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## Great Paths Cross: Freud and James at Clark University, 1909

BY ROBERT I. SIMON, M.D.

*The historic meeting of Freud and James at Clark University, where Freud presented his first exposition of psychoanalysis in America, is described. The reactions of these two great men to the encounter are recalled, and the author speculates as to the possible outcome of further dialogue between them had the illness and death of James not intervened.*

ON SEPTEMBER 5, 1909, Sigmund Freud gave his first exposition of psychoanalysis in America at Clark University, Worcester, Mass. Granville Stanley Hall, president of Clark and a new friend of psychoanalysis, was hosting Freud and his colleagues. William James, then 70 years of age and professor of philosophy at Harvard, journeyed from Boston to attend the lectures. Through Hall, an old associate from the days of physiologic psychology at Harvard, William James and Sigmund Freud met for the first time.

Their meeting seemed casual and unplanned. The reactions of these two great psychologists toward each other is recorded in Freud's autobiography(2) and the letters of William James(6).

Freud's(2) memory of the event was James' stoic attitude towards symptoms of a fatal illness:

Another event of this time which made a lasting impression on me was a meeting with William James the philosopher. I shall never

forget one little scene that occurred as we were on a walk together. He stopped suddenly, handed me a bag he was carrying and asked me to walk on, saying that he would catch me up as soon as he had got through an attack of angina pectoris which was just coming on. He died of that disease a year later; and I have always wished that I might be as fearless as he was in the face of approaching death.

James' letters(6) written shortly after their meeting did not mention any exchange of ideas with Freud. His earlier enthusiasm for Freud seemed considerably abated, but not so for the psychoanalytic movement itself. His attitude toward psychoanalysis continued to be optimistic:

Speaking of "functional" psychology, Clark University, of which Stanley Hall is president, had a little International Congress the other day in honour of the twentieth year of its existence. I went there for one day in order to see what Freud was like, and met also Jung of Zurich, who . . . made a very pleasant impression. I hope that Freud and his pupils will push their ideas to their utmost limits, so that we may learn what they are. They can't fail to throw light on human nature; but I confess that he made on me personally the impression of a man obsessed with fixed ideas. I can make nothing in my own case with his dream theories, and obviously "symbolism" is a most dangerous method. A newspaper report of the Congress said that Freud had condemned the American religious therapy (which has such extensive results) as very "dangerous" because so "unscientific." Bah!

In another letter dated September 19, 1909, James(6) made similar comments about the meeting with Freud.

. . . My day at Clark University was very enjoyable, not only in meeting you, but in seeing

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new faces; especially Titchener's, whom I had never yet met, and who made on me a very pleasant impression. I strongly suspect Freud, with his dream theory, of being a regular hallucine. But I hope that he and his disciples will push it to its limits, as undoubtedly it covers some facts, and will add to our understanding of "functional" psychology, which is the real psychology.

Jung and Ernest Jones were less ambivalently received by James. Jung(5) many years later returned the compliment: ". . . (He) made me realize that the horizons of human psychology widen into the unmeasurable."

Jones(4) recalled the meeting with William James at Clark University as follows:

His pathetic encounter with William James, then fatally ill, Freud has himself described. William James, who knew German, followed the lectures with great interest. He was very friendly to us and I shall never forget his parting words, said with his arm around my shoulder: "The future of psychology belongs to your work,"—a remarkable saying when one reflects on his puritanical background.

### Background

Years before their encounter at Worcester, the widely read James was familiar with Freud's work. However, Jones(4) tells us indirectly that Freud's reading tastes may have left him somewhat unfamiliar with James' writing: "It is hardly likely that Freud, who was not very given to reading books on psychology, would have been at that time familiar with William James' detailed criticism. . . ."

Freud nevertheless seemed knowledgeable enough of the contributions made to psychology by William James. In a passage quoted by Ernest Jones(4), Freud spoke with little enthusiasm about the theory of emotion propounded simultaneously but independently in 1887 by William James and the Danish physiologist, C. Lange:

Do not suppose that the things I have said to you here about affects are recognized stock-in-trade of normal psychology. They are on the contrary views that have grown up on the soil of psychoanalysis and are native only to it. What you may gather about affects from psychology—the James-Lange theory, for example—is quite beyond understanding or discussion to us psychoanalysts.

I cannot agree with the comment in Allen's(1) recent biography of William James that Freud's theory of the unconscious held little interest for James. In 1901, eight years before their encounter, James wrote with great enthusiasm about the new ideas of Freud and his co-workers. In his famous treatise, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, James(3) relied heavily on the workings of the unconscious to explain the central experience of conversion and other religious phenomena:

In the wonderful explorations by Binet, Janet, Breuer, Freud, Mason, Prince, and others, of the subliminal consciousness of patients with hysteria, we have revealed to us whole systems of underground life, in shape of memories of a painful sort which lead a parasitic existence, buried outside of the primary fields of consciousness, and making irruptions there-into with hallucinations, pains, convulsions, paralyses of feeling and of motion, and the whole procession of symptoms of hysteric disease of body and of mind. Alter or abolish by suggestion these subconscious memories, and the patient immediately gets well. . . . These clinical records sound like fairy-tales when one first reads them, yet it is impossible to doubt their accuracy; and, the paths having been once opened by these first observers, similar observations have been made elsewhere. They throw, as I said, a wholly new light upon our natural constitution.

At first blush it appears Freud and James held many ideas in common. Both were physicians steeped in the physiologic tradition of their time. Empiricism, combined with magnificent intellectual capacity, distinguished their scientific endeavors. In addition, James had long had a personal interest in psychopathology, undoubtedly stemming from his own frightening experience with severe depression as a young man. Each man also underscored the importance of instinctual behavior in man. Not by accident, Ernest Jones(4) praises Freud's literary ability by comparing it with the style of William James and his brother: "If William James wrote textbooks of psychology as if they were novels and his brother Henry wrote novels as if they were textbooks on psychology, Freud may be said to have combined the two aims in an enchanting degree."

Freud and James both had an intimate knowledge of classical literature, and each displayed a magnificent ability in expressing his ideas lucidly. William James and Sigmund Freud found a similar interest in the scientific study of man's spiritual experiences. Jones(4) speaks of the adverse comments directed toward Freud for his psychological forays into religion and notes James' earlier pioneering effort: "In particular psychology should keep its hands off religion—a claim often opposed from William James onward—and this in spite of the undeniable fact that religious beliefs, emotions and attitudes are part of the mind of man."

Not stopping at religious experience, both men lent credibility to psychical research by a scientific interest in all forms of occult phenomena. Their careers had another interesting parallel: each was the most widely read psychologist of his time.

But there were fundamental differences too. James was a Brahmin of the New England tradition; yet he received all ideas with a sympathetic ear. His character was restless and his professional interests extremely broad, leading eventually to a career outside of psychology proper. He gave no thought to creating a new school of psychology. Jones(4) notes the philosophical difference between Freud and James: "Most students of Freud have been struck by what has been called his obstinate dualism; had he been a philosopher he certainly would not have been a monist nor would he have felt at home in William James' pluralistic universe."

These were some of the similarities and differences each man brought to Clark University in the autumn of 1909.

### Reflections

The reader who expects to find memorable history made by the meeting of Freud and James comes away disappointed. The recorded memories of each man seem almost irrelevant now, leaving one to conclude that only the lightest conversation passed between these two 20th-century Titans of psychology.

From William James' account comes the

hint of personal antipathy. One wonders if the powerful personalities of Freud and James hindered a free and easy exchange. Was 17 years' difference in age a contributing problem? Having nursed his thoughts surrounded by trusted colleagues, Freud may have felt a certain reluctance in expressing his new ideas to the friendly but nonpartisan American psychologist during their walk. James may have also represented the impeding past. Indeed, William James was no great friend of abstract metapsychology and its cousin—symbolism. To the very end, he remained true to his own radical empiricism and pragmatism.

James seemed repulsed by Freud's personal vehemence and the proposal of his novel dream theory. He did not, however, reject the whole of psychoanalysis. William James was the last of the 19th century philosopher-psychologists, untrammelled by any school of psychology, intellectually impartial to all ideas that excited his scientific curiosity. No better example of objectivity exists than his benevolent prophecy for the future of psychoanalysis.

A credible explanation of what actually happened emerges from Freud's account: A pleasant, casual afternoon's walk was unexpectedly interrupted by the symptoms of James' impending fatal illness, frustrating their effort to meet and understand each other. The harbinger of this outcome was contained in a colloquium given one year earlier in Boston by Ernest Jones. That small circle contained a number of James' friends, although he was conspicuously absent. (James had just returned to Boston from Europe but was physically ailing and did not attend.)

An exchange, like the dialogues Freud and James had with other eminent men, seemed silenced by James' illness. The personal differences that existed would have probably animated their encounter. No account is found in the writings of Freud or James of any further contact. William James' death within a year of their meeting ended that interesting possibility.

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## The History of Psychiatry in Residency Training: Report of Survey II

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*Early in 1967, 100 teaching centers in the United States and Canada were surveyed by questionnaire in regard to their attitudes and practices in teaching the history of psychiatry. Eighty-seven responded. Many of the centers had been included in a similar study in 1961. Forty-four U. S. centers, and two Canadian, report that they are now offering courses in historical psychiatry—twice as many as in 1961. Average curriculum time is about 20 hours.*

**I**N 1961 THE AUTHOR conducted a questionnaire survey of 100 medical centers in order to assess attitudes and practices in the teaching of the history of psychiatry to residents. The results of that survey were reported in 1962(4), and are summarized in Table 1. Table 2 presents a typical reply to the 1961 survey. After an interval of six years, it was decided, early in 1967, to carry out a similar survey in order to detect changes, if any, and the direction of changes or trends in teaching the history of psychiatry. The method employed was essentially the same as that of the previous study and it is unnecessary to repeat the details here. However, there were some methodological differences which must be mentioned.

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**TABLE 1**  
**Results of 1961 Survey of 100 Residency Training Centers**

Mailed:	100		
Returned:	85		
1. In what way do you regard a course in the history of psychiatry:			
a) as essentially of academic interest only.	(7)	100	85
		7%	8%
b) as largely for the purpose of Board examination.	(1)	1%	—
c) as an important or essential part of the post-graduate (residency) curriculum.	(76)	76%	89%
2. a) In the curriculum at your center, is a separate course devoted to the history of psychiatry?			
Yes (22)	22%	25.8%	
No (62)		62%	72.9%
b) If so, in what year of the program is it offered?			
		First:	11
		Second:	3
		First and second:	2
		Misc.:	5
Required or elective?			
		Required:	20
		Elective:	2
How many hours?			
		1-2 to 72	
		Average:	17
Conducted by?			
		Psychiatrist:	18
		Historian:	2
Required reading?			
		Yes:	15
		No:	6
3. Rather than treating history as a separate subject, do you blend historical information with your presentation of current theories and techniques?			
	Yes (64)	64%	75%
4. Do you regard the historical, evolutionary perspective as so important that, more than blending, you present psychiatric theory and technique entirely in a historical frame of reference?			
	Yes (22)	22%	25.8%
	No (51)		51%
			60%

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