The Truth About Freud's Technique
Thompson, Michael Guy

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Preface

Nothing persuades us more fully of the vitality of psychoanalysis as a supreme intellectual achievement than the fresh insights into Freud's writings gained by successive generations of students. In them Freud offered far more than he could himself have been aware of. In this way he resembles, for example, Shakespeare and Goethe. For all the massive changes in life and culture that have taken place over the centuries—and perhaps especially during the dark century that has passed since Freud began to write—these writers appear to have anticipated the questions we moderns have to put to them. They speak out of a timeless wisdom, cast in the language of particular times and places, from which new epochs derive nourishment and inspiration. In large measure their greatness resides in their perpetual novelty.

Freud differs from other creative geniuses in a respect we should never lose sight of: he was not only a literary and philosophic creator, but also the founder and chief exponent of a therapeutic method, a method of caring for troubled humans through understanding, with the intention of the alleviation of suffering. As we see in Michael Thompson's exposition, it is necessary to be very clear to what extent this kind of therapy is analogous to medical care, and to what extent the psychoanalyst must depart from his or her disposition to think medically, for the very purpose of offering help. A similar distinction, to which Thompson has also devoted his thinking, rests in the question whether psychoanalysis is a science. Were it not for the prevailing dogma that equates scientific truth with objective validation, this would not be a question worth pursuing. However, in the constant state of attack by the uncomprehending that has been the fate of psychoanalysis since its inception, such questions and distinctions need to be faced again and again.
It is here that Thompson’s understanding of Freud brings to light Freud’s own largely implicit replies. We are shown how Freud, ever the biological scientist attempting to look to his patients for substantiation of hypotheses established on biological models, was simultaneously engaged in the pursuit of the inner personal truth that defies objectification. For example, he came to recognize the phenomenon of transference—which is the foundation of all modern psychoanalytic theory and therapy, and to which Thompson directs our attention extensively—in the unexpected ways in which patients entered into their converse with him. In the cliché of our own day, the analyst becomes “a part of the problem,” and the interaction and dialogue between analyst and patient become the arena in which the hidden truths of the patient’s soul are disclosed. This lived transference cannot be grasped in the language of impersonal causality.

Unburdened by the requirement to make psychoanalysis sound like traditional science, Thompson reads Freud in the light of a philosophy of existence that was alive in Freud’s time, but out of direct contact with his thought or that of his followers. Indeed, as we have been taught, Freud rather disdained philosophy, although with bursts of admiration for a few philosophers. Like many natural scientists, he did not usually consider that scientific method itself was grounded in philosophic proportions. The philosophy of existence, of being, found its most eloquent voice in Martin Heidegger. Thompson’s subtitle, “The Encounter with the Real,” summarizes an important aspect of Heidegger’s philosophy in a nutshell, but fortunately Thompson does not leave us modestly equipped, and he expounds it in relevant detail. I must parenthetically remind those who would write off anything connected with Heidegger—Hitler’s unrepentant if ambivalent follower—that the fundamental principles of the philosophy of existence were developed independently by among others Karl Jaspers, a man of uncompromised character, although not nearly as exciting a writer.

Heidegger’s influence on psychoanalysis appeared in the important work of Jacques Lacan, and Thompson is also indebted to that eccentric innovator, as he has shown more fully in his earlier book The Death of Desire. Lacan too took exception early in his career to the aspirations of psychoanalysts towards affiliation with biological science. One may also see in Lacan’s therapeutic approaches, including his highly controversial sessions of variable length, ways of putting into practice the idea of psychoanalysis as a human encounter in pursuit of “the real.” The ultimate
blunder of organized psychoanalysis in its quest for purity of doctrine
occurred in 1963, when the International Psychoanalytical Association
pronounced its anathema on Lacan—admittedly not without provoca-
tion—thereby helping to sequestrate his school into a cult barely tangen-
tial to the mainstream. Happily, Thompson has not followed Lacan in
employing mystification as a presumed way of exposing the mysteries of
the unconscious; he presents his insights in an exceptionally lively and
accessible language.

Thompson persistently questions the technological stratification that
has in too many hands deadened psychoanalytic theory and practice since
Freud. Freud’s own disposition toward systematizing was there all the
time, but it was literally concretized in the English translation, the Stan-
dard Edition of his works, as Darius Ornston and others have amply
demonstrated. Thompson does not offer a new language or a new all-
encompassing system as a substitute. He does not dispute essential Freud-
ian theory of the unconscious. Rather the other side of Freud comes into
focus here: the side that was implied from the start in Freud’s greatest
technical invention, the fundamental rule of free association. If the rest
of Freud’s teachings were lost through some misguided censorship of
psychoanalytic instruction, we could still reconstruct all that we needed
for a great rediscovery, so long as we were permitted to listen to the
unguarded discourses of our patients, and to respond to them out of the
parallel mental processes of our own minds. For, as Thompson insists,
this unique form of discourse moves of its own momentum toward the
revelation of personal truth, which is the reality of one’s own being.

In this regard, Thompson has done us a service in pointing out the
affiliation—direct or not—of Michel de Montaigne with Freud. The
sixteenth-century essayist had discovered that allowing his thoughts to
run on would bring him to insight into motivations as unexpected to
himself as to his readers, and at a long remove from his ostensible subject.
We need not assume that Montaigne’s essays were spontaneous products
of his free associations, knowing that they were subjected to his careful
editing, but we remain astonished and delighted at this candor and con-
scientiousness in allowing so many unorthodox expressions to persist, and
so doing to produce, as Didier Anzieu noted, “an awareness of universal
mental processes.”

Thompson tells us that some of the implications of Heidegger’s philos-
ophy for psychoanalysis were developed by the late Hans Loewald, who
was in his youth a student of Heidegger's. Being reminded of that, I want to put in a word here in the defense of traditional psychoanalytic institutes and their training programs. It is true that the often excessive length of both training analyses and training programs may inhibit independent thought among young analysts, and that years of confinement to the teachings of a faculty limited in numbers, if not in talent, may narrow openness to new ideas. Nevertheless, I was a colleague of Loewald's in one of those schools for over twenty years, where his influential presence attested to a latitude of psychoanalytic theory that has been not only permitted but encouraged. Anyone with an ear to hear with could discern that Loewald's traditional psychoanalytic vocabulary, and his close following of Freud, delivered a message profoundly different from the mechanistic or "behavioral" prejudices of other formulations. In my career as a training and supervising psychoanalyst, I did not find that the sometimes oppressive structure of the training program kept down native ingenuity, spontaneity or personal responsiveness among candidates who possessed those qualities. Psychoanalysis, despite sometimes heavy-handed theorizing in the institutes, still liberates and enlightens. The ironist Karl Kraus wrote, with malice aforethought, that psychoanalysis cures the neuroses that it creates; we might paraphrase the aphorism to say that the psychoanalytic experience ought to make us impatient with the theories supposed to explain it.

Michael Thompson has earned our thanks in producing a book that qualifies as what Heidegger called a "Lichtung," that is, a "clearing" in the woods that opens the way for further exploration.

STANLEY A. LEAVY, M.D.
New Haven, Connecticut