

An excerpt from Chapter Eight of:

*Freud on a Precipice: How Freud's Fate Pushed Psychoanalysis Over the Edge*

by Robert Langs, M.D.

In sum, then, Freud may well have chosen Leonardo daVinci for his first—and only—biographical study because of significant resemblances in the early traumas and life histories of the two men. This means that unconsciously, Freud had come to realize that story of the early-life traumas suffered by Leonardo encoded a number of his own significant early-life traumas. It seems more than coincidence, as Freud noted in his book on *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* (Freud, 1901), that there are such strong parallels between the two lives. Rather than seeing this hidden correspondence as Freud did in terms of unconscious phantasies, I see them largely in terms of corresponding early-life traumas. As such, I take Freud's turn to the story of Leonardo's infancy as further support for my conjectures that Freud did not know who his biological father was, that he believed at times that he had two fathers—one biological and the other adoptive—and evidently, that he was conceived before or outside of Jakob's marriage to Amalie. The material does not, however, support the speculation that Freud may have thought at times that Amalie was not his biological mother, but it does suggest that the early traumas Freud experienced in the hands of his family had diminished his view of his mother.

Finally, there is Freud's conclusion to his paper in which he returns to the theme of the influence of accidental external circumstances on the career choices and life of Leonardo—and on the fate of humans in general. He notes: "If one considers chance to be unworthy of determining our fate, it is simply a relapse into the pious view of the Universe which Leonardo himself was on the way to overcoming when he wrote that the sun does not move" (Freud, 1910a, p. 137).

How strange, and yet telling, that Freud cites the surrender of the death-denying, earth-centered theory of the universe in a discussion of the role of chance and fate in human life (see Chapter 2). He then goes on to say:

.....we are all too ready to forget that in fact everything to do with our life is chance, from our origin out of the meeting of spermatozoon and ovum onwards—chance which nevertheless has a share in the law and necessity of nature, and which merely lacks any connection with our wishes and illusions. The apportioning of the determining factors of our life between the 'necessities' of our constitution and the 'chances' still be uncertain in detail; but in general it is no longer possible to doubt the importance precisely of the first years of our childhood. We all show too little respect for Nature which (in the obscure words of Leonardo which recall Hamlet's lines) 'is full of countless causes [*ragioni*]' of nature force their way into experience. (Freud, 1910a, p. 137)

According to the editors of the English edition of this paper, the allusion is to Hamlet's familiar words:

“There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio  
Than are dreamt in your philosophy.”

In much-deserved respect to Freud, I could not have summed up this book more poetically—and clearly. For one moment, Freud acknowledges the power of early-life realities over our inner wishes and fantasies and gives chance and fate their deserving due; he also alludes to the laws and necessities of nature, and thus to archetypes and universals. I am moved to say again that truth in the sense of reality is in so many ways and on so many levels stranger—and more intriguing and affecting—than fiction. In terms of this book, this is another way of saying that inner mental theories of the mind and the observations that they promote are relatively clichéd, uninteresting, and relatively uninformative, while reality-centered theories and where they take us in respect to life and human nature will never cease to amaze—and inform. As for the thesis that Freud did not know who his biological father was, the unconsciously driven aspects of his selection of Leonardo for study and his emphasis on the lasting effects of the circumstances of his birth—his illegitimacy and the absence of his father—again seem to provide encoded evidence that supports this line of thought. It begins to look that every time that Freud takes on the writing of a new book or a new psychoanalytic investigation, it is based on a strong unconscious need to work over the story of his personal origins.