Psychiatry has an evil genius for inventing too many terms – sometimes it seems that there are more words being bandied around than there are ideas to justify new terminology. Add to this the point that many psychiatrists dislike giving diseases a specific name and, at times, we almost end up with adjectives and no nouns, and no realistic idea of a mind or brain that could possibly contain them. Criss-cross the whole field of such ‘knowledge’ with fashionable terms, suitably undefined or at best poorly defined, and we end up with a minor branch of literature, inferior to the novel and tenuously attached to science (if not actually anti-scientific).

In my view, many Freudian psychoanalytic theories have remained partially formed ideas rather than becoming part of our store of knowledge because of a kind of intellectual confusion. Not enough of the non-rational has been considered in a calm rational moment. If Freud had examined the non-rational he would have rejected it.

Let us take the term ‘crisis of identity’ as an example. It was introduced into psychiatry by Erik Erikson and refers to his basic idea that as infants and children we develop and mature by meeting a series of crises – weaning, toilet training, separation and so on. It is by successfully meeting and solving such crises that we grow. In our childhood we are helped through these crises of growth by the ‘sameness’ and continuity of our inner and outer worlds – firstly by a caring mother, then by both parents, later by the family and later still by society.

But, Erikson asserts, in adolescence all the ‘sameness’ and continuity relied on earlier in childhood is questioned again – because of the rapid body growth, and the beginnings of sexual maturity. He talks of the crisis in puberty in terms of the ability or inability to integrate previous internal experiences, so that an adolescent is able to match what he means to himself with the meaning he has for others. He contrasts this ideal state of integration with other states of mind in puberty, when the meaning of ‘one’s self for one’s self’ and ‘one’s self for others’ is a ‘bad match’.

Secure identity

When the match is good, this is secure identity, when it is bad, he talks (or seems to talk) of ‘identity diffusion’. He emphasises the importance of peer groups during puberty, the need for leadership and the need to be led. He also makes some remarks about ‘ideological perspectives’.

The beginnings of sexual maturity itself, he sees as a psychological stage in which a young person
oscillates between intimacy on the one hand and isolation on the other. He reflects upon some psychoanalytic – and quasi-literary – ideas about 'losing and finding oneself in another'. In a more American way, he borrows from Margaret Mead and other social anthropologists, throwing in the themes of competition and co-operation in adolescence.

I have always been puzzled by Erikson's reputation. His main ideas have always seemed to be no more than Freud restated – but much less clearly. His various developmental stages are awfully hard to paraphrase without their either vanishing or becoming unintelligible. It is easy to mistake a rather obscure style for profundity.

Among philosophers, I find him not unlike Kant, in the sense that in the end I often do not know what he is telling me – or I knew it already, or I disagree.

It is perhaps absurd (or is it?) to compare Erikson to Kierkegaard. Working at Kierkegaard (surely, reading him amounts to work) one is inevitably changed. I never doubt that any difficulties are not merely stylistic, but are found in the depths the reader is led to – areas where there are indeed hardly any words that could be used. But with Kierkegaard the reader is led to the abyss beyond words – but not beyond meaning.

When I had to lecture on Erikson recently, I returned to his books after 20 years when, among others, I first read his Childhood and Society. It was just after the Second World War, which was fresh in my experience, and re-reading the book I was reminded of my original resentment over the slick generalisations about different nations – the Germans, the Russians, the Americans. I challenge anyone to predict, on the basis of Erikson's chapter 'Reflections on the American Identity', the obscenity of Vietnam.

It is easy to see how psychoanalysis has such a reputation for immense (and dangerous) powers apparently to explain the past; it has so many descriptive terms, it can make such drama out of relationships – but we should also expect a science to have a predictive value. Reading the pages in Erikson devoted to folksy John Henry, a Negro railroad construction worker in the days of the opening up of the American West, one arrives at this: '... he will not commit himself to any identity as predetermined by the stigma of birth; and he leaves to become a man who is nothing but a man before any attempt is made to provide him with what he has demanded.'

In fact, those who should provide John Henry with an identity, in the context of Erikson's sentimental tale, are John Henry's relations. These relations are absurd, stereotyped 'Uncle Toms', institutionalised in underprivilege. When Erikson calls his whole account a 'thoroughly American story', and humorous, he demonstrates why the liberal attitude is
defunct in America. Behind the apparent childishness and quaintness of the Southern Negro (that American identity) there was always despair and rage, open enough now for all to see. Seen with the eyes of the seventies, it is a long, sentimental Mark Twain passage.

We could not predict from these pages, the historical necessity of the rise of the Black Panthers, of the Civil Rights Movement, of riots, massacres by State police, the bankruptcy of the American liberal attitude, the despair of the American Negro turning towards revolution.

In other words, the endless discussion of ‘mind-stuff’, the ghost-in-the-machine, the generalised person who ‘contains’ and categorises periods of history, cannot in fact exist in the here and now of actual history. Nothing in Erikson’s schemes allows for the positive acts of men who change history now. They are only seen as patients lying on couches, mixing facts with fantasies, passively responding to events.

In a study of the kibbutzim in Israel I met no one who could recognise themselves and their ‘identity’ as described by Bruno Bettelheim in his book *The Children of the Dream*, particularly where Bettelheim uses Erikson’s way of describing adolescence.

When I saw the film *Klute* in Hampstead, I was particularly struck when one of the characters in the film, making a confession, said something like, ‘It was a couple of years ago, I had this crisis of identity....’ The Hampstead audience laughed. It sounded so slick, false, fashionable. If he had said, ‘I was depressed’ or ‘anxious’ or ‘had had a breakdown’, this audience would have sympathised and not responded with derision.

### Same kinds of people

Across the graves of all the wars, our ‘national’ problem is to see we are all the same kinds of people on either side of frontiers. Depressive anxiety, feelings of persecution, de-personalization, the loss of a sense of reality, are common to all races. They are not ‘fashionable’ experiences. They are yet commonplace.

I would agree that the schizoid have problems with identity. Touchy, uncertain, seeing the world as split into the good and the bad, making others feel their feelings, the schizoid deny that all this is *their* problem. Let us not agree with them that it is ours. We are nearly drowning in our psychiatric terms without all that too.