Book Review and Commentary


In his recently reissued Love and Its Place in Nature: A Philosophical Interpretation of Freudian Psychoanalysis (originally published in 1990 by Farrar, Straus and Giroux), Jonathan Lear performs a great service for non-philosophers. This closely reasoned, elegant, and ultimately radical reconstruction (is this the opposite of deconstruction?) of Freudian theory situates the founder of psychoanalysis within the history of theorizing about the human mind. Lear argues that interpretation itself is a reflection of the basic force of love, and indeed his book is a most loving reinterpretation and constructive critique of Freud. In my view, it is not an exaggeration to characterize psychoanalysis as the opposite of soul murder, and Jonathan Lear offers an account of why this is so.

It is beyond the scope of this brief review to do justice to Lear’s argument. Perhaps it is fair to say that his point of departure is the observation that “love has become almost taboo within psychoanalysis” (p. 15). He is by and large correct, although I have seen some papers on the salutary role of love creep onto the programs at some recent analytic meetings (for instance J. & K.K. Novick, 1998). Kernberg (1995) and Gabbard (1996) have also written on the subject of love. It has been my experience that analysts are generally comfortable talking about sex and aggression, but that whenever one speaks of love in a case presentation the question about where the aggression is immediately follows. Without, I hope, doing exactly what Lear has predicted and I have just bemoaned, I would have very much appreciated it if Lear had included in this volume a preview of his conception of aggression, promised for a later work. I would be curious to see whether he understands aggression to be essentially a breakdown product and whether he would agree with Ian Suttie’s comment: “Earth hath no hate but love to hatred turned, and hell no fury but a baby scorned.” (1935, cited in Bacal, 1987)
Lear believes that Freud identified love as a basic force in nature but did not fully appreciate the ramifications of this. Lear also points to the method of subjective inquiry and the significance of the archaic mind as Freud’s implicit challenges both to science and philosophy respectively. His chapters take up the subjects of catharsis, dreams, Little Hans, the question “what is sex,” and the “Wo es war” which (like Lacan) Lear translates as, “Where it was, there I shall become.” Lear’s writing is clear and powerful; he uses a minimum of jargon and lards his narrative with delicious tidbits (for example, “Subjectivity is upwardly mobile,” and “Father-representations and horse-representations are, one might say, ‘lumped’ together”).

The red thread in Lear’s narrative is the effect of love, the central force in the animate world. He reasons that it is love in the expanded (rather than simply erotic) sense that both characterizes and explains our tendency toward greater complexity and individuation. The very definition of a mind, Lear argues, includes an element of self-examination; it is this that permits us to define ourselves as human rather than simply animal. Lear links the quality of being human to Socrates’ statement about the unexamined life not being worth living. In fact, Lear demonstrates that there is a continuity between psychoanalysis and the previous 2,500 years of thought in the field of philosophy.

Psychoanalysis represents one of the most determined attempts in the twentieth century to work out the relation between self-reflection and freedom. Indeed, it is only because psychoanalysis was grounded in the treatment of illness and philosophy tends to focus on health that they look like different disciplines. As psychoanalysis and philosophy turn their attention to the growth and development of the individual, their boundaries should fade. (p. 183)

In this day and age when many psychoanalysts argue that we ought to turn back to neuroscience in the hope of being able to prove the efficacy of our treatments, it is refreshing to read an unabashed opinion to the contrary. It is love, Lear suggests, that structures the mind and the activities of the mind—including psychoanalysis. Along with current thinkers (Renik, for instance), Lear calls into question the issue of analytic neutrality. By placing clinical psychoanalysis in the context of the force of love, he points out that analysts do, in fact, have values. I agree with Lear and feel that it is important to include the axiological dimension in our theorizing and clinical practice—for it is there whether we acknowledge it or not (Levine, 1999).

It is thus unnecessary to try to make psychoanalysis fit into the constraints of a so-called objective science. Rather, we should see psychoanalysis as a young specimen of a new type of science, the parameters of which are not yet well understood—that is, a science of subjectivity. (In a sense,