At the end of the nineteenth century Sigmund Freud began to publish a body of texts that gave birth to the field of psychoanalysis. For the next four decades Freud created a massive archive based both on his therapeutic experiences and on the philosophical conclusions he drew from these experiences. Though Freud is perhaps best known for his insistence that the “unconscious” informs—and also deforms—our conscious behaviors, as well as the ways we make sense of them, he was not the first to propose this concept. However, he did give the unconscious a new significance when he affirmed that these unconscious meanings constitute “psychical reality” which is just as “real” as any other reality. Moreover, the reality of the psyche contains elements that do not properly belong to us insofar as they come to us from the world in which we live and from those with whom we live as infants. Freud’s emphasis on “infantile sexuality” and on the “Oedipus complex” represent his attempt to give meaningful shape to the paradox that we only become our “selves” by incorporating aspects of others who are not us. Freud recognized that the internal tension produced among these different aspects of the psyche causes friction between competing desires and drives, often leading to deleterious or painful patterns of thought and behavior. Thus, as a therapeutic practice psychoanalysis sought to ameliorate such human suffering, while as an intellectual practice psychoanalytic writings sought to understand the psychic dynamics that give rise to it.

In this course we will attempt to understand some of the basic concepts and insights of psychoanalysis with regard to sexuality. While what Freud meant by sexuality is not exactly clear, it nevertheless served as the crux for his interpretation of human existence. In this regard Freud takes up and transforms a trajectory of European thought which extends from the middle of the 18th century to the present that sees individual human beings as belonging to a species whose continued existence as a species relies on sexual reproduction. Concomitantly, this line of thought holds sexuality to be the most animal—and hence least “rational”—aspect of human lives, leading to conflicts within the individual between these distinct animal/human imperatives. As a late 19th century Viennese physician trained in neurology, Freud took up this paradox of the human animal by situating sexuality on the borderline between the biological and the psychic. In so doing, he elaborated some of the contradictions that bourgeois European society systematically engendered and then sought to explain and to treat them. Although Freud believed that his insights applied universally to all human beings, it seems more likely that Freud’s work illuminates the tensions created within a distinct cultural and economic milieu—tensions which contemporary American culture continues in many ways to develop and transform.

This course is not psychoanalytic per se. Rather it seeks to reflect on the ways Freud explains the dynamics of the human psyche and to consider some of the intellectual tools he offers us make sense of our own lives.