

systems at the level of the individual and at the level of the group. Perhaps, had they not been so willing to leave the psychoanalytic unconscious on one side they could have understood the subtle unconscious fantasies that mediate the interaction between the internal system of parts of the individual and the external system of the members of the group. They might have been able to explore the correspondences (or lack of them) between internal and external object relationships, which psychoanalysts call projection and introjection. But then these general system theorists would only have discovered another psychoanalytic discovery. Perhaps it is as well to continue trying to generate theory from the material rather than material for a theory.

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Greatness and Limitations of Freud's Thought.
By Erich Fromm. London: Jonathan Cape. 1980.
Pp. 160.

Erich Fromm, who died in March 1980, is well known to a wide public, reaching far beyond the boundaries of professional psychoanalysis and psychotherapy. His work has deservedly attracted the attention of sociologists, educationalists, anthropologists, churchmen and others, and has done much to humanize and demystify psychoanalytical concepts and metapsychology.

As a member of the 'Neo-Freudian' school, originating in the United States about 40 years ago, he was concerned to incorporate socio-cultural, familial and, later in his life, political factors into the psychoanalytic view of human psychology and these preoccupations have, no doubt, been in large measure decisive in making him such a popular figure. But, whatever the more rigorous theoretical and philosophical views of the psychoanalytically-informed reader of Fromm, I think most would agree that his efforts to popularize Freud's thought and bring it to a wider public audience have had considerable effect and largely, in my view, for the good of psychoanalysis.

Fromm has, for me, always come over as a very *human* man, passionately concerned about justice and the value of human life and creativity, religious in the widest and best sense, and a keen

critic, commentator and analyst of the destructive capacities potentially inherent in human beings, as well as of the forces to be harnessed in the service of living, and for the general good.

This book is the last he wrote and is firmly in the tradition of all his earlier writings. It also belongs in the mainstream of current debate about the nature of psychoanalysis as a biological or hermeneutic psychology. Fromm's position is clearly with the 'psychology of meaning' camp, rather than with the 'biological drive' school, as the chapter on a critique of instinct theory indicates. But he does not adopt a dogmatic point of view. Rather he attempts a critical analysis of some of the more basic Freudian assumptions and cites the lack of support for these by adequate studies in social-psychology, anthropology and genetics. He sees Freud (arguably with some justification) as a prisoner of his own movement with its paranoid over-protectiveness of metapsychological formulations often assuming the characteristics of dogma.

For all this, there is no doubt that Fromm is an admirer as well as a critic of Freudian thought, and, in this sense, he shares a similar (though by no means theoretically comparable) position to the British Object-Relations Theorists: Klein, Fairbairn, Bion, Balint and Winnicott.

But it is his lucid, uncluttered style, combined with his social anthropological and political common sense perspectives and his charge of concern and enthusiasm for human truth, which will, I believe, make this a successful book. It is a book which could be recommended to the interested lay-reader as an introduction to psychoanalysis, paving the way to a more ready grasp of some of the more difficult and confusing aspects of Freud's metapsychology and theoretical thinking in his own writings. He adheres faithfully to the central tenet of Freud's thought; namely, that the truth can heal and make free, especially and centrally knowledge of the truth about unconscious mental life. Fromm discusses truth in terms of facing up to what is primitive and instinctual in man as rooted in his biological nature, and also in terms of the ultimate nature of reality, and the nature of good and evil. He reviews the most central and important discoveries of Freud and the main pillars of his metapsychology.

The first main argument in Fromm's critique of Freud is that he expressed his thought, perhaps



inevitably, within the constraints, and in the spirit, of his time, and from an essentially Helmholtzian and biological point of view. Fromm's assertion (and it is one I am personally sympathetic to), is that Freud's determination to construct a respectable 'scientific psychology' blinkered and limited his vision regarding aspects of human mental life and behaviour, which he would otherwise almost certainly have taken into account. This is not intended in any way as a diminishing criticism. On the contrary, Freud's stature and achievements are properly acknowledged. Fromm is simply concerned to get Freud into perspective and to set the stage helpfully for a first or re-reading of him.

The first chapter on the limitations of scientific knowledge discusses the social context of new concepts and the limitations this imposes, i.e. what is unthinkable is unspeakable. 'Language itself is influenced by the social repression of certain experiences which do not fit into the structure of a given society; languages differ inasmuch as different experiences are repressed and hence are inexpressible.' There are, in other words, limitations inherent in communicating new ideas and experiences in conventional language. What is new and original in the creative thought of a genius like Freud, is sifted out from what is conventional largely by pupils and followers. But revision too is influenced and bound by convention, only an approximation to the truth is arrived at, i.e. truth is historically conditioned.

Fromm's contention is that Freud's thought was limited by two main social constraints. Firstly, the influence of his teacher, Brucke, which founded him in biology and hence led him to rely increasingly on sexuality as the physiological basis for psychic forces. Secondly, Freud's bourgeois, authoritarian, patriarchal attitude.

Despite these limitations, Fromm supports and affirms Freud's status as an original scientific thinker with a valid, scientific method, and a man who saw the human psyche as a structure, or set of structures, which formed an interconnected whole system.

Fromm follows this with a criticism of Freud's intellectual integrity (he blames Freud's 'obsessionality') for ruthlessly shaping and interpreting clinical material to fit his theoretical system. He quotes the flimsy evidence on which Freud based the oedipal interpretations of the

Wolfman's childhood dream of the wolves in the tree. But he then pays tribute to Freud's meticulous and thorough observations which led to the discovery that a phenomenon may also express its negation. Fromm is rightly scathing about trends towards psychoanalytical superficiality or cleverness which the Freudian over-determination concept can readily pave the way to; what he calls 'vulgar Freudianism'.

Fromm's aims are to show:

1. What Freud's greatest discoveries were.
2. How his philosophical and personal premises forced him to narrow down and to distort his discoveries.
3. How their significance is greatly enhanced if we free Freud's formulations from these distortions.
4. That this is equivalent to distinguishing what is essential and lasting and what is time-conditioned and socially contingent in Freud's theory.

Fromm asserts that his aim does not constitute a revision of Freud, nor does it constitute Neo-Freudianism; rather he asserts that his aim is to illustrate the development of the essence of Freud's thought by critical interpretation of its philosophical basis, substituting historical for bourgeois materialism.

In dealing with the main discoveries, Fromm's assertion about the nature of the unconscious is that the idea of a primary process involving instinctual drives of sex and aggression, or of life and death, is a limited one. He acknowledges that this is a difficult philosophical area and personally I felt his thinking was lacking in depth here. He does, however, pay tribute to the momentous and far reaching effect of Freud's discovery of the unconscious on the field of ethics. That is to say, questions of sincerity and authenticity are no longer decided by what a person thinks he is, there now being a conflict between thinking and being. The phrase 'I meant well' has lost its meaning and can no longer be easily offered as an excuse. Fromm turns to the second great Freudian discovery, of the Oedipus complex. His critique here is more extensive and carefully thought through. He asserts that a boy's longing for, and attachment to, his mother, is much more than a purely sexual one. He expands the oedipal constellation to include what contemporary British psychoanalysis certainly takes into account, that is the importance of the infant's dependence, and love as well as hate, for the mother, and



clearly this was not foremost in Freud's thinking. Furthermore, Fromm asserts that rivalry with, and hatred of, the father by the little boy as something that Freud gave a *universal* meaning to, is only of significance in a patriarchal society. Fromm pays scholarly attention to the Oedipus trilogy and he directs the reader to the important theme of conflict between the matriarchal principle of equality and democracy represented by Oedipus with the patriarchal law and order dictatorship, as represented by Creon. The other main Freudian discoveries reviewed by Fromm are the transference and the theory of narcissism. There is also a chapter on Freud's theory of dream interpretation, followed by a chapter on the question of why psychoanalysis was transformed from a radical theory to one of adaptation.

Throughout the book I found myself asking the question whether Fromm has an axe to grind and whether this book is not an expression of disappointment and disillusionment. However, if this motive is running through the work, I still consider it a mature attempt to present Freud to the newcomer in a realistic light, assessed with the advantages of hindsight and with perspectives of the intervening years. On balance I think the latter is probably the more correct view. It is an attempt to pay tribute to the originality and genius of the man, whilst avoiding the pitfalls of dogmatism and idealization, even if Fromm does play on his social engineering theme from time to time throughout the book.

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