

Review of Matthew C. Altman and Cynthia D. Coe, *The Fractured Self in Freud and German Philosophy*. London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013.

247 pages

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Preview

Freud's metapsychology is a product of post-Enlightenment thinking. This is the upshot of Altman and Coe's well-researched *The Fractured Self in Freud and German Philosophy*. To get to this conclusion, Altman and Coe examine Freud's relationship with major German thinkers of the 19th century. Despite Freud's own claim that metapsychology is a science, not a philosophy, Altman and Coe's examination reveals the philosophical underpinnings of an otherwise positivistic and methodologically individualistic program of psychoanalysis. This underpinning turns out to be both empirical (determinist) and autonomous (anti determinist). Of course, Altman and Coe do not see this (as Freud might have) as a deficiency of intellectual rigour: rather as an acknowledgement of the intellectual history Freud subsumes as part of his metatheory generation. This puts Freud clearly in line with 19th century post-Enlightenment thinking. And it places Freud in a line of scholars keen to test the boundaries of subjectivity as set by Enlightenment parameters. Freud's subject is "a fractured self—embodied, historically situated, and bound by language" (5). It is "an unfinished project" that continues but does not imitate conclusions of post-Enlightenment German thought. In the interest of space, I will examine five of the nine thinkers through whom Altman and Coe read Freud; these are Kant, Schelling, Schopenhauer, Hegel, and Nietzsche. I will then discuss Altman and Coe's conclusions on having canvassed the tradition of 19th century German philosophy.

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Kant's theory of freedom operates as the point of departure for Freudian analysis. Kant's freedom is notoriously dualistic; knowledge limits itself to make room for faith (10). Furthermore, self-knowledge is ultimately inscrutable: we don't have access to the (hidden) motivations of our hearts, and we don't have a mechanism to uncover these. We have the capacity to formulate moral maxims, but only to superimpose these onto our baser motivations, which remain inaccessible. Our empirical self is impenetrable, and our noumenal self is opaque (14). In contrast to this, Freud's self is empirical all the way down, and is motivated by (materialistic) drives (14). Through

psychoanalysis, what once were inscrutable motives are rendered analyzable and comprehensible (15). The “unbridgeable divide” of Kant’s phenomena and noumena is bridged through recourse to a materialistic accounting of the unconscious (17). However, this comes at a cost: Freud is said to fall into the same Humean trap as empiricism generally, for his constructs are laden with cultural and personal commitments (20). Whereas Kant’s divide attempts a transcendental shoring up of objectivity, Freud’s empirical accounting leaves him vulnerable to profound researcher effects (20).

Fichte’s theory of recognition is a watershed event in German Idealism, and for two reasons. First, it is the inaugural attempt at a theory of the subject that is intersubjective, for it relies on the other for acknowledgment. Second, it is empirical. While Kant’s *sensus communis* in the 3rd *Critique*, for example, is an attempt at intersubjectivity, it remains transcendental. However, Fichte does not develop this beyond a few pages in the *Foundations of Natural Right*, and it is left to Schelling and ultimately Hegel for a more thorough articulation. Whereas Kant leaves us with a bifurcated consciousness (phenomenal/noumenal), Fichte leaves us with a thoroughly transcendental-empirical consciousness and no way to the outside or beyond. And here I disagree with Altman and Coe; they claim that Fichte’s *Anstoss*—the self-limiting ‘check’ on the I—arbitrarily limits the I (34). But it turns out *contra* Altman and Coe that this limit is no limit at all. For it turns out that the limit is discovered to be the product of the self-positing I. Thus, consciousness is inescapable for Fichte. It is Schelling who properly introduces the unconscious to German Idealism (54). For Schelling, the unconscious is a ground of consciousness (56) “that is exalted and characterized as divine productivity...” (56). For Freud, of course, the unconscious is the repository of base motivations and animalistic impulses (56). For both, however, consciousness is derivative of the unconsciousness

(56), and this is an important family resemblance. Furthermore, consciousness rests on an irrational foundation: for Schelling, this is the (negative) Absolute (58); for Freud, the id (60). Both are allied against Hegel (59), who develops a positive understanding of the Absolute, complete with empirical content. But Schelling differs methodologically from Freud: whereas Schelling appeals to an intellectual intuition in isolating the Absolute, Freud eventually appeals to the thoroughly empirical method of analysis (65). First, he attempts the method of hypnotherapy (67), which bears resemblances with Schelling’s abstraction. When this fails, he alights on an examination of repression and the unconscious (71). What Freud discovers—and what Schelling misses—is the importance of interpretation, and the recognition of the self-as-subject-as-researcher in the activity of analysis.

Next to Nietzsche, Schopenhauer is most often associated with Freud's understanding of unconscious forces (79). Yet, there are great differences between them. Schopenhauer's pessimism and determinism with respect to the human will contrast with his admonition to turn the will against itself (79) and this does not go unnoticed by Freud. Schopenhauer's drives are part and parcel of consciousness: Freud's drives are unconscious (82), yet sexual desire in particular is at the bottom of our basic motivations for each (82). Furthermore, our egos are subservient to our basic motivations (82). Far from the seat of autonomous intellect, consciousness is a defensive fortification, prey to the worst rationalizations. Nevertheless, and particularly in Freud's late works (e.g., *Beyond the Pleasure Principle, the Future of an Illusion, Civilization and its Discontents*), an understanding of the superego is developed that plays a positive, even gratifying role in id and ego restraint (86). This superego Schopenhauer lacks. And whereas Schopenhauer's goal is ultimately peace—a Nirvana of sorts—Freud has no illusions that psychological conflict will continue as long as there is a human species (90).

I alluded earlier to Schelling and Freud's renouncement of the positive Absolute—an Absolute with empirical force. It is Hegel who is associated with this positivity, and Hegel who comes in as Freud's chief combatant in Altman and Coe's work. Interestingly, Hegel is presented in the book rather late—after chapters on Schopenhauer and Marx, though no explanation for why this is can be found. And more interestingly, it is Hegel's theory of history, rather than his *Logic* or *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences in Outline* that is examined. Unfortunately, the avoidance of treating these considerably weakens the force of the argument in this chapter. Altman and Coe's thesis is that Freud has tools at his disposal to argue that history is largely made up of irrational, emotionally-laden, and unconscious events that impinge on our current, conscious history, whereas Hegel does not (133). Indeed, Hegel's history emphatically embraces this progressivism. One clue to Altman and Coe's misreading of Hegel comes early in the chapter; the authors claim that "Hegel derives the goal of Geist from its spiritual (unnatural nature)" (134). But this is incorrect. Hegel derives the goal of *Geist* from its *complete* (spiritual and natural) *nature*. Strictly speaking, the spiritual is the whole, including nature, and this is hammered home again and again in the *Logic* and *Philosophy of Mind*. Past empirical events have as much truck as spiritual understandings in the coming Shape of Spirit, for they are the content of the Spirit's form in the initial coming-to-be of the new Shape of Spirit. Another clue lies in Hegel's optimism: Altman and Coe approvingly state that the past as past is a basis or "means toward self-fulfillment and carries no threat of dissolution" (148) without noting the contradiction this sets up for a thoroughly progressivist

reading of history. The past as past is robust enough to withstand the vagaries of interpretation, without denying interpretation. Far from being subsumed in a progressivist narrative, the past lends itself towards such a narrative because it remains robust under examination and interpretation.

The two chapters on Nietzsche and Kant, Schopenhauer, and Nietzsche are the most fulfilling of the book. Of course, Nietzsche is famously thought of as a progenitor of Freud. What Altman and Coe do— masterfully—is resist the all-too-easy appropriation of Nietzsche by Freud in favour of a more problematic uptake. Not only does Freud provide us with “a more detailed description of the therapeutic process of coming to terms with one’s past...” (151), he in effect helps finish the project of genealogy that Nietzsche starts. Altman and Coe concentrate on Nietzsche’s *Genealogy of Morals* and the story of the creation of values. The central critique is that of asceticism (155). The summarization of the story and its ramifications of such a critique for nihilism, activity, passivity, and subjectivity are spot-on. The place Nietzsche leaves us—on the threshold of nihilism—is a turning against life to which Freud will attend (159). Freud cashes out this nihilism in terms of trauma and the process of working-through (160-161). Through examination of some of Freud’s most famous cases—Emma, the Wolf-man— Altman and Coe articulate Freud’s theory of traumatic neuroses and its resemblance to Nietzsche’s genealogy. Freud’s account of working-through (164) is particularly well-developed, especially the role of the subject in her own recognition and interpretation of the past.

In the final chapter of the book, Altman and Coe turn their attention to a singular issue that looms large at the *fin de siècle*: the death of God. Three responses (Kant, Schopenhauer, and Nietzsche) are canvassed. Not surprisingly, Freud is closest to Nietzsche in his response. Whereas Kant and Schopenhauer both turn to faith in the guise of truth and end (optimistically for Kant; pessimistically for Schopenhauer), Nietzsche rejects this turn to ideals and turns us toward the sufferings we embody (185). The authors psychologise Nietzsche through reading his Doctrine of Eternal Recurrence as a state of (psychological) health rather than a cosmological principle (188). In so doing, they locate in Nietzsche’s ‘yes-saying’ and affirmation of joy

(188) the key to the focused introspection, analysis, and interpretation of the psyche that Freud compels of his patients. The authors then summarize their findings: Freud’s project “navigates between a form of biological determinism, in which innate drives express themselves mechanistically through our behaviour, and a libertarian belief in autonomous self-creation”

(191). After reading this book, I remain as-yet-unconvinced about the latter, though quite confident regarding the former. Nor am I (yet) certain that Freud’s empiricism entails a mind-independent reality distorted by

psychological disorders (194), as the authors claim. I still think Freud's basic motivations are through-and-through empirically accessible. Nor do I see an *a priori* tension between Freud's empiricism and the unconscious (195). But I do agree with the authors that what matters is the subjective truth. And this is both a post-Enlightenment and Nietzschean conclusion. This, it seems, should be enough to warrant Freud's entrance into the panoply of post-Enlightenment philosophers that inhabit the 19th century.

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