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Freud, Ferenczi, Fromm: The Authoritarian Character as Magic Helper

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“The example of Ferenczi shows, however, that the Freudian attitude need not be that of all analysts.”

(Erich Fromm, *The Social Determinants of Psychoanalytic Therapy*, 1935)

To contemporary students of Ferenczi Erich Fromm is likely to be best known for having spearheaded the rebuttal to Ernest Jones's (1957) preposterous accusation, in the third volume of his Freud biography, that both he and Rank toward the end of their lives “developed psychotic manifestations that revealed themselves in, among other ways, a turning away from Freud and his doctrines” (p. 45). In his refutation on the basis of testimony from an array of eyewitnesses, including Clara Thompson and Izette de Forest in the case of Ferenczi, Fromm (1958) went so far as to contend that Jones's “rewriting’ of history introduces into science a method which we so far have been accustomed to find only in Stalinist ‘history,’” where those who deviate from officially sanctioned doctrines are condemned as “‘traitors’ and ‘spies’ of capitalism” (p. 11). In his rejoinder to Fromm, Jacob Arlow (1958) asserted on behalf of orthodoxy not only that “in psychoanalysis there is no monolithic structure with a ‘party line,’” but also that Ferenczi's technical innovations “went beyond psychoanalytic concepts,” and indeed he had no hesitation in proscribing them as “not psychoanalysis” (p. 14). That Arlow endorses Jones's proscription of Ferenczi even while maintaining that psychoanalysis has no “party line” is an irony that is doubtless

more apparent to us today than it was to him.

Only one year after coming to the defense of Ferenczi and Rank, Fromm published *Sigmund Freud's Mission* (1959), a compact classic of revisionist thinking in which he sought to provide an alternative to “the idolizing and unanalytic approach of Jones's biography” (p. 20). Focusing on Freud's relationship to his mother, Fromm argues that “dependency and insecurity are central elements in the structure of Freud's character, and of his neurosis” (p. 23), a structure that manifested itself in his relationships with men by causing Freud to “repress the awareness of dependency” as long as his emotional needs were being met and then to “negate it completely when the friend failed in the complete fulfillment of the motherly role” (p. 43). As Fromm points out, it made little difference whether Freud was in the position of pupil, equal, or mentor, since there is in all these relationships not only the “obvious and *conscious* dependence in which a person is dependent on a father figure, a ‘magic helper,’ a superior, etc.,” but also “an *unconscious* dependence in which a dominant person is dependent on those who are dependent on him” (p. 52), as Freud was on



his followers in the psychoanalytic movement.

Sigmund Freud's Mission is another landmark in Fromm's championing of Ferenczi because, in his chapter "Freud's Authoritarianism," Fromm singles out Freud's relationship to Ferenczi as "the most drastic example of Freud's intolerance and authoritarianism" (p. 68). Fromm cites a personal communication from de Forest relaying Ferenczi's account of his final visit to Freud in Vienna, prior to the Wiesbaden Congress where he presented his now-classic paper "Confusion of Tongues," at the conclusion of which, in Ferenczi's words, "I reached

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out my hand in affectionate adieu," but "the Professor turned his back on me and walked out of the room" (p. 70). While acknowledging that "the faithful worshipers of Freud," such as Jones, "make it a point to deny any authoritarian tendency in Freud," Fromm counters that such denials exhibit a "psychological naïveté" because they fail to reckon with the fact that Freud was "kind and tolerant" only "to people who idolized him and never disagreed." Precisely because he "was so dependent on unconditional affirmation and agreement by others," Fromm elaborates, Freud could be "a loving father to submissive sons," but when he encountered any opposition, Freud became "a stern, authoritarian one to those who dared to disagree" (p. 71).

That Fromm compares Jones's questioning the sanity of psychoanalytic dissidents to a Stalinist approach to history becomes all the more comprehensible when one recognizes that both his indictment of Freud's "authoritarianism" and his use of the term "magic helper" draw on the conceptual framework set forth by Fromm in his 1941 masterwork, *Escape from Freedom*, a profound analysis of the allure of fascism to so many middle-class Germans, which Fromm traces back to the existential choice between "positive

freedom" and the retreat into "new dependencies and submission" faced by "modern man, freed from the bonds of pre-individualistic society" (p. viii) since the Renaissance. Although Fromm does not mention Ferenczi, and his critique of Freud is confined to a demonstration of why an adherence to drive theory caused him to view man as a "closed system" who is "primarily self-sufficient and only secondarily in need of others to satisfy his instinctual needs," instead of understanding that "man is *primarily* a social being," so that "the needs and desires that center about the individual's relations to others, such as love, hatred, tenderness, symbiosis, are the fundamental psychological phenomena" (pp. 317-18), *Escape from Freedom* can nonetheless be read as an incisive commentary on the Freud-Ferenczi relationship, in its personal as well as its theoretical dimensions.

As Lawrence Friedman (2013) recounts in his biography, although Fromm had been a member of the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research since 1929, and "played a central role" (p. 46) in negotiating its relocation to Columbia University in 1934, by the end of the decade his emphasis on the concept of social character led to a break with Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, who continued to adhere to Freud's "biologically rooted instinct theory" (p. 61), and *Escape from Freedom* emerged from the inspiration and solidarity Fromm derived increasingly from the cultural and interpersonal visions of psychoanalysis espoused by Karen Horney and Harry Stack Sullivan. A linchpin of the book is Fromm's thesis that both sadism and masochism spring from "the inability to bear the isolation and weakness of one's own self," and thus have as their aim what he terms *symbiosis*, or "the union of one individual self with another self (or any other power outside of the own self) in such a way as to make each lose the integrity of the own self and to make them completely dependent on each other" (p. 180).

As Fromm elaborates, such a "sado-masochistic character" is not limited to those with sexual perversions but can be found in otherwise "normal" people, and might better



be called “the ‘*authoritarian character*’” (p. 186). “Authority,” Fromm notes, “refers to an interpersonal relationship in which one person looks upon another as somebody superior to him,” but whereas in rational versions of such relationships—between a teacher and student, for example—the aim is to foster the development of the one in the subordinate position so that “the authority relationship tends to dissolve itself” as the power differential diminishes over time and the student “becomes more and more like the teacher himself,” in irrational or perverse versions of this structure—prototypically, between a master and slave—the “superiority serves as a basis for exploitation” so that the power differential is maintained, and indeed the distance between the two parties “becomes intensified through its long duration” (pp. 186-87). Fromm introduces the term “*magic helper*” to describe the largely unconscious dependence exhibited by people on a source of power outside of themselves, the essential function of which is “to protect, help, and develop the individual, to be with him and never leave him alone,” a function that can be attributed to someone who is then “endowed with magic qualities” (p. 197), whether that seemingly godlike other be a political leader, a partner in a romantic relationship, or a psychoanalyst to a patient in the throes of transference.

Fromm’s analysis of the authoritarian character precisely captures the essential dynamics of Ferenczi’s relationship to Freud. Thus, when Fromm writes, “the reasons why a person is bound to a magic helper are, in principle, the same that we have found at the root of the symbiotic drives: an inability to stand alone and to fully express his own individual potentialities” (p. 198), this uncannily echoes the final entry of Ferenczi’s *Clinical Diary* (1985), where he confesses, “I was brave (and productive) only as long as I (unconsciously) relied for support on another power, that is, I had never really become ‘grown up’” (p. 212). Because Ferenczi interprets his pernicious anemia as a punishment for his attempt at emancipation from Freud, he feels he must face the bleak prospect that “the only possibility for my continued existence” lies in “the renunciation of

the largest part of one’s own self, in order to carry out the will of that higher power to the end (as though it were my own)” (p. 212).

A further extended passage from *Escape from Freedom* (1941) highlights the pertinence of Fromm’s ideas to grasping the perversely “symbiotic” quality of the Freud-Ferenczi relationship:

The intensity of the relatedness to the magic helper is in reverse proportion to the ability to express spontaneously one’s own intellectual, emotional, and sensuous potentialities. In other words, one hopes to get everything one expects from life, from the magic helper, instead of by one’s own actions. The more this is the case, the more the center of life is shifted from one’s own person to the magic helper and his personifications. The question is then no longer how to live oneself, but how to manipulate “him” in order not to lose him and how to make him do what one wants, even to make him responsible for what one is responsible oneself. (pp. 198-99)

A crucial component of Fromm’s analysis is the ambivalence that is bound to arise in the subordinate member of a sado-masochistic dyad. As he remarks, “this dependency, springing from and at the same time leading to a blockage of spontaneity, not only gives a certain amount of security but also results in a feeling of weakness and bondage” (p. 199). Because of the inhibition of his authentic being, “the very person who is dependent on the magic helper also feels, though often unconsciously, enslaved by ‘him’ and, to a greater or lesser degree, rebels against ‘him.’ This rebelliousness against the very person on whom one has put one’s hopes for security and happiness,” Fromm continues, “creates new conflicts. It has to be suppressed if one is not to lose ‘him,’ but the underlying antagonism constantly threatens the security sought for in the relationship” (p. 109). Since “any actual person is bound to be disappointing” if burdened with the expectations of being the magic helper, the disenchantment that must ensue upon waking up from one’s dream augments “the resentment resulting from one’s own enslavement



to that person,” and once again “leads to continuous conflicts” (pp. 109-10).

Having been in analysis not only with Ferenczi in Budapest but also with Fromm in New York, Clara Thompson was in a unique position to draw on what she had learned from Fromm in pondering Ferenczi’s character. Thompson renders her verdict in “Ferenczi’s Contributions to Psychoanalysis” (1944):

Despite Ferenczi’s obviously lovable qualities, he suffered during life from a need to be accepted and loved. Because of this need, his personal relationship to Freud was more important to him than his own independent thinking. He was the type of man who is happy in working for a strong person; Freud was that strong person in his life. (p. 73)

Without using the term “magic helper,” Thompson makes it clear that Freud served this psychological function for Ferenczi. She continues:

Had Ferenczi had nothing original of his own to contribute, the relationship might have been a completely satisfactory one; but his was an original mind, and, beneath his devotion to Freud, there raged a constant struggle to be himself. At the same time, he feared incurring the disapproval of Freud. This made his attitude toward Freud definitely ambivalent; and this ambivalence can be seen, I believe, in his writings. (p. 73)

Thompson specifies that many of Ferenczi’s papers “give one the impression of an appeasing quality,” and that he evinced a tendency to be “more Freudian than Freud.” With great acuity, Thompson discerns that Ferenczi’s ambivalence “manifested itself despite all his efforts for he would often develop an idea of Freud’s to a fantastic degree, thus, in the end, making the situation absurd,” as he did in *Thalassa*, where Ferenczi “traces the stages of libido development to the Ice Age, thus making the whole idea pure fantasy” (p. 73).

By calling attention to Ferenczi’s penchant for unconsciously parodying Freud’s ideas

by taking them to “absurd” conclusions, Thompson underscores what Ferenczi himself had privately acknowledged in the *Clinical Diary* (1985) concerning his “total inhibition about speaking in [Freud’s] presence until he broached a subject, and then the burning desire to win his approval by showing I had understood him completely, and by immediately going further in the direction he had recommended,” all of which “reveals me to have been a blindly dependent son” (p. 185). Beneath this feeling of being “dazzled and amazed,” however, there always lurked a “hidden doubt” because “it was only adoration and not independent judgment that made me follow him” (p. 185). Ferenczi, too, retrospectively deems *Thalassa* to be a text that, despite its “many good points,” nonetheless “clings too closely to the words of the master,” a “new edition” of which “would mean complete rewriting” (p. 187). Although ultimately grounded in Ferenczi’s own self-understanding, Thompson’s analysis of the ambivalence stemming from the conflict between Ferenczi’s “struggle to be himself” and his fear of “incurring the disapproval of Freud” is directly indebted to Fromm’s explication of the “blockage of spontaneity” that affords an intimidated individual a “certain amount of security,” while simultaneously exacting “a feeling of weakness and bondage,” and of the ensuing tug of war between the impulses to submission and rebellion that is the hallmark of someone who subjects himself to the irrational authority of another person.

Ferenczi’s entire career constitutes an enactment of his unconscious ambivalence toward Freud. In his key paper, “Belief, Disbelief, and Conviction” (1913), for example, when Ferenczi describes how many of his patients who “were not really convinced of the correctness of the psychoanalytic explanations, but had believed them blindly (dogmatically, as a matter of doctrine) ... successfully repressed all their suspicions and objections only in order to keep secure the filial love they had transferred to the doctor” (p. 438), he voices in displaced fashion his own “suspicions and objections” concerning Freud. The same is true of “The Symbolic Representation of the Pleasure



and Reality Principles in the Oedipus Myth” (1912), in which Ferenczi interprets Schopenhauer’s reference to the Oedipus myth in a seemingly worshipful letter to Goethe as showing the young philosopher’s “unconscious reaction against this—perhaps rather extravagant—expression of gratitude” toward the sage of Weimar, “a reaction that allowed some display of the hostile tendencies that go to make up the fundamentally ambivalent feeling-attitude of a son towards his father” (p. 220). Even as Ferenczi seeks to pay tribute to Freud and uphold the universality of the Oedipus complex, his commentary on the “hostile tendencies” that lurked beneath Schopenhauer’s professions of gratitude toward Goethe again reflects his own disavowed resentment toward Freud, although, as Ferenczi observes of Schopenhauer, while writing this paper “he was himself dominated (...) by affects that would have debarred this insight” (p. 219). No less ironic in light of subsequent events is Ferenczi’s role as the founder of the International Psychoanalytic Association; his proposal for the formation of the Secret Committee by “a small group of men” who would be “thoroughly analyzed” by Freud, “so that they could represent the pure theory unadulterated by personal complexes” (Paskauskas, 1993, p. 146); his insistence that “*mutual analysis* is nonsense,” while Freud is the “only one who can permit himself to do without an analyst” and “right in everything” (Brabant, Falzeder, and Giampieri-Deutsch, 1993, p. 449); and his leading of the charge against the defections of both Jung and Rank by authoring critical reviews of their dissident books. In all these instances, we see Ferenczi having “successfully repressed all [his] suspicions and objections only in order to keep secure the filial love [he] had transferred” to Freud, though in the end the straitjacket of orthodoxy he sought to impose on others succeeded only in pinioning his own wings.

A review of Fromm’s contributions to the rehabilitation of Ferenczi’s reputation also serves to enhance our appreciation of his indispensability to the history of psychoanalysis. Of greater consequence than his overt affiliation with Horney and Sullivan is Fromm’s

elective affinity with Winnicott. Although to my knowledge Fromm never refers to Winnicott, nor does Winnicott to Fromm, Fromm is a crucial “missing link” in the tradition of Independent psychoanalysis that runs from Ferenczi to Winnicott and beyond. Thus, when Fromm traces the “root of the symbiotic drives” to a person’s “inability to stand alone and to fully express his individual potentialities,” he not only looks back to Ferenczi but also looks ahead to Winnicott (1965) and his studies of the interaction between “maturational processes and the facilitating environment.” Like Winnicott, Fromm (1941) traces what happens when “the parents, acting as the agents of society, start to suppress the child’s spontaneity and independence” (p. 201), and he captures the essence of Winnicott’s dichotomy between creativity and compliance when he writes that “every neurosis (...) is essentially an adaptation to such early conditions (particularly those of early childhood) as are themselves irrational and, generally speaking, unfavorable to the growth and development of the child” (pp. 30-31). Winnicott’s antithesis between creativity and compliance is itself an outgrowth of his core distinction between the True Self and the False Self, and Fromm again arrives at the same destination nearly two decades earlier when he affirms:

This substitution of pseudo acts for original acts of thinking, feeling, and willing leads eventually to the replacement of the original self by a pseudo self. The original self is the self which *is* the originator of mental activities. The pseudo self is only an agent who actually represents the role a person is supposed to play but who does so under the name of the self. (p. 229)

When it is recognized that Karen Horney (1942) likewise postulates an antimony between the “real self” and “phony self” (p. 22), then it becomes clear how close is the kinship between the “Middle Group” of British object relations theorists and the American “neo-Freudians,” and how both schools have carried forward Ferenczi’s psychoanalytic legacy.



During Fromm's lifetime, the most serious damage to his reputation was inflicted by his erstwhile Frankfurt school colleague, Herbert Marcuse, in a polemical exchange in the pages of *Dissent*, the centerpiece of which Marcuse included as the epilogue to *Eros and Civilization* (1955). Although Marcuse was widely perceived as having gotten the best of it, a rereading of his "Critique of Neo-Freudian Revisionism" shows it to be a surprisingly lame effort. Like Adorno and Horkheimer decades earlier, Marcuse staked everything on Freud's instinct theory, claiming absurdly that because of Freud's emphasis on early infancy "the decisive relations are thus those which are *least* interpersonal" (p. 231). Indeed, according to Marcuse, only Freud's "hypothesis of the death instinct," and not any environmental or social factors, can explain "the hidden unconscious tie which binds the oppressed to their oppressors" (p. 247). In a further reflection of the prevailing Zeitgeist, Lionel Trilling, too, hailed "the idea of the reality principle and the idea of the death instinct" as forming "the crown of Freud's broader speculation on the life of man" (1940, p. 53), and he castigated "the tendency of our educated liberal classes to reject the tough, complex psychology of Freud for the easy rationalistic optimism of Horney and Fromm" (1946, p. 95).

In a letter to Martin Jay, the historian of the Frankfurt School, Fromm commented, "my whole theoretical work is based on what I consider Freud's most important findings, with the exception of his metapsychological findings," which is "the reverse of Marcuse's position, who bases his thinking entirely on Freud's metapsychology, and ignores completely his clinical findings, that is to say, the unconscious, character, resistance, etc." (qtd. in Roazen, 2001, p. 36). The passage of time has vindicated Fromm in his debate with Marcuse. Freud's assumption that infants exist in a cocoon of primary narcissism has been discredited by empirical researchers, and it would be difficult today to find an analyst who is influenced by Marcuse. Fromm, by contrast, after decades of marginalization, is increasingly gaining recognition as a seminal psychoanalytic thinker. A

bellwether of this shift is Daniel Shaw's brilliant book *Traumatic Narcissism* (2014), as evidenced by Shaw's delineation of how "the traumatizing narcissist recruits others (...) into a relationship that seductively offers the promise of the bestowal of special gifts"—as Freud did with his followers—only soon to "find cause to accuse the other of insufficient concern and of selfishness" (p. 13). As we have seen, a key point in Fromm's analysis of the authoritarian character is that the "dominant person is dependent on those who are dependent on him," only the dependency needs of the oppressors in such symbiotic bonds must remain unconscious because, in Shaw's words, "they have learned to defend against their history of being shamed and subjugated by putting others in the situation they were in—by becoming the shamer and the subjugator" (p. 138). To borrow Shaw's terminology, and meld it with that of Bernard Brandchaft (Brandchaft, Doctors, Sorter, 2010), who has contributed no less signally from a self psychological and intersubjective perspective to our understanding of "relational systems of subjugation," whereas Freud played the part of the traumatizing narcissist in his relationship with Ferenczi, Ferenczi exhibited the deformations resulting from his attempts at pathological accommodation, though in the end he sought to cast off the shackles of Freud's authoritarianism and to promulgate a truly emancipatory psychoanalysis.

If, in the memorable pronouncement of Michael Balint (1968), "the historic event of the disagreement between Freud and Ferenczi acted as a trauma on the psychoanalytic world" (p. 152), I hope to have shown that Erich Fromm, in addition to being Ferenczi's stalwart champion, has with his concepts of the authoritarian character and the magic helper given us invaluable scalpels with which to dissect both the psychic roots and interpersonal dynamics of this immensely generative but ultimately tragic encounter. But it must not be forgotten that Fromm was not only the analyst but the victim of trauma, having by 1953 been stripped of the "Nansen" or direct membership in the International Psychoanalytic Association that Ernest Jones had bestowed on him in 1936



as an émigré in New York (Roazen, 2001). Having himself been purged from the “party,” Fromm knew whereof he spoke when he took Jones to task for the “Stalinism” in his account of the fates of Ferenczi and Rank in his biography of Freud. Now that Ferenczi, if not Rank, has at last been accorded his full measure of recognition by posterity, let us hope that in 2015—this landmark year in which the William Alanson White Institute, cofounded by Fromm in 1946, has become a component of the American, and thereby also of the International Psychoanalytic Association—Fromm may in his turn undergo a similar rehabilitation.

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