

Reading Freud Anew

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Reading Freud Anew

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Abstract

Howard Kaye offers an important and compelling demonstration of Freud's continued significance as a cultural and social theorist. Kaye provides a deep reading of several important texts of Freud, responds to many of his interlocutors, and he situates him within the political, intellectual and social context of his time. He demonstrates the breadth of Freud's ambition to transform "metaphysics into metapsychology" and his contribution to on-going ethical and moral debates of our time. Nonetheless, Kaye inadequately considers the on-going significance of psychoanalysis as a method of psychological treatment and as an emancipatory practice designed to liberate individuals from unnecessary self-imposed constraints interfering with their freedom and happiness.

Keywords Freud · Psychoanalysis · Psychopathology · Social and cultural critique · Social theory

Had I not been invited to participate in this Symposium on Howard Kaye's book, *Freud as a Cultural and Social Theorist* likely would have escaped my attention. It would have been my loss. The book provides a provocative and significant new reading of Freud's *oeuvre* beginning with his earliest pre-psychoanalytic writings prior to the 1899 *The Interpretation of Dreams* up to his last major writing, *Moses and Monotheism* when Freud in 1939 was finally preparing to flee Vienna to escape the Holocaust. And through his beautifully explicated, meticulously crafted engagements with many of these important writings, Kaye makes apparent that Freud remains a major social theorist for our contemporary age. Kaye concludes that Freud, like Marx, ought not to be dismissed because of his failure to realize his ultimate aim of a total psychology of the human being. Freud's concern with human unhappiness, like Marx's with alienation, originated during his young adulthood and remained with him throughout his career. His thinking about the human psyche, as well as the social and cultural environment in which it is embedded,

continued to develop throughout his life. The moral and philosophical concerns about human freedom, human nature and the relation of the individual to the society that intellectually engaged him early on only deepened throughout his career. For Freud, the human mind possesses the awesome task of internalizing and regulating into one human being patterned social interactions between significant others, social structure, cultural norms and values, and the biological limitations imposed by one's body. Kaye celebrates Freud's unique capacity to identify these dimensions of life, both proximal and distal, as all germane to his theory and to bring them into dialogue with one another. That said, Kaye remains agnostic on the continued relevance of Freud for the clinical therapeutic insights he offers related to psychological healing and health to address various manifestations of human suffering. I will return to this point at the end of this review.

Reading this as someone who has spent his career, like Kaye himself, teaching 19th social theory—Marx, Weber, Durkheim, and Freud—to college students over several generations, I welcome his careful exegesis of Freud's work and the care he takes in acknowledging and responding to other scholarly interpretations of Freud. I also appreciate his demonstration of the continuity between Freud's more "technical" psychoanalytic pieces, those which describe, as examples, the unconscious, instincts, intra-psychic conflict, and those, like *Civilization and its Discontents*, widely acknowledged as one of the great twentieth century social writings. For Freud, the conflict between sexual and aggressive impulses, and the need

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to limit or restrict their expression within “civilization” contribute, in a word, to both psychic and social conflict.

Specification and elaboration of those themes provide a *leitmotif* that connect Freud’s evolving formulation of the nature of the human psyche, the origins of psychopathology, the human being’s place within the social and natural order and an important dynamic informing social conflict. Freud’s brilliant contribution to social thought, as Kaye makes clear, is his demonstration of the critical role the human mind plays—governed by its own rules of functioning—in the development of the socio-cultural world. Weber, Simmel, Nietzsche, and even Marx (think of the “*fetishism* of the commodity”) knew of its importance but failed to deepen their understanding of it. Freud was unique among them, devoting his entire career, as Kaye writes “to transform metaphysics into metapsychology.” The riddle how the unconscious mind plays a substantial role in the unfolding of our current age Freud was determined to answer.

Freud as a Cultural and Social Theorist begins by Kaye describing the many ways Freud was hardly simply a medical scientist, even though he would often identify himself as such. Even as a young man, Freud read widely, far beyond the knowledge required to become a successful student, a MD, and a neurologist in Vienna. Kaye reveals how Freud’s explanation of neurotic symptoms, pioneering many different techniques including dream analysis and free association, and his later writings intended to explain anxiety, melancholia, traumatic transmission, repetition compulsion, and the death drive among others expressed his common and consistent concern both with lessening human suffering and developing a universal psychology. Taking on the subsequent interpreters of Freud, like Sulloway’s *Freud: The Biologist of the Mind*, Kaye documents the ways in which Freud’s early writings expressed his early learning in Latin and Greek classics. Freud typically was attracted to mentors who sought to situate science within a modernist, philosophical discourse. He responded favorably to those professors who claimed that philosophy needed to be disciplined by a scientific rigor and psychology should be pursued for philosophical ends. Unlike Sulloway and others, Kaye documents, Freud was not attempting to *reduce* the complexity of the mind to biology. Instead, he situated the human mind within the matrix of personal and social relations. Sexuality, not germs or genes, offered for Freud the link between the mind and body. Hardly reducing the complexity of the mind as some have suggested, Freud’s identification of the presence of infantile sexuality (and adult response to it) revealed the pattern of relationships shaped by and shaping the human mind.

Interestingly, Kaye suggests that Freud’s insistence that all minds possessed the capacity for mental illness in part was a result of rising European anti-Semitism in the late 1880’s. The Jewish mind, it was claimed, possesses unique (and dangerous) properties. Such assertions coincided with a developing

science, including the work of French psychiatrists Charcot and Janet, that sought the organic sources of the diseased mind. Against the prevailing view that those who suffer from mental illness possess minds qualitatively different from healthy ones, Freud demonstrates there to be a universal capacity for mental illness. No one is exempt. The study of neurosis and psychoanalytic treatment, thus, grew out of Freud’s rejection of a biological theory that propounded a psychopathological theory of the mind premised on a medical model of disease. As Freud well understood, such a model can easily be invoked for nefarious purpose. Freud presumes the psyche to be conditioned by the interpersonal and socio-cultural environment, *as well as* the biological components within its body. Even Freud’s often mentioned elitism when he describes the “common man” or the “masses” as having a different psychology than “our own” has a far different root than a biological one. For Freud, the brutality of the common man’s life helps account for a different sensibility among the lower classes. This was a clumsy, and now offensive way of making the point about class difference but it was an important corrective, nonetheless, to the psychiatric tendency to isolate the mind as disembodied and dis-embedded. It is in marked contrast to those who conclude, like those today who insist on a biological or genetic determinism, that the mind is self-contained and not subject to exogenous factors. Freud’s appreciation of the part played by various socio-cultural factors to influence the human mind leads us to appreciate the profound human consequences that American sexism, racism, and homophobia play today. It describes psychic violence, expressed through its internalization within individual psyches, that occurs a result of these various expressions of asymmetries of power.

Kaye’s reading of Freud thus requires us to re-position the place of Freud’s socio-cultural texts, *The Future of an Illusion*, *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, *Totem and Taboo*, and *Civilization and its Discontents* in relation to the bulk of his work relating to the human psyche. These texts were not addendums to Freud’s earlier writing, as they are commonly understood. Instead, they stand as the *denouement* of a life-long quest to explain human psychology, neurotic symptoms and social suffering. In these later essays, he pays special attention to the role of religion, excessive repression, and guilt as special targets within the social and cultural world that interferes with any healthy reconciliation between personal need and socio-cultural programs necessity.

Kaye’s insistence on the continuity of thought between Freud’s early and “late” writings is reminiscent of the debate that raged for a time over whether there were one or two Marx’s: an early, philosophically motivated one focusing on human freedom and emancipation and a late, economic deterministic one. Personally, I always saw Marx’s moral vision and social critique, despite his turn to the economic laws of capitalism, to be the inspiration behind all of his work. Not

two Marx's but a singular one. Also, for Kaye, Freud's intellectual project was not split between his socio-cultural focus that he turned to at the end of his life, standing apart from his interest in the individual human psyche. Rather, Kaye demonstrates Freud's life-long aspiration to situate the human mind as simultaneously constituted by and constitutive of 1) the body, 2) interpersonal experience and 3) the broader socio-cultural world. Both Freud and Marx stand among the small pantheon of extraordinary minds who live on: for Freud, psychoanalysis and all the subsequent multiple forms of psychological intervention that emerged as a result of psychoanalysis greatly influenced Western medicine especially, and the role the mind (as distinct from the brain) plays both in pathology and cure.

But medicine itself ultimately misunderstood Freud and has tended to reduce his achievement to be no more than an encounter between a Doctor and an isolated mind. Psychoanalysts too, especially in the two or three generations post-Freud, have largely concentrated only on this dimension, eagerly attempting to verify the value of Freud's techniques of free association, working through, unconscious conflicts and transference analysis. They too have emphasized the distance existing between Freud's understanding of the individual mind and the collectivity. But by underscoring Freud's contributions to modern social thought, Kaye importantly closes the distance between this formula of the separation of psyche and society, and thereby demonstrates that Freud made an important mark beyond his elaboration of the character of the human mind itself. The social and cultural world, absent an understanding of the people who comprise it and the non-rational features of human thought, is incomplete without according the human psyche its proper place in social and cultural thought. Kaye's book, in this way, is significant for keeping Freud alive among those who help define the canon of classical Western social and cultural thought. He also correctly emphasizes Freud's importance for recognizing the health and vitality of the human being contingent too on a well-functioning, healthy, and vital society and culture.

Still, while underscoring Freud's major achievements as a major social and cultural theorist, Kaye fails to acknowledge the genius of Freud's metapsychology and his understanding of psychopathology, of mental illness. Freud, after all, pioneered an understanding of the mind as distinct from the brain, as irreducible to its organic parts, and as constituted because of its place within its own physical body concurrently with its interactions with others. Most simply put, chemical imbalance inadequately identifies the multiple sources that account for mental suffering. Still to this day, efforts to biologize or geneticize the mind persist. Freud spends much of his career describing psychoanalysis, a treatment method capable of responding to the complex formation and function of the psyche. "More than any previous theorist," Kaye (p. 218) concludes, "Freud reminds us of the power of the wish

and phantasy in our own individual and collective lives. He reminds us of the power and complexities of cultural traditions: that 'mankind never lives currently in the present and that no tradition is univocal.'" All of these domains demand investigation as potential contributors to psychic and social pain. Symptoms are the consequence of frustrations typically of multiple spheres of interaction, including with one's own body, felt as unduly restrictive, repressive, punishing, disappointing, persecuting or inhibiting. They can become manifest because of an assessment of others' unfairness and unjustness. These experiences can effectively thwart the full realization of the individual.

So as a practicing psychoanalyst myself, one who studied Freud as part of my own training, who continues to consult him for his clinical acuity, and who teaches Freud to those currently preparing to become psychoanalysts themselves, I believe that Kaye ignores how Freud applies his socio-cultural theory to create a new form of therapeutic intervention. In all fairness, Kaye neither claims to be an analyst himself nor to be involved in clinical practice. Freud, it might be said, is one of the few great theorists of our age who succeeded in operationalizing his ideas in practice. But Freud's genius as a social and cultural theorist, in my view, positioned him precisely to establish a practice of deep personal engagement between analyst and analysand, together engaged in the painstaking work of insight and repair. Kaye's deep scholarship as well as his insistence that the development of psychoanalysis had social, political and cultural resonances to Freud's intellectual world also reminds us of the extraordinary clinical technique he created correspondent to his socio-cultural analysis. Kaye implicitly suggests, in emphasizing Freud's contribution to social and cultural thought, we not throw the baby out with the bath water. As I see it, while the bath water undoubtedly possesses some impurities, it too needs preserving. Freud was, to be sure, a great theorist but also a master clinician.

Through psychoanalytic treatment, Freud proclaims, it becomes possible for people to find in themselves greater capacity, more psychic energy and deeper emotional resources. A psychoanalysis yields over time an understanding of the relative autonomy of one's own psychic reality. If a person overcomes his or her own efforts *not to know* how he or she unwittingly participates in the reproduction of various forms of subjugation and unhappiness, more personal gratification and happiness is possible. Psychoanalysis, in a word, offers the possibility both to mitigate unhappiness and for unlocking hidden potential.

Freud conceives of *the psychoanalyst* as a person who has achieved through training a deeper, less psychologically conflicted, appreciation of how individuals might function in a socio-cultural world. As a result of a personal analysis, he or she develops a capacity to situate current feelings and thoughts with pre-existing patterns of experience established

first with the original family but expanding beyond it. The patient similarly is encouraged to re-visit memorable moments and significant relationships and to now describe them to the therapist. But, this time, these descriptions now include, in dialogue with the analyst, greater attention to affect and to the conclusions drawn concerning their meaning as processed at the time. In this way, the analysand develops a facility to distinguish between a personal, idiosyncratic psychic reality, information from infancy, and objective reality.

Avoiding the search for single causation, the psychotherapeutic encounter instead looks for the multiple and complex sources that has brought that person into treatment. The challenge both for patient and therapist is to discover the unconscious roots that, over the years, has transformed pain and suffering now into a patient's search for relief. As Freud discovered, these roots can originate at a very early age—a product of biological, interpersonal, and socio-cultural forces. Yet, they also can occur synchronically, over the full life span as the individual navigates him or herself within various societal boundaries and cultural constraints. The therapeutic goal is to uncover these roots and inhibitions so as to become aware of how they continue to operate in new situations. Various kinds of mistaken convictions, misrecognitions and misperceptions of the world and one's place within it can be the result of inapt translations of old experiences pasted on the new. It is not uncommon that individuals live in the past and claim it to be their present. This is the significance of Kaye's argument for clinical purposes: the individual psyche is polycentric, not unicentric. It continually interacts, shapes and is shaped by multiple spheres of social life. It often needlessly blurs or condenses both consciously and unconsciously present reality with one's own past. And it traverses social and cultural terrain often experienced as foreign and dangerous.

For Freud, the great emancipatory potential of psychoanalysis lies in its capacity to undo the tyranny of the memory of

past relationships and that wrongly grants authority to unjust contemporary social and cultural restrictions. To do so, one has to recognize the power of psychic reality to create an objective reality *as if* it exists as an "armed garrison" governing behavior. It is *as if* the outside obstructs our freedom. But those same achievements led Freud to develop this novel method of psychic repair. By creating a method intended to make individuals cognizant of the nature and content of their psychic reality, Freud believed it is possible to overcome internalized voices—social and cultural ones included—that thwart our potential and interfere with our happiness. Psychoanalysis is not a treatment that promotes unrestricted freedom or license; rather, it is one that enables each of us to accept our full humanity and to be compassionate toward our own human needs. This is a radical departure from a *status quo* requiring adaptation to its reality. Rather, it is a therapy that promotes a radical acceptance of who we are despite expectations from real or internalized others. Psychoanalysis is a practice that, while de-centering the conscious mind to acknowledge and respect our more powerful unconscious one, simultaneously centers the individual self against a social and cultural order that often finds itself threatened by our self-awareness.

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