

A Sweeping Revision of Psychoanalysis

M. Guy Thompson

The Death of Desire: A Study in Psychopathology

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Review by

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As psychoanalysis enters its second century, its theoreticians and practitioners slowly recognize that it is undergoing a revolution. Its theory has changed more in the past 20 years than before, during, and immediately after the lifetime of Freud. Loyalty to the founder altered psychoanalysis from its early radical beginnings into a conservative movement, and after his death, further development proceeded within the framework he had established. This was true despite the opposition between some of the constituent schools coexisting within the orthodoxy, notably those of A. Freud and M. Klein. The basic structure of any official psychoanalysis was that of natural science, with its canons of objectivity, verifiability, and, to a more limited extent, predictability. Although existential and phenomenological philosophers began to criticize the validity of psychoanalysis as an empirical science with a naturalistic structure, and although in fact Binswanger, a friend and admirer of Freud, introduced a long time ago an alternative theory in his "existential analysis," it remained for Lacan to call the entire earlier system into question.

Thompson's book is more than an introduction to Lacan. It is a sweeping revision of psychoanalysis seen by a psychologist familiar with modern philosophy and aware of the difference that a philosophical point of view makes in constructing theory. It is as quietly confident, as respectful of the reader, and as unpo-

lemical as Lacan was the opposite of all of these. Thompson properly begins his study with a vigorous dissection of received views of the "ego," mainly as seen in ego-psychology, and he makes a persuasive case for the opposition between this alleged institution of the personality and the "subject" of desire. Efforts to strengthen any aspect of the ego so conceived must be antitherapeutic, because whatever the avowed intentions of those efforts, they can only serve to strengthen defenses against desire; that is, the analytic and therapeutic purpose must be to make it increasingly possible for desire, neurotically in a state of abeyance, to be spoken by the subject.

For all its dramatic quality, the title of the book reveals its persistent theme. If it is desire that is at the heart of the person, it follows that the vicissitudes of desire (not instinct, a concept heavily freighted with pseudoempirical baggage) account for much of human life and human suffering. In the psychoanalytic process, desire does not simply emerge, because inevitably the analyst acquires a position in the unconscious life of the patient that is not to be surrendered without a struggle; the analysis turns out not to prize self-knowledge as highly as ego preservation. The psychopathological, to the extent that it springs from the lived life of the person, is a movement, fortunately asymptotic as a rule, toward the extinction of desire, not in Nirvana but in despair. While much of this theoretical position will be familiar to readers of Lacan, they will see much more and in refreshing contexts.

Lacan is only one of the modern thinkers who play important roles in Thompson's thought. He has adapted Merleau-Ponty's analysis of temporality in an ingenious and persuasive effort to revise the Freudian concept of the persistence of the past in the present. He shows his indebtedness to Laing, one of his own teachers, and yet he is also able to appreciate the work of analysts closer to traditional points of view.

The only caution one might make is that for a study that is by a clinician and for clinicians, it is more theoretical than one would hope. It would be good to know just how these important modifications in theory are enacted in practice. Perhaps that will occupy Thompson in his next book. ■