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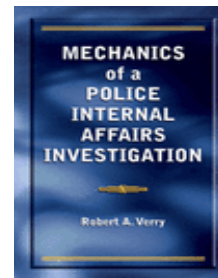
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**CONCENTRATION**



Disciplinary Hearing Officer  
Grievances | Unfair Practice  
Internal Affairs | Harassment | Workplace Investigator

Robert is **not** a lawyer. If you need legal advice, please contact a lawyer. (^-Retired SBB-NJ)



Internal Affairs Professional Standards/Guidelines  
Employee Misconduct | Employee Discipline  
OPRA | Common Law (Internal Affairs/Police Records)

## **Is There Such a Thing as an Accident?**

*In the course of researching my second book on police misconduct, I engaged with the longstanding question of whether an officer's actions can genuinely be characterized as "accidental." For decades, officers under investigation have frequently asserted that their conduct was unintentional, while attorneys and union representatives have commonly framed the issue as a distinction between actions of the "heart" versus those of the "head." This debate implicates a deeper theoretical inquiry—whether accidents exist at all—a question first articulated by Sigmund Freud, whose psychoanalytic framework provides a lens through which such claims of "accident" may be critically assessed in the context of misconduct investigations.*

Sigmund Freud's assertion that there is "no such thing as an accident" stands as a foundation of his psychoanalytic theory, reframing everyday mistakes and misfortunes as windows to the unconscious mind rather than mere coincidences. To modern readers, this perspective challenges the commonplace view that slips of the tongue, forgotten appointments, or even mishaps occur randomly. Yet, for Freud, these "accidents" provide valuable evidence that unconscious desires, conflicts, and emotions continuously shape behavior—even when individuals are unaware of them. This paper explores Freud's "no accidents" position, situating it historically, explaining its core elements, and illustrating it with easy-to-understand examples.

### *Foundations: Psychic Determinism and the Unconscious*

Central to Freud's theory is the principle of psychic determinism, which posits that every thought, feeling, and action is meaningfully driven by psychological forces. For Freud, nothing in human conduct is truly arbitrary—every mental event has a cause rooted in the psyche, even when that cause is hidden from conscious awareness. The bedrock of this causality is the unconscious mind, a realm Freud famously compared to the bulk of an iceberg: its vast contents remain submerged below the surface, unseen yet influential.

According to Freud, the unconscious contains forbidden wishes, traumatic memories, powerful instincts, and unresolved conflicts from childhood. These elements are locked away—often by psychological defense mechanisms like repression—because acknowledging them would cause distress. Yet the unconscious perpetually strives to assert itself, leaking out in disguised or

indirect ways. Freud's clinical work, particularly with neurotic and hysterical patients, convinced him that symptoms dismissed as meaningless, including nervous tics and forgotten words, were meaningful products of unconscious dynamics.

### *No Accidents: The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*

Freud's most famous articulation of the principle appeared in his 1901 book, *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*. Here, he coined the term *parapraxes*, or "faulty actions," encompassing the slips, bumbles, and lapses of daily life. Traditionally, such occurrences were regarded as simple mistakes or coincidences. Freud argued instead that these small failures always have a psychological meaning that, with analysis, can be interpreted.

He classified these "non-accidental" phenomena into several familiar categories:

- Freudian slips (*parapraxes*)
- Forgetting names, words, or appointments
- Bungled or erroneously performed actions
- Misplacing objects
- "Chance" actions with symbolic significance

Let's address each with concrete, easy-to-grasp examples—illustrating how the unconscious may be at work beneath the surface.

### *Freudian Slips: Revealing the Hidden Mind*

A Freudian slip, or *parapraxis*, is an unintentional verbal mistake that reveals a hidden thought or feeling. Freud used these examples to show how suppressed desires or anxieties find their way into speech.

#### Example 1:

A student tries to tell their friend, "Let's meet at the library after class," but instead says, "Let's meet at the bar after class." Is it a random error? Freud would ask if the student actually prefers to socialize and avoid studying, or if some desire for relaxation outweighs academic intentions.

#### Example 2:

During a job interview, an applicant calls the interviewer by their previous boss's name—who was dismissed after a major conflict. Freud would propose that the slip hints at unresolved worries or suppressed resentment about authority figures, rather than a memory lapse.

These examples demonstrate Freud's belief that slips of the tongue "are never just accidents": the unconscious mind communicates through mistakes, often betraying intimate secrets or hidden wishes.

### *Forgetting Names, Words, and Appointments: Motivated Forgetting*

Freud also explored how forgetting is not random, but psychologically significant.

Example 1:

A person forgets the name of an acquaintance who reminds them of an uncomfortable event—a quarrel or an embarrassing moment. Freud interpreted such lapses as “motivated forgetting,” driven by the desire to avoid discomfort or anxiety.

Example 2:

Someone consistently forgets about meetings they agreed to attend but later recalls appointments for activities they genuinely enjoy. Freud would say this suggests unconscious resistance: the mind “forgets” what it dislikes, even if consciously the person intends to keep their commitments.

Such examples illustrate Freud’s core claim that forgetting can serve as a protective mechanism, shielding the individual from distressing thoughts by keeping them out of mind.

### *Bungled Actions and Misplaced Objects: Expressing Repressed Feelings*

Freud extended his theory from mental slips to physical accidents and mistakes.

Example 1:

A person “accidentally” drops and breaks a gift from their partner after an intense argument. Is it just clumsiness? Freud would interpret the mishap as an expression of unconscious anger or resentment towards the partner.

Example 2:

Misplacing car keys on the morning of a stressful meeting may be more than an accident. Freud suggested that losing necessary items can reveal an unconscious wish to avoid the anticipated anxiety—providing, in a sense, a “psychological alibi” for not attending.

Thus, bungled actions and “accidental” behavior often carry emotional meaning, even if the person is unaware of it.

### *Chance Actions and Symbolization*

Freud also asserted that even trivial or “pointless” behaviors could be meaningful.

Example:

A doctor unconsciously places a stethoscope on his desk in a particular manner. Freud might interpret this action as symbolizing unconscious emotional tensions, perhaps as a barrier against attraction to a patient.

Such symbolic behavior highlights Freud's conviction that mundane actions are imbued with significance. According to Freud, even the simplest act may serve as a metaphor for deeper psychological concerns or wishes.

### *Determinism and Agency: Can Accidents Be Liberating?*

Freud's stance is deterministic in that it views thoughts and actions as governed by unconscious forces. However, he also maintained that individuals could gain greater self-understanding and autonomy through psychoanalysis. Therapy aims to make the unconscious conscious, enabling patients to overcome unwanted behaviors and psychological suffering. In this way, acknowledging the hidden meaning of "accidents" can be liberating—once understood, individuals can make choices with greater clarity and intention, free from the blind influence of suppressed conflicts.

### *Criticisms and Contemporary Perspectives*

Freud's view remains controversial, especially in light of advances in psychology and neuroscience. Critics charge that the theory is:

- Unfalsifiable: Because any mistake can be interpreted as having an unconscious motive, the theory is difficult to test or disprove.
- Subjective: The interpretation of slips and accidents lies in the eye of the beholder, often the therapist, making scientific validation challenging.
- Competing explanations: Current research shows that fatigue, distraction, cognitive overload, and simple linguistic errors can explain many "accidents" without resorting to the unconscious.

Yet, despite these criticisms, Freud's idea remains influential. Modern approaches blend recognition of unconscious influences with acknowledgement of conscious choice, honoring the insight that behavior—even when apparently random—may reflect hidden psychological currents.

### *Conclusion*

Freud's assertion that "there is no such thing as an accident" remains a milestone in his psychoanalytic legacy. Parapraxes, motivated forgetting, physical mishaps, and chance actions are not viewed as mere mishaps, but as meaningful expressions of the unconscious. Easy examples—calling a friend by the wrong name, forgetting a disfavored appointment, breaking an emotionally loaded object, or making a revealing slip during conversation—bring Freud's principle to life, showing how the psyche is always at work, even when the mind is unaware. Whether embraced or critiqued, Freud's perspective has transformed the way psychologists, therapists, and laypeople consider the hidden roots of everyday life.