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978-0-521-55560-9 - The Religious and Romantic Origins of Psychoanalysis: Individuation and Integration in Post-Freudian Theory

Suzanne R. Kirschner

Excerpt

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## Introduction

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In contemporary society, many of us look to psychoanalysis to tell us the truth about ourselves. Even with the current ascendance of biological models in psychiatry, both Freudian and post-Freudian approaches remain powerfully attractive to many clinicians, scholars and laypersons; they continue to exert a strong hold on our cultural and scientific imaginations. What accounts for these theories' resonance and appeal? In this book I suggest that much of the compelling quality of contemporary psychoanalysis derives from the fact that it is deeply rooted in Western religious and cultural values.

Received wisdom has long held that psychoanalytic conceptions of the self and its development embody a radical break with our Judaeo-Christian spiritual heritage. A broader perspective on the history of ideas, however, reveals that these psychological theories tell the story of human development in terms of a distinctive narrative pattern, a pattern that is derived from Biblical history and Greek mysticism. In the pages that follow I demonstrate how, over the course of nearly two thousand years, an originally religious story about the soul's fall away from God and reunion with him was transformed into a modern secular theory about the life and growth of the self.

At first glance it is not obvious that our ancient religious doctrines and our modern psychoanalytic pronouncements belong to the same cultural family. However, their genealogical connection becomes clearer and easier to grasp when we consider that the transmutation of spiritual narrative into psychological theory did not happen all at once. It took place over many hundreds of years, in a series of steps that coincided with the secularization of our culture. A key transitional period in the history of that secularization was the Romantic era. Romanticism was the great pivot-point in Western spiritual history. In the years immediately

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following the American and French revolutions, numerous artists and thinkers, disillusioned by what they perceived to be the broken promises and failed utopias of the Enlightenment and the emerging modern world, translated key religious themes and values into non-theological terms. The “soul” was refigured as the “mind” or the “self,” and God receded from view. The traditional religious quest for redemption also was re-envisioned by these Romantic poets and philosophers. They asserted that salvation was not something we would find in heaven; rather, they claimed, we must seek our saving graces in this world: in our art, in our loves, in our selves. It was the Romantics, then, who took the old stories of heaven and hell, of paradises lost and apocalypses to come, and refashioned them into a new (but still recognizably Judaeo-Christian) cultural language.

To the degree that we continue to seek some measure of salvation in our everyday lives and emotional attachments – to the degree that we earnestly and attentively scan our selves and our relationships for the worldly redemptions they might yield – we are all heirs to the Romantics’ quest. During the past century, psychoanalytic approaches, particularly those that have flourished in the United States, have further extended and promoted the Romantic imperative of self-development and worldly fulfillment. Thus they too articulate the dilemmas of human existence, along with the prospects for their mitigation, in terms of an inherited Biblical template. To a far greater degree than is generally recognized, psychoanalysis is a product of those same religious and spiritual traditions whose authority it has helped to undermine.

It is tempting to seek a moral in this story of psychoanalytic theories’ cultural and spiritual entanglements. Some readers may scan this history hoping to find support for the view that psychoanalysis is invalid because the lens through which it examines the self is clouded by cultural prejudice and ideological bias. Others, by contrast, may try to use the genealogical documentation I provide to unequivocally endorse psychoanalysis’s legitimacy and value. But as the reader of this book will discover, there are good reasons to resist both of these easy conclusions.

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## Towards a cultural genealogy of psychoanalytic developmental psychology

Theories of human development are fascinating objects of cultural history because they possess a dual nature. One side of this duality is readily apparent: contemporary developmentalist models<sup>1</sup> are predicated on a disenchanted, naturalistic view of the world and thus display a distinctively modern character. These theories, like their late nineteenth-century predecessors,<sup>2</sup> were conceived with the confident expectation that psychologists would substitute science for folk knowledge, rational-empirical understanding for cultural canon and religious belief. Where tradition and faith were, there would social science be.

Yet at the same time as the new science of child psychology resulted from, and was intended to further advance, a radical break with older

<sup>1</sup> The phrase “contemporary developmentalist models” is used here to denote three psychological paradigms: cognitive-developmental theories that trace the development of reasoning about the physical and social worlds (such theories are built on the work of Jean Piaget; those who have worked within this framework include Lawrence Kohlberg, Carol Gilligan, Robert Selman, William Damon, and others); the organismic theory of Heinz Werner; and psychoanalytic theories, particularly those aspects and branches of psychoanalysis that trace the development of the ego or self and its modes of relating to others.

It can be argued that the most basic developmentalist assumptions pervade not only these models, but virtually all other psychological theories as well. Thus the child psychologist William Kessen has argued that even learning theories evince developmentalist assumptions (see Chapter 4). However, the intricacies of the narrative I highlight here are peculiar to those theories that are more strictly termed developmental; more specifically still, my focus is on the structure and genealogy of the psychoanalytic developmental narrative.

<sup>2</sup> The proto-developmentalists included G. Stanley Hall, the founder of the child study movement (Hall, then President of Clark University, was the man who invited Freud and members of his circle to visit America in 1909), James Mark Baldwin, George Romanes, and Ivan Sechnov. See, e.g., Sheldon White, “The Idea of Development in Developmental Psychology,” in Richard Lerner (ed.), *Developmental Psychology: Historical and Philosophical Perspectives* (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1983).

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understandings of the person and the human condition, in fact that break was by no means a complete or absolute one. The history of the idea of development has not been just a history of rupture with the past, but also a history of continuity. Contemporary developmentalist models are structured in terms of an inherited vocabulary drawn from much older – in some respects ancient – cultural reservoirs.

In this book I focus on this second aspect of developmental psychology's nature: its continuity with older cultural forms. I explore how a particular group of developmentalist models, psychoanalytic theories of the development of the self, are structured in terms of a culturally constituted, centuries-old spiritual narrative. The narrative pattern in question appears to have originated in the Christian mystical story of the movement of the soul towards salvation. Over the course of nearly two millennia, this template has undergone several successive waves of transmutation. It has become increasingly secularized and interiorized (i.e., seen as pertaining to the history of the individual soul, mind, or self, rather than to the history of an entire group or the human race), yet to this day it retains certain characteristic features.

Chief among those features is a distinctive plot structure. I explicate that structure and trace its cultural genealogy. In other words, I demonstrate the linkage of themes and patterns found in current psychoanalytic theories to older sources within the culture, delineating the various transformations and branchings that the original theological narrative has undergone over the centuries. In its earliest form, that narrative chronicles man's<sup>3</sup> creation, fall out of unity with God, and redemption via reunion with God. It has been transformed or assimilated into newer doctrines, and those doctrines into still newer ones.

Four successive versions of the doctrine – four historical “moments” – are examined in order to chart the narrative's transmutations over time. The earliest version is the Christian mystical doctrine of mankind's fall and ultimate redemption. This narrative resulted from the intermingling of two different theological traditions: the Biblical story of human history and destiny, and the speculative theodicy of the third century pagan philosopher Plotinus (Neoplatonism). During the early modern period, a significantly modified version of the narrative emerged. Neoplatonized Biblical history took on a more worldly and interiorized cast, as can be seen in the writings of radical Protestant mystics. An important figure

<sup>3</sup> Most of the theologians, theorists, and artists I discuss in this book were writing when it was the unquestioned convention to use the terms “man” or “mankind” to denote the “generic human” or “all human beings.” For that reason, I retain those terms in my explications of these thinkers' doctrines, theories, or systems.

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during this transitional era was Jacob Boehme, a seventeenth century Silesian who is widely considered to be the father of Protestant mysticism. Boehme's teachings are used to exemplify the second moment in the history I trace. The definitive secularization of the narrative was effected during the early nineteenth century by English and German Romantic philosophers and men of letters. Selections from Romantic texts are used to illustrate this third, very striking moment in the history of the narrative's diachronic transformations.

Finally, a fourth link is added to this genealogical chain, that link being the story of development as told by contemporary Anglo-American psychoanalytic theorists (ego psychologists, object-relations theorists and self psychologists). I explore the ways in which these theoretical models partake of this same narrative pattern, while they take even farther the secularizing and interiorizing trends evinced by their cultural forebears. Thus, by a sort of principle of transitivity, I argue that in spite of the very tangible social, economic, and cultural transformations that European-American civilization has undergone during the past two millennia, these modern theories of human development are heir to much older spiritual and cultural structures and themes.

Long-standing cultural themes persist not only in the plot structure of psychoanalytic developmental theories, but also in the ends or goals of development as depicted in those theories. In this book, those goals – self-reliance, authenticity and intimacy – also are shown to be intertwined with cultural images and values. Self-reliance and self-direction (authenticity) are revealed as Anglo-American ideals, explicitly prescribed patterns of self-reflection and social interaction. These visions of ideal personhood are diffused throughout American (and to a lesser degree and with some variation, English) culture. They are “commonsense” for many in Anglo-American culture areas, but they are by no means universal in their reach or desirability. And, as in the case of the developmental narrative itself, these contemporary ideals also are drawn, albeit only in part, from older religious motifs. The ideals of self-reliance, self-direction, and even intimacy are articulated in terms that recapitulate several Judaeo-Christian images of salvation. Specifically, these images of the ideal self are secularized versions of Protestant ascetic and mystical visions of the soul's election by God or reunion with him.

Thus both the plot structure and the substantive goals of the psychological narrative bear the imprint of a Judaeo-Christian (and, in particular, radical Protestant) template. But psychoanalytic developmental theory's linkage to its theological past goes beyond the fact that it is shaped in terms of received images and preexisting narrative forms. For

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the psychoanalytic narrative also is kin to its spiritual forebears in that, like them, it offers a powerful vision of the human condition. Both types of narrative – psychological theory as much as theological doctrine – embody attempts to delineate and address the deepest and most difficult existential issues that human beings face: suffering, loss, frustration, and various forms of moral “evil.” Both can be seen as forms of what Max Weber (referring to explicitly religious doctrines) called “theodicy,”<sup>4</sup> i.e., systematic doctrines through which the existence of all forms of human suffering and the imperfections of human life are addressed and imbued with meaning. A theodicy constructs the dilemmas of human existence along certain lines and offers the possibility of their resolution (e.g., salvation) or mitigation along similarly structured lines. In this study, then, I emphasize the persistence of a culturally distinctive version of theodicy in contemporary psychoanalytic theory, and thereby highlight the latter’s status as a secular theodicy, a way of constructing issues of ultimate concern.<sup>5</sup>

### Challenges to the objectivist view of psychological theory

To underscore these theories’ continuity with a premodern cultural past – in structure, in thematic substance, and even in function – is to call into question the conventional (if often tacit) self-image of psychoanalytic developmental psychology. According to that conventional image, these models of human development depict empirical realities that have been discovered through the observation of behavior or the reconstruction of individuals’ biographical histories. In other words, we tend to assume an objectivist and naturalist view of psychological knowledge, including psychoanalytic knowledge. Objectivism (here defined by philosopher Richard Bernstein) holds that “knowledge is achieved when a subject [the

<sup>4</sup> “The Social Psychology of the World Religions,” p. 274 and “Religious Rejections of the World and Their Directions,” pp. 358–9, in Hans Gerth and C. Wright Mills (eds.), *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976). For additional discussion of the theodicy concept, see Chapter 4.

<sup>5</sup> Sociologists and anthropologists of religion, as well as theologians, have offered a variety of interpretations of the “meanings” and “functions” of religious discourse. Certainly there are many ways of studying the social and cultural meanings of formal religious rhetoric and its deployment in practice. I am not suggesting that theodicy is the only meaning of religious discourse (any more than it is the only meaning or use of psychology). But I am one with Weber in deeming it a deep and consequential one. When we try to analyze religious or psychological models and classification schemes only as enactments of social order or power, or solely in terms of the pragmatics of their deployment in concrete social or historical situations, we risk losing sight of this other crucial dimension of their meaning, persistence, and subjective salience.

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knower] correctly mirrors or represents objective reality.”<sup>6</sup> Closely allied with objectivism is naturalism; as stated by the psychologist and historian Kurt Danziger, the naturalist position is that “psychological events have fixed natural forms, which a few lucky philosophers and an army of systematic investigators have found and labeled. Thus, to each label there corresponds a fixed natural form.”<sup>7</sup> The objectivist-naturalist model is not the only available perspective on the nature of knowledge or even of science, but most of us – psychologists and non-psychologists alike – tend to speak, write, and work as if it were. Thus when we grant legitimacy and authority to a particular model of human nature and social life, we tend to assume that that model mirrors an essential reality found in the world or in the mind.

By contrast, the genealogical perspective offered in this book suggests that the contours of the psychoanalytic developmental trajectory are derived less from empirical observation than from the redeployment of a preexisting cultural template to a new context, the recently delineated domain of the psychological. It suggests that current psychoanalytic depictions of the self’s development explicate a pattern that has been reassigned rather than discovered. A corollary of this is that the theories’ language is better understood as structuring analog than as reflecting mirror.

In making this claim about these psychoanalytic theories, I do not mean to single them out as unique in this respect. The adequacy of objectivism as a theory of knowledge increasingly has come to be challenged for all forms of psychological and social theory, and arguably for knowledge in other domains as well. The problematizing of objectivism has been a central project of many influential philosophers during the twentieth century.<sup>8</sup> This concern has been shared by theorists associated with a variety of philosophical and theoretical movements, including ordinary language philosophy,<sup>9</sup> postempiricist philosophy of science,<sup>10</sup> ontological

<sup>6</sup> Richard Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983), p. 9.

<sup>7</sup> Kurt Danziger, “Generative Metaphor in the History of Psychology,” in David E. Leary (ed.), *Metaphors in the History of Psychology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 334–5.

<sup>8</sup> For overviews of the history of challenges to objectivism, see Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism* and Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979). See also George Lakoff, *Women, Fire and Dangerous Things* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

<sup>9</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1953).

<sup>10</sup> Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (2nd edn. enl., Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970); Mary Hesse, *Revolutions and Reconstructions in the Philosophy of Science* (Brighton, England: Harvester Press, 1980); Paul Feyerabend, *Against Method: Outline of an Anarchistic Theory of Knowledge* (London: NLB, 1975).



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hermeneutics,<sup>11</sup> social constructionism,<sup>12</sup> poststructuralism,<sup>13</sup> postmodernism,<sup>14</sup> and neopragmatism.<sup>15</sup> These movements, like the philosophers from whom they claim descent (chiefly Nietzsche, Wittgenstein, Heidegger and Dewey) diverge from one another on significant points. “Even taken together,” write the editors of *The Rhetoric of the Human Sciences*, “these writers are nothing like a school – unless common enemies make a school.”<sup>16</sup> But they do share in the endeavor to undermine naturalistic epistemology (in Danziger’s sense that “to each label there corresponds a fixed natural form”). And, in one way or another, they all aim to replace such naturalism with an emphasis on language, social life, culture and history as generative sources of our knowledge, particularly our social knowledge.<sup>17</sup>

### The metaphorical character of psychological knowledge

The increasing prominence and influence of these anti-objectivist accounts has prompted an intensified celebration of an old insight – the central role of metaphor in the constitution of knowledge. The historian

<sup>11</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson (New York: Harper and Row, 1962); Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. G. Burden and J. Cumming (New York: Seabury Press, 1975); Charles Taylor, “Interpretation and the Sciences of Man,” in Paul Rabinow and William M. Sullivan, *Interpretive Social Science: A Reader* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1979), pp. 25–71. See also Stanley B. Messer, Louis A. Sass and Robert L. Woolfolk (eds.), *Hermeneutics and Psychological Theory: Interpretive Perspectives on Personality, Psychotherapy, and Psychopathology* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1988).

<sup>12</sup> Kenneth J. Gergen, “The Social Constructionist Movement in Modern Psychology,” *American Psychologist*, vol. 40, 1985, pp. 266–75 and “Introduction: Towards Metapsychology,” in Henderikus J. Stam, Timothy B. Rogers, and Kenneth J. Gergen (eds.), *The Analysis of Psychological Theory: Metapsychological Perspectives* (Washington: Hemisphere Publishing Co., 1987), pp. 1–21; Edward E. Sampson, “The Deconstruction of the Self,” in John Shotter and Kenneth J. Gergen (eds.), *Texts of Identity* (London: Sage, 1989), pp. 1–19; John Shotter, *Social Accountability and Selfhood* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1984).

<sup>13</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* (New York: Vintage Books, 1970) and “What is an Author?” in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, ed. Donald F. Burchard (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), pp. 113–38; Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. G. Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976).

<sup>14</sup> Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

<sup>15</sup> Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979).

<sup>16</sup> John S. Nelson, Allan Megill and Donald N. McCloskey (eds.), *The Rhetoric of the Human Sciences: Language and Argument in Scholarship and Public Affairs* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987), p. 11.

<sup>17</sup> For a brief discussion of how several of these anti-objectivist perspectives might consider the implications of this genealogical approach to the psychoanalytic narrative, see Chapter 9.



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of psychology David Leary offers this definition: “Metaphor consists in giving to one thing a name or description that belongs by convention to something else, on the grounds of some similarity between the two.”<sup>18</sup> Invoking a long line of thinkers (beginning with Aristotle), as well as current understandings of the nature of language, Leary argues that the allegedly hard distinction between literal and metaphorical language is an inaccurate one. Literalness and metaphoricity are matters of degree more than kind, and there is “continual commerce between these two poles.”<sup>19</sup> In everyday language as in theoretical knowledge, today’s literal terms were yesterday’s metaphors.

Comparison and analogy thus play a central role in all thought, psychological theories being no exception. Such an appreciation of psychology’s metaphoricity contributes to the anti-naturalist critique, particularly when it is recognized that metaphors have what Danziger calls a “generative” function.<sup>20</sup> For when we look more closely at how metaphors are used to delineate psychological entities or processes, we see that the process is not simply a matter of static comparison. Rather, once a “root” metaphor<sup>21</sup> has been set in place, it continues to be elaborated and thereby to structure subsequent investigations and the findings they yield. Metaphors, Danziger reminds us, bring together not two “specific words describing specific features of the world,” but rather “two *systems* of implications”:

What is involved is not simply a comparison of two units, which could be reduced to a literal statement, but an application to the one subject of a whole set of implications previously linked with the other subject: ... [T]he notion of generative metaphor ... suggests that we treat the objects of psychological discourse not as things that were lying around waiting to be discovered, but as the product of generative schemata applied across various domains.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Leary, Introduction, *Metaphors*, pp. 1–78, p. 4. In this book, I follow what Leary terms his “broad definition” of metaphor, which, he writes, “encompasses a variety of other figures of speech. Indeed, according to the above definition, metaphor can hardly be distinguished from trope (figure of speech) in general. Furthermore, a consequence of this definition is that such things as fables, parables, allegories, myths, and models, including scientific models, can be seen, by implication, as ‘extended and sustained metaphors’ [Turbayne, 1970, pp. 1–20].” (Leary, *Metaphors*, p. 5).

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6. See also George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

<sup>20</sup> Danziger, “Generative Metaphor in the History of Psychology,” in Leary, *Metaphors*; he follows Stephen Pepper, *World Hypotheses: A Study in Evidence* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1942), and Max Black, *Models and Metaphors* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1962) and “More about Metaphor,” in A. Ortony (ed.), *Metaphor and Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), pp. 19–43.

<sup>21</sup> The term is Stephen Pepper’s; Danziger uses it in “Generative Metaphor,” p. 334.

<sup>22</sup> Danziger, “Generative Metaphor,” pp. 334–5.

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Once a root metaphor is invoked and “naturalized,” “a whole complex of knowledge and belief,” associated with the first domain, is brought to bear on the psychological domain that is likened to it.<sup>23</sup>

Thus, in the case of psychoanalytic developmental psychology, we will see that the development of the self implicitly has been likened to the Judaeo-Christian mystical theodicy. The developmental trajectory is compared, step by step, to the episodes of the soul’s necessary fall and progression, while the ends of development are framed in terms derived from depictions of salvation. The movement of the self through the life course (a phrase that already contains a few metaphors) is construed to resemble the soul’s fall away from paradise and its movement back towards greater moral and spiritual proximity to God. Actually, as will be shown, this is too crude a way of describing the analogy at work here. For there are at least two generations of the root narrative that can be detected in the psychoanalytic theories: not only the Christian mystical story, but also its secularized variant, the Romantic spiral or *Bildung*. In the Romantic spiral, the religious terms are recast into natural and secular ones, and some features of the narrative pattern are significantly modified. Instead of being a story about the soul, it is a tale of the mind’s estrangement from nature and gradual development towards reintegration with nature at a higher level. Most of the time, the psychoanalytic narrative is depicted in terms that implicitly portray it as being similar to this Romantic spiral, which is explicated in Chapter 7. As will be explained, Romanticism provided the accessible and acceptable vocabulary from which analytic theorists drew and from which they continue to draw, often without apparent awareness.

To underscore the crucial role of generative metaphor in the growth and elaboration of psychological theory is not to deny the existence of reality, of a world that is “external” to human perception. The anti-naturalist perspective discussed here is, in fact, compatible with a commitment to a non-objectivist form of what linguist George Lakoff calls “basic realism.”<sup>24</sup> But it does hold that we engage with much of that

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 334.

<sup>24</sup> Lakoff asserts that “[b]asic realism [of which objectivism is an increasingly discredited form, but not the only form] involves at least the following:

- a commitment to the existence of a real world, both external to human beings and including the reality of human experience
- a link of some sort between human conceptual systems and other aspects of reality
- a conception of truth that is not merely based on internal coherence
- a commitment to the existence of stable knowledge of the external world
- a rejection of the view that ‘anything goes’ – that any conceptual system is as good as any other.”

Lakoff notes that “objectivism...is one version of basic realism,” but not the only sort. He advocates an alternative version called “experientialism.” (*Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things*, p. 158).