid the groundwork for a philosophical anthropology that integrates clinical insight with cultural and existential reflection. However, limitations remain. Freud's framework, while innovative, carries internal contradictions—particularly his ambivalence toward the superego and his evolving stance on instinctual theory. These unresolved tensions suggest the need for cautious interpretation and further refinement.

Future research could build on this study by exploring comparative ontologies in psychoanalytic and existential traditions or by applying Freudian insights to contemporary debates in identity theory, ethics, or social philosophy. Additionally, interdisciplinary approaches that engage neuroscience, cultural theory, and phenomenology may help bridge gaps between Freud's historical context and present-day perspectives. Ultimately, this research affirms Freud's lasting contribution: he compelled modern thought to confront the unconscious as a core

dimension of being, expanding the horizon of philosophical reflection on what it means to be human.

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Autor(a) para correspondência / Corresponding author: Ha Van Thi Ta. vanha@tmu.edu.vn