Good-bye, Freud

"Can Psychoanalysis Be Saved?" by J. Allan Hobson, in *The Sciences* (Nov./Dec. 1985), The New York Academy of Sciences, 2 East 63rd St., New York, N.Y. 10021.

"Psychoanalysis, born amid doubt in 1900, could well be dead by the year 2000."

So says Hobson, professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School. He maintains that doubt about the legitimacy of Sigmund Freud's method of probing the mind through the free association of words now looms large in psychiatric circles—even among Freudians. As a result, psychoanalysis itself lies ailing on the couch.

Psychiatrists are currently split into two camps. The American "ego psychologists" (the hard-core Freudians) have tried to reconcile psychoanalysis with neurobiology; they have strayed from the old method of penetrating the patient's subconscious mind solely by interpreting his utterances. Across the Atlantic, the Freudian followers of the French psychoanalytical theorist Jacques Lacan (1901–81) regard the ego psychologists as renegades; they insist that speech reveals the only true road to the unconscious.

Aggravating this breach is another issue: Does psychoanalysis constitute a "scientific" discipline?

One group of critics, led by British philosopher Sir Karl Popper, rejects psychoanalysis' claims as a science because clinical investigations can neither prove nor disprove its tenets. Frank Sulloway, a historian at University College London, further undermines psychoanalysis' status as a science by arguing in *Freud, Biologist of the Mind* (1979) that the Viennese physician doctored some of his case histories to protect his reputation.

Recently, two scientists have attempted to rescue Freud. Psychoanalyst Morton F. Reiser of Yale, in *Mind, Brain, Body* (1985), contends that biology can explain such Freudian concepts as "memory repression" and "signal anxiety" (a feeling of impending danger). Neurobiologist Jonathan Winson of Rockefeller University, in *Brain and Psyche* (1985), asserts that man's brainstem houses his unconscious mind, which emerges during Rapid Eye Movement (REM) sleep.

Hobson finds neither argument convincing. Instead, he lauds a critic of Freud, Adolf Grunbaum, a philosopher of science at the University of Pittsburgh. In *The Foundations of Psychoanalysis* (1985), Grunbaum points out that Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1899) relates a vengeful dream Freud had about his patient Irma. Yet the dream—with no allusion to Freud's childhood—contradicts Freud's main thesis that repressed infantile wishes are acted out in dreams.

Moreover, Grunbaum highlights a contradiction in the psychoanalytic method: If an analyst guides a patient's "free associations" of thoughts to build a psychological profile, then the patient is not, in fact, thinking freely; the psychoanalytic process is merely self-fulfilling. Without expunging "the ghost of suggestion," psychoanalysis quickly comes to resemble its progenitor, hypnosis.

If Grunbaum is right, Hobson concludes, then "the scientific value of the [psychoanalytic] technique is hopelessly impugned."