

Thompson, M.G. (2000). Nietzsche's Presence in Freud's Life and Thought on the Origins of a Psychology of Dynamic Unconscious Mental Functioning. By Ronald Lehrer. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995, xi + 370 pp.. Psychoanal. Rev., 87:463-467.

Nietzsche's Presence in Freud's Life and Thought on the Origins of a Psychology of Dynamic Unconscious Mental Functioning.

**By Ronald Lehrer. Albany: State University
of New York Press, 1995, xi + 370 pp.**

Review by: M. Guy Thompson, Ph.D.

Freud's debt to philosophy and philosophers is probably the most disputed, controversial, and ultimately confusing area of the sources he is said to have drawn from in the development of his thought. Conventional wisdom suggests that Freud had little use for philosophy and even despised the few philosophers whom he bothered to read. Freud's dismissive remarks in his **1933** paper "The Question of a *Weltanschauung*" concerning philosophy-that it "has no direct influence on the great mass of mankind" and that "it is of interest to only a small number even of the top layer of intellectuals" (p. 161)-has contributed to the impression that Freud's mind was ill suited for philosophical inquiry and that he was wedded to the physicalist bias of the natural sciences. But does this characterization of Freud actually hold up under scrutiny?

In fact, Freud was an avid and informed reader of a wide range of subjects, including philosophy. His insatiable appetite for knowledge encompassed the Greek Classics, literature, mythology, anthropology, and virtually every religious system known to man-including the mystics-in addition to the "harder" sciences that his medical training entailed. Freud's grasp of and appreciation for Greek philosophy probably exceeded that of many contemporary philosophers; his imaginative incorporation of ideas from Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, and Empedocles into his clinical theories and technique demonstrates a gift for practical application that would rival the most gifted artist. Indeed, it is generally acknowledged that Freud was profoundly influenced by any number of philosophers, including some who lived closer to his own era, such as Brentano, Feuerbach, and Schopenhauer.

It is therefore ironic that the one philosopher who, it is generally assumed, made an indelible impact on Freud's thinking is the one he most stubbornly resisted: Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche. Anyone who is acquainted with both Freud and Nietzsche-not a large group, to be

sure-cannot fail to appreciate the striking similarities in their views about man, civilization, morality, transcendence, and the nature of human suffering. Of course, Freud knew who Nietzsche was but claimed that he deliberately *avoided* reading him because he did not want people to think he owed his ideas to this famous nineteenth-century philosopher! Was Freud telling us the honest truth or just pulling our collective leg? No one has ever managed to determine the actual facts of the matter.

Ronald Lehrer has devoted this able and fascinating study to addressing precisely this question. What was Freud's relationship to Nietzsche and how much, in fact, did he owe to this extraordinary thinker? Specifically, Lehrer seeks to determine whether Freud studied Nietzsche while a student at the university (during the same years he was an enthusiastic pupil of Brentano), and to what extent Freud subsequently discussed Nietzsche's writings with his followers in Vienna.

There are basically two sources one can turn to for the purpose of exploring such a question. One is Freud himself and what he actually said about Nietzsche; the other is the testimony of Freud's friends and colleagues, who claimed to know more than Freud was prepared to let on. Lehrer makes liberal use of both these sources in his investigations. A third source is comprised of innuendoes and educated opinions by any number of people who have studied both thinkers in depth and arrive at speculative conclusions. We all engage in such speculations, and there is no small number of them included in this study.

For example, Lehrer notes that Jones reported “a truly remarkable correspondence between Freud's conception of the super-ego and Nietzsche's exposition of the origin of the ‘bad conscience’” (p. 2). The French analyst, Didier Anzieu, suggested that one can locate any number of Freud's concepts in Nietzsche's work (clothed, however, in different terminology), including his concept of an id, repression, the psychology of drives, and the general view that civilization serves to stifle man's search for gratification. He concludes that Nietzsche's notion of a “superman” actually characterizes “the individual who succeeded in transcending the conflict between established values [i.e., society] and his instinctual urges, thus achieving inner freedom,” a major tenet and goal of psychoanalytic treatment (pp. 2-3). Closer to home, Hans Loewald believed that Nietzsche's “direct and indirect influence on Freud and his early followers has been generally underrated” (p. 4).

Even Freud expressed his personal admiration for Nietzsche when he acknowledged that “the degree of introspection achieved by Nietzsche has never been achieved by anyone, nor is it likely ever to be reached again” (p. 5). Yet, Freud made this assessment while claiming

never to have read the man himself! It is hard to imagine how someone who made such an impact on an entire generation of German intellectuals could have escaped Freud's voracious appetite for knowledge. Ronald Hayman, a Nietzsche biographer, noted Nietzsche's indelible impact on twentieth-century thought, an era during which “almost every major writer in the German language has been profoundly indebted to him-[including] Rilke, Kafka, Mann, Musil, Benn, Heidegger and Freud” (p. 3). The list, of course, continues to grow and shows no signs of letting up. On the other hand, anyone that familiar to the intellectual community to which Freud belonged would be discussed and gossiped about far and wide. It is conceivable that Freud could have formed an opinion of Nietzsche based on what friends and colleagues—even his patients—reported. How many intellectuals today, for example, have chosen to base their opinions about Freud on nothing more than hearsay and secondary source materials? If Freud did as much himself, at least he had the courage to admit it!

Fortunately for Lehrer, he does not have to leave this question entirely to speculation. Instead, he has devoted a considerable amount of effort at looking further than gossip and opinion, informed or otherwise. In addition to reviewing the many ideas that Nietzsche and Freud shared in common, the magnitude of which would convince most scholars, Lehrer has devoted the bulk of his study to Freud's university years, and to minutes from the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society during which Nietzsche's works were read and discussed. What did Lehrer learn from his investigations?

Although Lehrer was able to determine that Freud must have had some knowledge of Nietzsche as early as 1875, based on his correspondence with Eduard Silberstein in which Nietzsche was discussed, all that the author was able to glean from this exchange is that some degree of familiarity can be assumed. Upon what, precisely, that acquaintance was based was neither disclosed nor concretely determined by Lehrer, but was simply inferred. In fact, all that Lehrer can say from his study of Freud's university years is that, “When we appreciate the great influence Nietzsche had on a substantial number of Viennese university students in the 1870s... it would appear to be a reasonable conclusion that the ideas of these early works [i.e., *The Birth of Tragedy* and *Untimely Meditations*] had significant impact upon Freud” (p. 18). Hence, nothing even remotely resembling a “smoking gun” by which Freud himself confessed to having studied Nietzsche during this period of his life was uncovered. This so-called “discovery” is disappointing to say the least.

What of the other principal source of Freud's admitted acquaintance

with Nietzsche? On this score the author fares considerably better. He confirms that during the course of at least two meetings of the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society- April 1 and October 28, 1908-some of Nietzsche's works were discussed by the members who were present, including Freud. At the first meeting, sections of *On the Genealogy of Morals* were discussed and some of it was even read aloud. Everyone present agreed that Nietzsche's ideas were phenomenally close to their own. According to the minutes of the meeting, subsequently published by **Herman Nunberg and Ernst Federn (1962)**, Freud stated that he did not actually know Nietzsche's work, though he had tried to read it on numerous occasions. He even acknowledged that in spite of the fact that many people had alerted him to the similarity between them, Freud insisted that Nietzsche's ideas had had no direct influence on his work (pp. 104-105). This paucity of firsthand knowledge, however, did not prevent him from suggesting that Nietzsche, despite his genius, had failed to explore the nature of infantilism to a significant degree! Naturally, Lehrer wonders how Freud could have made this assessment of Nietzsche's work without having studied it. On the other hand, could Freud have been so naive as to lie to his own followers about such a matter? Lehrer suggests that Freud may have simply "forgotten" that he had read Nietzsche more thoroughly than he realized-a conclusion that seems even more preposterous than the likelihood of his having lied about it.

I only mention these details to emphasize the shaky scholarship on which many of our suspicions about Freud's "originality" are based. It is curious why Freud would insist-repeatedly, it seems-that Nietzsche was not a principal source of his theories if indeed he was. Lehrer's research into the matter does nothing to refute Freud's testimony convincingly. In fact, Lehrer himself frequently suggests that Freud probably gleaned his impressions of Nietzsche from his followers and that he was no doubt sincere in his statements to that effect. What, then, should we conclude about Freud's relationship to Nietzsche?

It seems to me that the principal strength of this book is the manner in which the author compares the two thinkers' ideas and shows their striking similarity. Freud and Nietzsche shared a parallel course. The more Freud heard about Nietzsche's ideas, the more he realized how "philosophical" his own ideas were. This, no doubt, unsettled him as much as it excited him. While on the surface they seemed worlds apart, they shared a conception of human existence that, as Lehrer points out, was actually Greek in origin. Both had a passion for Greek mythology, and their vision of modern society was informed by their appreciation of Classical philosophy. Although we tend to think of Nietzsche as the artist

and philosopher and Freud as the scientist and healer, both were equally concerned with the intractable nature of human suffering and wanted desperately to obtain a cure for it. Moreover, Freud was every bit the artist and philosopher that Nietzsche proved to be.

A valuable lesson to be gleaned from this book is the appreciation the author has for Nietzsche's relevance to contemporary society, as a philosopher whom many recognize as the father of existentialism and arguably the inspiration for postmodern thinking. Comparing these accomplishments with Freud serves to remind us how far-reaching Freud's ideas really were, and are even now. Those who would reduce Freud to a "victim" of his time who was prey to an outmoded way of thinking will benefit from Lehrer's painstaking efforts to demonstrate the "Nietzschean" dimension to his work. Even today Freud must be considered a radical and a visionary who was not stuck in his time but far ahead of it. Both Nietzsche and Freud thought that truth was the central concern of what it means to be human and that our tendency to suppress it from others and to deny it within ourselves is more destructive to our sanity than the hardships of everyday living. If this book encourages us to reconsider for just a brief moment the profound nature of Freud's contribution, it will have succeeded more admirably than his medical disciples could ever imagine.

References

- Freud, S. (1933). New introductory lectures on psychoanalysis. In J. Strachey, ed. and trans., *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, 24 volumes. London: Hogarth Press, 1953-1974, 22: 3-182.
- Nunberg, H., & Federn, E., eds. (1962). *Minutes of the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society*, vols. 1-3. New York: International Universities Press.

- 467 -