The name Sigmund Freud dominates early history personality theories. Freud proposed the first major personality theory and psychotherapy procedure. He painted a picture of human personality so forceful (some would say bizarre) that he inspired strong devotion or strong opposition. Sometimes scholars analyze how frequently famous names are mentioned in the reference sections of journal articles. A citation analysis like this will often show Freud near the top of the list. So he is one of the most-frequently cited names in psychology, even though Freud was not a psychologist but a psychiatrist.

What such a citation analysis fails to show is that many present-day citations of Freud are critical or negative in tone. Psychologists commonly refer to Freudian theory as a historical fact, then they discuss why they disagree with it or how newer ideas are better. Most of the personality theories generated in the first half of the 20th Century were presented as alternatives to Freud's theory.

So, while it is true that Freud's name comes up a lot in psychology classes, it is not true that most psychologists embrace Freud. To the contrary, most psychologists (with some exceptions) believe Freud's work is unscientific, poorly supported by research, and primarily of historical interest. However, Freud's theory was very influential. In order to understand how ideas about psychology developed in the 20th Century, one must be familiar with Freud and his theories. Therefore Freud is discussed in many psychology classes.

**Freud's Divisions of The Psyche**

In the 1890s, Freud proposed a theory that distinguished between three different levels of consciousness. *Conscious* thoughts are mental products currently in awareness. *Preconscious* thoughts are memories not currently in awareness but easily retrieved. *Unconscious* thoughts are things a person cannot voluntarily bring to awareness. This was Freud's first theory about how the personality was put together.

In 1923, Freud came out with a new book, *The Ego and the Id*, describing a new, comprehensive theory of personality organization. Most people think of this as "Freud's personality theory." However, he came out with it after practicing for 40 years, so it was a relatively late development in Freud's career.

The ideas of *id*, *ego*, and *super-ego* were an attempt to describe important components of the psyche (overall mental contents). Freud called them *functions*. He cautioned his readers to remember that id, ego, and super-ego were not "persons in their own right." They were just concepts-handly words for describing patterns of human behavior.

**The Id**

The first developing part of the psyche, in Freud's theory, was the *id*, which means "it." Freud got the idea of a psychological id from a psychologist named Georg Groddeck who lived in Vienna at the same time as Freud. To Groddeck, the id was a dark, unknown part of the mind that controls us but remains outside our awareness. Groddeck wrote a book called *The Book of IT* in which he argued that we are "lived" by this unseen presence. In other words, "it" is *really* in control!

Freud described the id as "chaos, a cauldron full of seething excitation" dominated by impulses of sex and aggression. Freud proposed that the id was the source of the *libido*, a source of energy for
the entire psyche. This energy was expressed in *drives* or *urges* like sex and aggression. (Freud used the German word *trieb*, which means a motivating tendency, sometimes translated as "wish.")

Freud described the mental activity generated by the id as *primary process* thinking. *Primary* means *first*. Primary process thinking is primitive, dream-like thinking, presumably the first type of thinking we experience as babies. It is simple, irrational, and gut-level, aimed at seeking pleasure or avoiding pain. As adults, we experience it most often in dreams or in moments of mental disturbance.

Freud believed the id generates urges and impulses in accordance with the *pleasure principle*: pursuit of immediate gratification, regardless of consequences. The pleasure principle might be described as "I want what I want when I want it." Primary process thinking, which Freud believed was typical of unconscious mental processes, was said to be dominated by the pleasure principle. It aimed to satisfy the demands of the id in irrational, unrealistic ways, often through fantasy. Freud believed, for example, that *dreams* were aimed at satisfying id impulses.

Freud believed babies were "all id" when born. When a baby is hungry or lonely, it cries and demands immediate relief. Even children three or four years old have a hard time waiting even a few hours for something they want. They operate on the pleasure principle; they want immediate gratification.

In general, Freud said, the unconscious is *infantile*. It is not necessarily evil, but it is childlike. It is innocently good or bad depending on circumstances, reacting with immediacy to events as they happen. Unconsciously, Freud believed, we are all like little children: we want immediate gratification and have low tolerance for frustration. Only the development of more mature, controlling parts of the mind helps us avoid expressing id impulses and acting like babies when we are grown up.

**The Ego**

The second of Freud's three divisions of the psyche is the ego. Ego means "I." It is roughly equivalent to our sense of identity—who we think we are. Modern theorists sometimes refer to the ego as *the executive function*. The part of the mind/body system that Freud called the ego is the part that executes plans and coordinates activity.

Freud described the ego, drawing power from the id while controlling it, as resembling a rider on a horse. In this metaphor the horse represents the id: a primitive, animal-like source of energy. The rider represents the ego. It may be weak or strong, clumsy or skillful. If the rider is uncoordinated or lacking in skill, the horse goes whatever direction it pleases, and the rider must hold on for dear life. This is like a person whose impulses are out of control, poorly coordinated by the ego. On the other hand, if the rider is an expert, the horse becomes like an extension of the rider's willpower, making the rider swifter and more powerful than a human on foot. Similarly, in Freud's view, the id provided raw energy, and the ego (if skillful or well controlled) used this energy to do remarkable, positive things.

To Freud, a good horse rider was like a person with good *ego strength*. Having a *strong ego* is *not* the same thing as being egotistical or "stuck up." Having good ego strength means you can remain in control of your impulses, even under adverse circumstances, and that you persist in directing your energy toward long-term goals.

In Freud's scheme the ego is not entirely conscious. Some of the plans and activities a person coordinates may not be conscious. For example, repression of unpleasant memories is an activity
that Freud attributed to the ego, and it was thought to be an unconscious sort of defense. Similarly, the other defense mechanisms (discussed in the next section) were said to be unconscious functions of the ego, carried out to defend the psyche (the overall mental system) against painful thoughts and emotions.

Freud said the ego develops in early childhood. Little children discover that id-impulses often cannot be gratified immediately. The pleasure principle is not realistic. Sometimes, to get what you want, you must be rational or tolerate a delay. The ego develops as a result of this clash between desires of the id and realities of the world. With the development of the ego comes conscious, rational thinking. Freud called this secondary process thinking because it occurs later in development and modifies the most animal-like primary process thinking.

While primary process thinking is dominated by the pleasure principle, secondary process thinking— that which is controlled by the ego—is based on the reality principle. Freud described the reality principle as the ability of the ego to make plans that take reality into account, even if it means postponing pleasure or enduring pain. For example, most students realize they must complete school before they can embark on a career. Therefore they endure years of schooling in order to achieve their ultimate goals. In Freud's scheme this would be seen as an example of the ego's ability to execute plans and to defer gratification, in accordance with the reality principle.

**THE SUPER-EGO**

The super-ego is a third function that Freud hypothesized. The word super means above, and the super-ego is like a supervisor of the psyche, monitoring our activity and making value judgments which lead us to feel good or bad about our behavior. Freud believed that we learn morals and values from the people who take care of us in childhood. Gradually these values are internalized or taken inside us, and the result is the super-ego. He said the super-ego, as an "internalization of parental values," was responsible for both pride and guilt. Because of this two-edged quality, one psychoanalyst (Schecter 1979) referred to the loving and persecuting super-ego.

According to Freud, the super-ego was partly unconscious. We could be aware of parts of it, but we could also be surprised by guilt or pride. Freud, in a famous metaphor, compared the psyche to an iceberg. The following diagram is based on Freud's metaphor. Like an iceberg (Freud said) nine-tenths of the psyche is invisible to us, submerged in the unconscious.

Freud said the ego is often caught in a struggle between the id and super-ego, which pull in opposite directions. This is commonly symbolized by a devil on one shoulder, an angel on the other shoulder, each speaking into a different ear.

Freud wrote, "The poor ego...has to serve three harsh masters," It adapts to reality, it adapts to the urges of the id, and it adapts to the super-ego. This was the ego's function: to serve as the master executive, juggling all the priorities, planning out the best course of action. In Freud's theory, the ego was the agent of adaptation for the entire personality.

**SUMMARY: FREUD'S THEORY**

Freud is one of the most influential figures in the history of psychology, but not necessarily because modern psychologists accept his ideas. Freud is one of the most frequently cited names in psychology, but many of the citations are critical in nature. Many other personality theories were
formed as a direct reaction to Freud’s theory, branching off in directions neglected by Freud, or using portions of his ideas while rejecting others.

The word *psyche* refers to the mind as a whole. Freud believed much of the psyche was unconscious; he compared it to an iceberg, which was nine/tenths under water. In his 1923 theory, Freud distinguished between the *id* (the primitive, animal-like part of the mind, supposedly the source of energy for the psyche), the *ego* (the "agent of adaptation" in the psyche, mostly conscious) and the *super-ego* (the source of self-evaluation, guilt and pride, an internalization of parental values). The id was totally unconscious, Freud believed. The super-ego was partly unconscious, and the ego was mostly accessible to consciousness.

Freud described the phenomenon of repression, in which the conscious mind turns away from a painful thought or memory, pushing it down into the unconscious. The thought does not go away, however, and energy from the *libido* (life energy) is consumed by keeping it repressed. This energy can be released, Freud thought, when a repressed memory is re-admitted to consciousness.

Freud described a variety of defense mechanisms, by which the ego defended itself against unpleasant thoughts, memories, or wishes. This is probably the part of Freud’s theory that is most acceptable in today’s psychology. However, Freud himself put the most emphasis on his sexual theory, especially the sequence of events in early childhood that he labeled the "family drama." Scientific research fails to support many of Freud’s ideas, with the notable exception of the defense mechanisms.

**Source:**