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Apart from Freud: Notes for a Rational Psychoanalysis

Jonathan Cohen
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Psychoanalysis contains at

least as much philosophy as science. Sigmund Freud's disciple Otto Rank even called himself a "philosopher of helping." He, like so many others, eventually broke with Freud, who was much more concerned with theory than therapy.

Fortunate we are, now, to have an insider who can critique his profession with the combined perspective of clinician, philosopher, and historian. Denver psychiatrist and psychoanalyst Cohen faults Freud's system for being too pessimistic about human nature and too biased by Freud's own socio-political conservatism. "By endorsing repressive socialization," asserts the author, Freudianism "promotes blind conformity to authority and undermines the individual's critical and creative efforts to understand his or her self and the world." Cohen proposes a rational psychoanalysis, by which he means a system that is internally consistent, open to thoughtful criticism, and concerned with results. He includes lively case illustrations to demonstrate his approach.

With an introduction and ten chapters, Cohen takes the reader-preferably one who has some background in the subject-through a new approach to some central Freudian ideas: repression, the Oedipus complex, trauma, aggression. Cohen challenges Freud's notion of instinct and his understanding of the incest taboo. He wants to develop a psychoanalysis that includes moral responsibility and social consciousness. What has been called the "talking cure" must become a thinking cure. Psychoanalysis as a theory, therapy, and profession owes Cohen thanks, because the field has suffered enough from heated combat between acolytes and Freud bashers.

Cohen's knowledge and perspective are well served by his writing: even his footnotes are worth reading. He promises to address more topics and thinkers in a subsequent book, but one misses a mention here of relevant names like Aaron Beck, Karl Menninger, and Rank. This fine book, along with the biography Freud by Louis Breger (Wylie, 2000) and Healing the Soul in the Age of the Brain by Elio Frattaroli (Penguin Putnam, 2001), opens a new era of enlightened, balanced studies of the dominant psychologist of the century past.
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