

THE CONCEPT OF STRUCTURE IN FREUD, LÉVI-STRAUSS AND CHOMSKY

John B. Fisher

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Abstract:

In this paper I attempt to help clarify the nature of structuralism as a philosophical approach by examining the way in which Freud, Lévi-Strauss and Chomsky use the concept of structure. I argue that in each of these thinkers there is an important tension between their attempts to develop, on the one hand, a theory within the framework of determinism and, on the other, to emphasize the meaningfulness of certain aspects of human behavior. I suggest that the ability of the term "structure" to refer either to a universal or a particular helps the two sides of their thinking from coming into conflict with one another, and that this is a major reason why these figures were attracted to a structural approach.

The Concept of Structure in Freud, Lévi-Strauss and Chomsky

I. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to make some suggestions on the nature of structuralism in the social and psychological sciences. My ultimate purpose is to help clarify what structuralism is in philosophy, but this can only be done in the context of what structuralism means in those fields in which it has been seen as a coherent movement. Although there is a good deal of philosophical interest in structuralism, none of the recent literature seems to me to get at the heart of what sort of a philosophical approach structuralism is. It is at least clear that structuralism is a view essentially opposed, in important senses, to atomism, to functionalism, and to existentialism. But before we are reduced to defining structuralism by saying what it is not, perhaps we can start from scratch and say what it is.

The first problem is to decide who is a structuralist. If we limit ourselves to those who have declared themselves part of a movement called structuralism then we are dealing with a very small group of people. On the other hand, the broadest view is clearly too broad. The range of thinkers whose work appears in the various anthologies of structuralism is incredible. It shows no clear pattern and seems to exclude almost on one.¹ Perhaps what is needed is more discussion of just what the defining characteristics of structuralism are. If we were clear about this we might be able to define a small number of people as paradigm structuralists and then have a broader range of thinkers who could be characterized as embodying, in varying degrees, a structuralist approach.

¹ Among the anthologies currently available in English are, Richard and Fernande DeGeorge, eds., The Structuralists from Marx to Lévi-Strauss, (New York, Doubleday Anchor, 1972), Michael Lane, ed., Introduction to Structuralism, (New York, Basic Books, 1970), Richard Macksey and Eugenio Donato, eds., The Structuralist Controversy, (Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins Press, 1970), and David Robey, ed., Structuralism, An Introduction, (London, Oxford University Press, 1973).

The discussion which follows does lead to such a suggestion. Specifically, I will suggest that Freud, Lévi-Strauss and Chomsky are paradigm structuralists. Obviously, the reason for choosing these three has nothing to do with any declared adherence to a structuralist point of view. Also, there may be something a bit odd about including Freud as a structuralist; it may be a tail wagging the dog situation. Certainly from some points of view it would be more appropriate to consider structuralism as one of the offshoots of Freudian thought. However there may be some value to ignoring any possible lines of influence or intellectual debt that may exist among the three in order to look at what seems to me to be an interesting similarity among them; a similarity which centers on their use of structural concepts. The similarity is interesting partly because of the light it sheds on their work and partly because of what it indicates about the concept of structure.

To show that there is indeed something in common in the way they use structural concepts is the main burden of the paper. I will argue, first, that there is a very strong tension in the ordinary as well as the technical use of the term structure. Secondly, I will suggest that Freud, Lévi-Strauss and Chomsky share a certain fundamental tension in their thought, and that in each case the tension inherent in the concept of structure is what made a structural approach so amenable to their purpose. That is, in the case of all three, it is the use of structural concepts as basic which enables the two sides of their thinking to avoid coming into direct confrontation with each other. To be a structuralist is, perhaps more than anything else, to believe it a good thing for such confrontations not to take place.

II. The Term "Structure"

Let me begin with a bit of ordinary language philosophizing about the term "structure". I might sum up what I wish to say about it by saying that it is schizophrenic. What I mean to say is that the term structure has two distinguishable personalities, but that they are so closely related that they remain confined within the same head. Both personalities can be illustrated by thinking of someone standing in front of one of the twin towers of the World Trade Center in New York City and saying "What an interesting structure!". Now in one sense of the word structure what he is referring to is the actual glass, metal and concrete that he sees. In this sense

the terms "structure" and "building" are nearly synonymous (indeed, the word "structure" derives from the Latin "struere", to build²). In this sense of the term the two towers, although they look exactly alike, are, nevertheless, different structures. Thus in one of its personalities the term structure refers to something concrete and particular. But even when we use the term in this way, the choice of the term structure rather than, say, building, is significant. Even though we are referring to something concrete, we are emphasizing that there is something about its form that we find interesting. We would never refer to something as a structure unless it had at least a fairly complex and interesting form.

The other personality of structure reverses these two emphases. That is, it refers to something formal and abstract, although emphasizing that we believe it to be embodied. In this case, typically, we refer not to "structures" but to "structures of...". For example, Ernest Nagel's book on The Structure of Science is about the logical form of science. In this sense the term structure refers to something essentially abstract - a repeatable universal. This sense of the word enables us to say "These two buildings have the same structure". And, equivocating between the two meanings of the term we can say, quite sensibly, "These two structures have the same structure". But again, this abstract sense of structure is not one which can be completely separated from its other sense. When we wish to speak of a structure as completely abstracted from anything concrete, we more naturally use a word like form. We use "structure" in its abstract sense when, although we wish to refer to something abstract, we are interested also in its embodiment.

The fact that structure is a schizophrenic term is, of course, no reason to avoid using it; its peculiarities might make it a uniquely useful concept. This is exactly the case, for example, with the mathematical concept of the infinitesimal, which is schizophrenic to the point of being an outright contradiction. Even if recent work has succeeded in showing that the infinitesimal is not indispensable in mathematics, it certainly would have been a shame if Berkeley's criticism had prevailed and the development of calculus had been cut off at its inception. But we should at least be as careful as possible in the presence of such concepts and try not to let their internal tension do any damage. In particular

²Lane, p. 19.

it seems to me important to keep in mind the following. In one of its senses the term structure refers to a concrete particular. In this sense of the term one can talk of two structures as being homologous. This means that the two structures have the same form. In its other sense it refers to a repeatable universal. In this sense any two structures which are homologous are the same structure. Also in this sense, though not in its other sense, a structure can be embodied. I call the term structure schizophrenic rather than just ambiguous because there are two ways in which its different senses are related that is not usually the case with the different senses of ambiguous terms. First, the use of the term in one sense usually carries a strong connotation of its other sense. Second, the two senses are connected by the relation of embodiment. That is, the entity referred to by one sense is always the embodiment of the entity referred to by the other sense.

It seems to me that this tension in the ordinary use of the term is reflected in philosophically serious discussion of what the term structure means. One particularly clear and interesting such discussion is Peter Caws' paper "Operational, Representational, and Explanatory Models".³ The use of the term structure by Caws in this paper seems to reflect exactly the tension discussed so far. The tension involves the use of the term to refer, on the one hand, to an abstract universal, and on the other hand, to a concrete particular. At the beginning of the paper, when Caws is defining terms, we get a clear impression that structures are abstract entities. Structures are defined as sets of relations and relations, surely, are abstract entities. Also enhancing an abstract reading for "structure" at this point is Caws' statement that "to make the structural features of the model central reflects the fact that it stands for the relationships between the entities that constitute the system, rather than for the entities themselves."⁴ Soon after this, however, a shift takes place following which structures are concrete particulars. The shift takes place in the course of one sentence which reads: "In one sense, of course, there is no such thing as an abstract structure, since as soon as it is specified the structure is automatically embodied, in a dual sense: in language and as part of the mental structure of the person or persons who perform or take note of the specification."⁵ Now the sense

³Peter Caws, "Operational, Representational, and Explanatory Models", The American Anthropologist, Volume 76, (1974), pp. 1 - 10.

⁴Caws, p. 1.

⁵Caws, p. 1.

of "abstract" in which there are no abstract structures is the sense in which it means disembodied. Thus, using the term abstract as I have done so far, to refer to a universal as opposed to a particular, what Caws is saying is that all structures, abstract though they may be, if they are specified are automatically embodied. But what forms their automatic embodiment? Mental structures. Now in the phrase "mental structure" the term structure must refer to a concrete entity since it is the embodiment of an abstract one. What Caws takes to be important about these mental structures is that they model other structures and so he begins to call them models. The word "model" has an even more concrete ring to it than the word "structure" and the way in which Caws talks about models strengthens this interpretation. Take, for example, his discussion of Leach's remark that models are logical constructions in the anthropologist's mind. Caws agrees with Leach that it would be "disconcerting" for a theory to be nowhere, although he argues that it makes more sense to speak of them as in "heads" rather than "minds". But if models were abstract then they would not be constructions in the mind; they would be constructions of the mind. My point is that it is only disconcerting for them to be nowhere if they are thought of as concrete. If they were abstract it would be equally disconcerting for them to be somewhere. Thus, although Caws wants to say that structures are sets of relations, not things, mental structures seem to be particular things, locatable in people's heads.

Although I will argue later that the work of Lévi-Strauss exhibits a basic tension that has nothing to with what he says about the word structure, still, when he does talk about the term I think we can perceive the same tension we have been discussing. The clearest expression of this is his view that the very distinction between form and content is antithetical to structuralism. He says "form is defined by its opposition to a content which is foreign to it; but structure has no distinct content. It is the content itself apprehended in a logical organization, conceived as a property of the real".⁶ I do not think, though, that one can get rid of the form-content distinction so easily. Any distinction which was fundamental to the the thinking of Aristotle and part of the working apparatus of most philosophers since, will not be so easily displaced. In any case, in Lévi-Strauss' actual work, and in the work of French structuralists generally, I find more of an equivocation between structure as form and structure as content than any real synthesis. The

⁶Claude Lévi-Strauss, quoted by Lane, Introduction, p. 31.

structuralists use the term structure to refer to two very different kinds of things; formal theories constructed by the social scientist, and the things in people's minds which these theories model. One of the points of Caws' paper discussed above is to argue that these two things are not so different as they might seem. He points out that although we often speak of the "model" as opposed to the "real" thing, that actually the model is just as real as what it models.⁷ While I do feel that this is an important point to make, I still maintain that there is an important difference between a model and the thing it models: a model is abstract and the thing it models is concrete. The fact the the term structure can be used for both is due precisely to the fact that it is ambiguous between form and content.

This dual usage can be seen clearly in Lévi-Strauss. On the one hand we have the view expressed in the often quoted statement: "It should be kept in mind that what makes social-structure studies valuable is that structures are models, the formal properties of which can be compared independently of their elements".⁸ This asserts quite clearly that social scientists create something formal. Saying that the social scientist deals with something which can be considered independently of its elements (i.e. content) is certainly not overcoming the form-content distinction; it constitutes adopting a formalist position. Indeed, this aspect of what Lévi-Strauss says is quite in accord with the views of people who are closer to formalism, such as Edmund Leach. Leach is quite in favor of using formal models as one element in the comparative study of certain aspects of society such as kinship systems. But there is an important difference between Leach and Lévi-Strauss in their views on what can be accomplished by these formal models. Lévi-Strauss feels that they can, ultimately, give a full accounting of social reality while Leach assigns them a much more modest mission - they are only a convenient device for organizing our knowledge. Leach argues that the total analysis of social reality "must always take into account the whole range of institutional dimensions with which the anthropologist has to deal and must start from a concrete reality - a local group of people - rather than from an abstract reality - such as the concept of lineage or the notion of a kinship system."⁹ Now why is it that Lévi-Strauss disagrees with this and feels that formal models

⁷Caws, p. 1.

⁸Claude Lévi-Strauss, Structural Anthropology, Translated by Claire Jacobson and Brooke Grundfest Schoepf, (New York, Basic Books, 1963), p. 284.

⁹Edmund Leach, "An Alternative Theory", Readings in Kinship and Social Structure, Nelson Graburn, ed., (New York, Harper and Row, 1971) p. 231.

can give a full accounting of social reality? I think the answer is accurately given by Nathan Rotenstreich in his paper "On Lévi-Strauss' Concept of Structure" when he points out that for Lévi-Strauss the models of the anthropologist model another kind of structure; concrete "built-in" structures which exist in the people under study and which, though unconscious, actually form the basis for their behavior.¹⁰ In other words, the anthropologist is not so much inventing a model which conveniently summarizes an aspect of social reality, as he is discovering something concrete, something already there. Lévi-Strauss puts it this way: "If, as we believe, the unconscious activity of the reason consists in imposing forms upon content, and if these forms are fundamentally the same for all who possess this faculty...it is both necessary and sufficient to grasp the unconscious structure which underlies each institution or custom in order to provide a principle of interpretation which is valid for other institutions and other customs..."¹¹ Thus I think it would not be unfair to sum up Lévi-Strauss' use of the concept of structure (which I take to be illustrative of French structuralism generally) in the following way. There are two kinds of things to which the term structure applies: concrete things in the minds (unconsciously) of the people under study and the abstract models created by the social scientist. But of course these two things are closely related. They are related by what might be called a modeling relation. While a full analysis of exactly what the nature of this relation is certainly requires more discussion than I will provide here, it seems to me that it is not significantly different from some of the more traditional kinds of relations. If we think in terms of a universal-particular distinction then each of the individual unconscious mental structures is an instantiation of the abstract theory. If we think of the form-content distinction then the unconscious mental structures are the content and the abstract theory is the form of social reality.

I want to make clear that I do not feel there is anything wrong with Lévi-Strauss' use of the concept of structure. I think it is perfectly coherent and sound. I disagree only with his statement that he has overcome the form-content distinction. He has neither overcome it nor is there any need to overcome it. As long as one is

¹⁰Nathan Rotenstreich, "On Lévi-Strauss' Concept of Structure", Review of Metaphysics, Volume XXV (1972), pp. 503-504

¹¹Lévi-Strauss, Structural Anthropology, p. 21

clear about the tension inherent in the concept of structure there is no reason why its peculiarities should not be exploited. Of course if one is not clear about it the result can be a very confused kind of view. Take, for example, the following statements by Jean Piaget (I do not wish to suggest that the views of Piaget, in general, are confused, but I do think there is something wrong with the statements which follow: "If the character of structured wholes depends on their laws of composition, these laws must of their very nature be structuring: it is the constant duality or bipolarity, of always being simultaneously structuring and structured that accounts for the success of the notion of law or rule employed by the structuralists."¹² And also: "...structures are not simply convenient theoretical constructs; they exist apart from the anthropologist, for they are the source of the relations he observes; a structure would lose all truth value if it did not have this direct connection with the facts."¹³ While this at least represents an attempt at a genuine synthesis of form and content, it seems to me to result in mere confusion. In Lévi-Strauss we can distinguish between the two kinds of things that constitute the two aspects of structure; things in the minds of those under study and things constructed by the social scientist. In Piaget's terms the former is "structured" and the latter is "structuring"; the former "exists apart from the anthropologist", while the latter is dependent upon the anthropologist for its creation and has truth value. But what is the point of saying that these two kinds of things are the same thing? What kind of peculiar entity exists, at the same time, both as an abstract theory, a linguistic entity having truth value, and as a part of concrete reality? Of course one can study the scientist's theory itself as a part of social reality. But this is not what Piaget is talking about. It is the conflation of a theory and what the theory is about that I find utterly confusing. It seems to me that in providing a foundation for social science we can do just as well by simply thinking of the term structure as having two closely related but distinguishable senses.

So, to sum up, there is a basic tension in the term structure. In one sense it refers to something abstract and formal; in the other sense it refers to something concrete and particular. Most uses seem ultimately to be

¹²Jean Piaget, Structuralism, Translated by Chaninah Maschler, (New York, Harper Torchbook, 1970), p. 10.

¹³Piaget, p. 112.

a case of one sense or the other, but the two senses are never completely separable; whichever sense is mainly intended, a strong connotation of the other sense persists. The term structure may not be the 'only term' which behaves this way. Other terms, say "organization", also share these characteristics to some extent. But the term structure is uniquely important because it is the term whose peculiarities have been richly exploited by a number of thinkers; most importantly Freud, Lévi-Strauss and Chomsky.

III. The Theory of Meanings

Freud, Lévi-Strauss and Chomsky have a great deal in common aside from the fact that they have all, in one context or another, been referred to as structuralists. Although each is associated with one of the sciences concerned with man, all three have written on much broader philosophical issues, and have had an influence with an audience that goes way beyond their special fields. In fact it has occasionally been said of each of them that their most important contribution has more to do with this broadly philosophical work than with their technical discoveries. In addition, all three see psychology as in some sense the most basic of the human sciences. More specifically, all three have done their most important work, after the pioneering by Freud, in the area of that aspect of the mind of which a person is not normally aware. But perhaps the most striking similarity is that all three have two basic aspects to their thought between which there is at least a tension and at most a serious conflict. I would characterize these aspects, in general, as follows. First, we have a theory of meanings. This represents the side of their thought which tries to show that ordinary experience is meaningful on a level deeper than that of overt behavior. For Freud this consists in his ascription of meanings to phenomena not previously thought to be meaningful, notably dreams and errors. For Lévi-Strauss it consists in his attempt to show as meaningful a tremendous range of social phenomena - myths, kinship systems, even culinary practices. For Chomsky it is the attempt to show that our creative and open-ended use of language is based on the existence of linguistic structures at a level deeper than that of overt linguistic behavior. Just as Freud's work makes possible the study of certain kinds of errors, Chomsky's work makes possible the study of other kinds of errors which even Freud might have seen as without a deeper meaning. "Chomskian errors" (i.e. spoonerisms) are not meaningful in the sense of revealing an unconscious wish or desire, as with Freudian errors, but there is evidence that they reveal

something of the unconscious structure that makes human language possible.¹⁴

The second aspect of their work has to do with their commitment to be scientifically rigorous. In all three cases this is expressed as some kind of determinism. For Freud it is his theory of instincts, the interplay of various forces within the psychic apparatus. For Lévi-Strauss it is his adherence to the philosophical views of materialism and determinism, made lucid by his recurring thermodynamic metaphor for social phenomena. For Chomsky it is his view that the capacity for language is innate; part of the genetic make-up of the human species. I will discuss the role played by the concept of structure in this aspect of their work in the next section of the paper. I will now discuss the role played by the concept of structure in the theory of meanings in Freud, Lévi-Strauss and Chomsky.

What kind of a basic, primitive, concept is required for this aspect of their work? It seems to me that whatever concept is taken as basic would have to be abstract. This is true not merely because meanings themselves are abstract sorts of things, but also for a more important reason. For all three thinkers the meanings they are working with are meanings of which the person who has them is not normally aware. The meaning of dreams and errors, the meaning of myths, kinship systems, etc., and the rules which constitute the deep structure of language, all share the property of residing primarily in the unconscious. Now there is a *prima facie* problem with the notion of unconscious mental entities. All of the arguments in favor of mental entities as some sort of ultimate category which is not reducible to the category of physical things derive their strength from the fact that we are aware of our own minds directly and not, as in the case of physical things, through the intervention of the senses. But if this is so, how can we divide the mind in such a way that one part of it is, by definition, not directly available to our awareness? It certainly makes sense to talk of things going on in the brain of which we are not aware, but it is not so clear that it makes sense to talk about things going on in the mind of which we are not aware. In one of the early analytic critiques of the concept of the unconscious, C. D. Broad argued persuasively that while there certainly are gaps in

¹⁴See, for example, Victoria A. Fromkin, "Slips of the Tongue", Scientific American, December, 1973.

consciousness, they can most plausibly be filled with physical processes, not unconscious mental entities.¹⁵

This is a point which none of the people I am discussing seem to take seriously. Chomsky, for example, says, "The greatest defect of classical philosophy of mind, both rationalist and empiricist, seems to me to be its unquestioned assumption that the properties and content of the mind are accessible to introspection; it is surprising to see how rarely this assumption has been challenged..."¹⁶ Chomsky, however, does not seem to be prepared to confront the reasons why the assumption seemed, for so long, to be eminently sensible.

Freud also seems to me to dismiss the philosophical problems connected with the concept of the unconscious too quickly. At one point he rejects the kind of argument expressed by C. D. Broad with these words:

At this very point we may be prepared to meet with the philosophical objection that the latent conception did not exist as an object of psychology, but as a physical disposition for the recurrence of the same psychical phenomenon, i.e. of the said conception. But we may reply that this is a theory far overstepping the domain of psychology proper; that it simply begs the question by asserting "conscious" to be an identical term with "mental" and that it is clearly at fault in denying psychology the right to account for its most common facts, such as memory, by its own means.¹⁷

Claiming territorial "rights" for psychology, however, is hardly a serious philosophical argument. At another point Freud says, "To most people who have been educated in philosophy the idea of anything psychical which is not also conscious is so inconceivable that it seems to them absurd and refutable simply by logic. I believe this is only because they have never studied the relevant phenomena of hypnosis and dreams..."¹⁸ This, however, is simply false. William James, for example, was

¹⁵C. D. Broad, The Mind and Its Place in Nature, (London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1925), pp. 353 - 477.

¹⁶Noam Chomsky, Language and Mind, (New York, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1968), p. 25.

¹⁷James Strachey, ed., The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XII, p. 260

¹⁸S. Freud, The Standard Edition, Volume XIX, p. 13.

aware of all the work on hypnosis which played such an important role in the early part of Freud's career, and still felt, on philosophical grounds,¹⁹ that the notion of the unconscious was unacceptable.

All of this is certainly not to say that we should discard unconscious mental entities. I think that what we have here is a clear case of what Chomsky is talking about when he distinguishes between sciences other than physics working within the Newtonian "analogy" as opposed to working within the Newtonian "framework".²⁰ In Newtonian physics the concept of force is justified not because it is required by common sense. On the contrary, the concept of force is quite problematical since it seems to be just a device to get around the injunction against action at a distance. Its justification lies rather in its richness and power within the system of Newtonian physics. In other sciences, though, the notion of force may not be useful enough to justify its use as a basic concept, and then it becomes merely occult. Rather than trying to force other sciences into the Newtonian framework, they should work within the Newtonian analogy, that is, to follow its example and try to develop their own concepts on the basis of what has the greatest richness and power. It seems to me that the notion of an unconscious mental entity is just such a concept.

Nevertheless, the basic role of the unconscious as the main arena for the work of Freud, Levi-Strauss and Chomsky does introduce a somewhat unsettling element into their work. If I were an analytic philosopher I would call this unsettling element the person within a person fallacy. Of course I do not think that what we have here is really a fallacy, but it is a convenient way to explain what I mean. What I have in mind is the kind of thing mentioned by Ulric Neisser in discussing visual perception. He points out that a mistake commonly made in talking about perception is to take the analogy between the eye and a camera lense too seriously. Sometimes one describes the visual apparatus and then tries to make a philosophical point by saying that what one really sees is not things as they are in the world, but rather one sees the end product of the visual apparatus. However, as Neisser points out, "...one does not see the retinal image; one

¹⁹William James, The Principles of Psychology, (New York, Dover, 1950) Volume I, pp. 164-176, Volume II, pp. 594-616.

²⁰Chomsky, Language and Mind, p. 8.

sees with the aid of the retinal image".²¹ Persons see and it does no good to postulate a person within the person who sees the retinal image.

It seems to me exactly this kind of thing I find unsettling in the attempt to attribute meaningfulness to things in the unconscious. Take, for example, the way in which Freud talks about his discovery that even commonplace errors can carry a hidden meaning. In his Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis he says "...the product of the slip of the tongue may perhaps itself have a right to be regarded as a completely valid psychical act, pursuing an aim of its own, as a statement with a content and significance. So far we have always spoken of 'parapraxes (faulty acts)', but it seems now as though sometimes the faulty act was itself quite a normal act, which merely took the place of the other act which was the one expected or intended."²² More directly and concisely, he says that parapraxes have a "sense" and he explains that by "sense" he means "intention" or "purpose".²³ Now purposes are things that, normally, persons have; acts are performed by persons and their acts mean certain things to them. To say that acts are performed by the unconscious and that these acts carry out the purposes of the unconscious is very much like postulating a person within a person. I find it quite revealing of what Freud has in mind when he gives an argument which seems to be against going too far in eliminating anthropomorphism from science. Suppose, he suggests, someone is (in contemporary terminology) mugged and reports this fact to the police by saying "Loneliness and darkness have just robbed me of my valuables".²⁴ Obviously the crime was committed by a thief, even though loneliness and darkness may have been contributing factors. Similarly, if we wish to explain an error, we must look beyond the external factors which accompanied the error, and may have been a contributing factor, to its basic cause: the unconscious motivation which lay behind it. What I find interesting is that in telling this little story, Freud makes a person analogous to the unconscious. Freud, it must be said, does reject the view that the unconscious ought to

²¹Ulric Neisser, "The Process of Vision", Scientific American, September, 1968, p. 204.

²²S. Freud, The Standard Edition, Volume XV, p. 35.

²³S. Freud, The Standard Edition, Volume XV, p. 40.

²⁴S. Freud, The Standard Edition, Volume XV, pp. 45-46.

be interpreted as a second consciousness.²⁵ But this disclaimer may not be sufficient if he attributes properties to the unconscious which can only be properties of persons.

In Chomsky the unsettling element has to do not with his view of grammar as an explanatory theory held by the linguist, but with his view of grammar as a theory in the mind (unconsciously) of each person from birth. This smacks of the person within a person fallacy in a very direct way since a person normally adopts a theory consciously and it is not clear what it would mean to say that a person has a theory without being aware of it; unless it means that there is a person who holds the theory within the person. Consider the kind of criticism of Chomsky's position offered by Gilbert Harmon.²⁶ While I do not think that Harmon succeeds in showing that Chomsky's view is incoherent, or even implausible, I do think that his argument points to something in Chomsky's approach which does require further discussion. One of Harmon's points is that if we assume a person is born with a theory of language, then this theory must be presented within some metalanguage. But we can now apply the same argument to the metalanguage so we get an infinite regress of languages which the person must be born with if he is to be born with any language at all. Chomsky argues that this conclusion does not follow even if we assume that "the innate schematism must be represented in an 'innate language'". He says that the "child must know this 'innate language', in Harmon's terms, but it does not follow that he must 'speak and understand it'".²⁷ Now what can it mean to say that a person knows a language if not that he can speak and understand it? Indeed, when we say a person knows a language we seem to mean precisely that. Thus the only way I can make sense of what Chomsky is saying is to picture a person within the person. The inner person knows the language and somehow guides the outer person in speaking and understanding, but the outer person does not know the language.

It seems to me that the concept of structure, when it

²⁵S. Freud, The Standard Edition, Volume XIV, p. 170.

²⁶Gilbert Harmon, "Psychological Aspects of the Theory of Syntax", Journal of Philosophy, Volume LXIV (1967). See also the articles by Chomsky and Harmon in Sidney Hook, ed., Language and Philosophy, (New York, NYU Press, 1969)

²⁷Chomsky, "Language and Philosophy", in Hook, p. 88.

is used in its abstract sense, is exactly what is needed to (quite properly) smooth over this unsettling element in the attempt to discuss meanings in the unconscious. What is important in this aspect of the work of Freud, Lévi-Strauss and Chomsky is not so much the ontological status of the purposes, meanings and rules invoked, but the complex set of relations among them. This aspect of their theories would not be changed much if they declared themselves to be formalists or instrumentalists merely creating formal models which conveniently organize our knowledge of behavior. Of course none of them wishes to do this and I am not suggesting that there is any reason why they should. But what they need is a foundation for their conceptual framework which will allow them to focus on abstract relations, but in a way which emphasizes that they see themselves as discovering something concrete, and not merely inventing an abstract schema. Clearly, the abstract sense of structure is just what they need.

I also think that this interpretation can be especially helpful in understanding what Freud meant by referring to his final metapsychology, presented in The Ego and the Id as a structural view of the mind. Although the close textual analysis required to sustain this point can not be presented within the confines of this paper, a brief sketch of what I have in mind might be in order. In his early work, the term "unconscious" appears mainly as an adjective; it refers to a property which a mental entity may or may not have. Unconsciousness conceived in this way, however, began to seem to him too abstract. To correct this he introduced the more concrete notion of "the system Ucs". The excessive concreteness of this approach, though, created other problems. It seems to me that the basic purpose of the "structural" metapsychology presented in The Ego and the Id is to strike a balance between an overly abstract and an overly concrete notion of the unconscious. He wants to emphasize that although he is talking about concrete entities, it is the relationships among the entities rather than the entities themselves which are most important.

IV. The Theory of Determinism

But Freud, Lévi-Strauss and Chomsky also have another side to their intellectual personalities and the conceptual framework they employ must be adequate to it also. It is often pointed out that Freud's intellectual roots were in the Helmholtz school of "Physicalistic Physiology".²⁸ This school was committed to placing psychology within, to

²⁸For a recent discussion of the influence of this heritage on Freud's thought, see Daniel Yankelovich and William Barrett, Ego and Instinct, (New York, Random House, 1970).

use Chomsky's phrase, the Newtownian framework. To accomplish this Freud devised the notion of the psychic apparatus. Its purpose is to serve as a surrogate for an inertial system. In Freud's first major (although initially unpublished) work, the Project of a Scientific Psychology, the psychic apparatus is made up of explicitly physical forces. In later work this was translated into psychical forces but their interplay remains deterministic. Furthermore, it is goal oriented, in Freud's early work, only in the sense that it inevitably tends toward a state of quiescence; its purpose is to abolish disturbing stimuli. The actual way in which it works was often to change. He emphasized at various times sex alone, then sex versus aggression, a life instinct versus a death instinct, the pleasure principle, etc. But what remained constant is that Freud saw the psychic apparatus as a deterministic system; the arena in which there is a constant interplay of forces.

We have in the thought of Lévi-Strauss also a deterministic side which tends to see the world within the framework of classical physics. Just as Freud sees the essential teleology of the nervous system as tending toward a state of quiescence, Lévi-Strauss sees the same thing holding true for society in general. He says: "Man's role is itself a machine, brought perhaps to a greater point of perfection than any other, whose activity hastens the disintegration of an initial order and precipitates a powerfully organized matter towards a condition of inertia which grows even greater, and will one day prove definitive."²⁹ "Hot" societies are unstable and go through the process quickly and explosively while "cool" societies are relatively stable and go through the process more slowly. But all societies are ultimately part of the physical world and subject to the laws of thermodynamics. It is not clear to me just how much of this is intended by Lévi-Strauss to be taken literally, but even to the extent that it is a metaphor it reflects a decidedly deterministic point of view.

And with Chomsky we have the view that the fundamental structure of language is part of the genetic make-up of the human species. Chomsky feels that we have begun to see that there are certain universal properties of all human languages. He argues that the universality of such features can only be accounted for by holding them to be innate; part of our biology. It would be as appropriate

²⁹ Lévi-Strauss, quoted by Yankelovich and Barrett, p. 302.

for Chomsky to say that some day biology might replace linguistics as it was for Freud to say that some day biology might replace psychology. Thus Chomsky, as well as Freud and Lévi-Strauss, has a side to his thinking that emphasizes the existence of something concrete. The universals of language may be formal universals, but they are instantiated within each individual as part of his genetic make-up. However, in the case of all three, what is important is not so much the biology or physics of the elements in their system but the relations among the elements. The problem is that in all three cases, not much is known about these relations. The "forces" of Freud's psychic apparatus must be thought of as actually existing and yet they are rather hard to pin down. They can not be measured and the fact that their use as explanatory factors often seems quite ad hoc is a common criticism of psychoanalysis. Lévi-Strauss' concept of "hot" and "cool" societies is open to the same criticism. We can not really measure the temperature of a society and any attempt to use this distinction to explain differences among societies is surely ad hoc. And with Chomsky we have talk of universal principles of human language, but we still know practically nothing of their neurophysiological manifestation. In any case what is important about this aspect of the work of all three is that we can, as our knowledge develops, learn about the relations among the concrete elements that make up these deterministic systems. Thus what is needed is a basis for the conceptual framework which, while it actually refers to concrete things, emphasizes that it is the relations among them that we find interesting. So again, the concept of structure, in this case its concrete sense, is exactly what is needed.

V. Conclusion

In the account of structuralism I have given I have emphasized a number of points which are not usually emphasized in discussions of French structuralism and I have also neglected a number of views and tendencies which are usually held central to what structuralism is. I would like to make a few comments about how two such points might relate to structuralism as I see it. The first is that an interest in language, and more basically, how signs and symbols operate in general, seems to be present in all those who have been even vaguely associated with structuralism. My suggestion is that perhaps this fact, and the emphasis of those who I consider paradigm structuralists on the unconscious may be more closely related than they seem at first glance. Perhaps

the discovery of the unconscious did for linguistics what the discovery of non-Euclidian geometries did for logic. That is, the discovery of the coherence of non-Euclidian systems took mathematics so far from its intuitive foundations that an intensive study of the logic of mathematical thought was required to keep mathematics well grounded. Perhaps in a similar way, the discovery of meanings in the unconscious took linguistics so far from its intuitive foundations, the corpus of what people actually say, that the need was felt for a more basic study of the logic of meaningful signs.

Second is the emphasis among French structuralists on synchronic rather than diachronic systems. This clearly has to do with the deterministic side of structuralist thought. Perhaps it is a sort of philosophical injunction against action at a (temporal) distance. That is, a way of saying that what interests us about the past is only those things which have manifested themselves in some way in the present. Seeing it this way might help to incorporate Freud into a structuralist framework. The most apparent disparity between Freud and the French structuralists is the strongly genetic, developmental, tendency in Freud's thought, and the fact that in practice psychoanalysis is quite backward looking. But for Freud this backward looking is a means to an end. What really interests Freud is something which exists right now but is being repressed. If there were some quick way of bringing it to consciousness Freud would undoubtedly have much less interest in the long process of going back to the time when it was first repressed. This whole line of thought in Freud originated in his attempt to cure hysterical symptoms. Joseph Breuer reported an incident in which a patient's symptoms vanished when she was able to recall, under hypnosis, what she had felt during the incident when the symptoms appeared.³⁰ This gave Freud the insight which led to the development of the basic techniques of psychoanalysis. The point is that Freud was attracted to this approach only because it succeeded in relieving a present symptom. B. F. Skinner undoubtedly goes too far in asserting³¹ that the entire Freudian psychic apparatus is merely a device for bridging the temporal gap between stimuli in childhood

³⁰Charles Brenner, An Elementary Textbook of Psycho-Analysis, (New York, Anchor Books, 1957), p. 7. For a fuller discussion of this aspect of Freud's early development, see Ernest Jones, The Life and Work of Sigmund Freud, Volume I, Chapter XI.

³¹B. F. Skinner, "Critique of Psychoanalytic Concepts and Theories", Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Science, Volume I, pp. 77 - 87.

and adult responses. But the developmental aspects of Freudian thought might indeed turn out to be less important than is sometimes thought.

Finally, it seems to me that the essential characteristic of what I wish to call structuralism is not so much the fact that it happens to embrace both a theory of meanings and a theory of determinism. What makes Freud, Levi-Strauss and Chomsky paradigm structuralists is the attempt to hold the two together. Let me illustrate with Freud. Among his followers some emphasized one aspect and some the other aspect of his thought. For example, Jung elaborated the theory of meanings while Willhelm Reich reduced everything to the theory of forces. Jung's approach is abstract in the extreme, just as Reich's is concrete in the extreme. In some sense both Jung and Reich are Freudians but in no sense is either of them a structuralist. As I said earlier, perhaps being a structuralist is, more than anything else, trying to hold together a theory of meanings and a theory of forces, without reducing one to the other and without giving up either one or the other.

John B. Fisher
Herbert H. Lehman College
The City University of New York
Bronx, New York 10468