

ACTIVE/ PASSIVE - The Crucial Psychological Dimension

by  
Edrite Fried

Gruen and Stratton, \$7.95, 1970 pp222

The present text attempts to study, in the title at least as well as in one of its chapters (ch.8), the gamut of psychological disorders from the perspective of active/passive modalities of encounter with both the self and the world. The author is sensitive to the narcissism and rage present in passive-aggressive, masochistic and borderline behavior, she is aware of the extensive secondary gains which passive doldrums frequently contain, but her insights go little beyond this. Instead of the careful study the problem deserves, the reader is exposed to a mixture of repeated misunderstandings of Freudian theory, as well as to behavioristic-like techniques, e.g. "tease the patient into expressing anger." Or, abandoning psychological study completely, the author resorts to ~~amoralistic~~ exhortations, e.g.: "The psychologist, sociologist and wise political leader and all people of goodwill -- must help in the work of cleaning up these new confusions (i.e., mental conflicts)." Or, "We must teach reality to neurotics, schizophrenics, children and others."! These excerpts reflect a level of simplistic conceptualization evident throughout the text.

Dr. Fried's misreading of Freud is of the same calibre. She dismisses his understanding of the role of anxiety and then goes on to state that anxiety is a warning sign of the ego's impending weakness, a signal of danger coming. She reads Freud as saying that we do master trauma via the repetition compulsion and comes to the

conclusion that he misunderstood the facts. Had he only realized ~~tha~~ that people are involved in a cognitive error. Had he only taught people that the future need not be like the past, they presumably would not be neurotic. That the repetition compulsion serves neurotic ends, that Freud never implied that it a realistic means of overcoming past trauma, but that it is an intra-psychic force which profoundly effects both the psyche's self-understanding and interpretation of reality and that it can be dissipated by intra-psychic awareness: all of this apparently escapes the author. And because it escapes her, and many others besides, psychoanalysis is catalogued as a mechanistic/deterministic psychology which has an unproductive interest in the patient's past.

In the present day zeal for therapeutic effectiveness and its widespread distribution, as urgent and as understandable as these goals are, there has been a flight from the awareness that lasting autonomy is anchored to growth in inner personal meaning; and such personal meaning, in the therapeutic setting, results from interpretation, particularly of the transference, with its consequent emotional recognition on the part of the patient. Perhaps it is the sensitivity of the interaction as well as the necessity for mutually tolerated frustration in analyst and patient, but whatever the cause, there seems to be a convinced disbelief, born of non-experience, that such a phenomenon as transference interpretation fosters, preeminently, personal autonomy. Throughout the text we are given strategies and tactics, exhortations and command

at times wise counsel and at other times absurd platitudes, but rarely, if ever, does the author evidence an awareness of spotting, interpreting, and working through, intrapsychically, a transference phenomenon.

Because the whole area of transference phenomena is practically ignored, the question of construction, that is, understanding developmental characterological and neurotic problems in terms of present-day residues, is not touched upon. There is, consequently, a general formula present throughout the text: the reason patients are passive, are masochistic, etc. is because of deprivation in childhood. That passive adults are sometimes the products of profound over-indulgence and that such individuals can not be exhorted out of their narcissism but must painfully decide to leave Eden, likewise escapes the author. Autonomy, within the psychoanalytic community at least, is the capacity to affectively encounter and understand the past as it presently constitutes itself. To do that with minimum defenses leaves enough psychic energy for an individual to have an experience of personal competence out of which he can freely seek his necessary destiny -- to love with strength, to play with ease, and to work with satisfaction.

Not only does the author give no evidence of understanding the dynamic unconscious, but her reading of the psychoanalytic literature leaves one puzzled. For example, "Extolling the fertile qualities of primary-process thought, it (psychoanalysis) has unintentionally underplayed the inventiveness and excitement of rational thinking." Anyone familiar with current analytic thought would know that this

sentence is simply absurd. More profoundly disturbing, however, is that such a statement evidences a level of awareness which seems to reduce the role of theory to something like finding clever words in a game of scrabble. The author apparently thinks she can show the inadequateness of other theories by using au courant words to describe her own. Or another technique is that, under the guise of correct syntax, she give the impression of knowing the field she is discussing. For example: "Independent, healthy personalities and schizophrenics, contrary to various psychoanalytic assumptions (emphasis added), are active speakers in the sense that they make up their very own and often carefully selected terminology." Unless one knew the field, a layman might get the impression, from the syntax alone, that a meaningful observation had been made.

Finally there is an area of the author's conceptual fuzziness which goes beyond irritation and approaches dangerously careless statements in a book purporting to be of help to clinicians. I am referring specifically to the author's off-handed remarks in reference to paranoia. For instance: "A moderate and 'healthy' paranoia can be an aid in inching away from entrapment." Such a sentence not only plays havoc with even the most general of diagnostic categories; it evidences total confusion in distinguishing maturation differentiation from regressive fixation.

And in conclusion we may ask: is it because the author has gone beyond Freud that she finds it unnecessary to mention the area of dream interpretation in her book? Whatever the reason the lacuna reflects, once again, the absence of any operative awareness of the dynamic unconscious, of the infantile roots of adult behavior,

and of the transference phenomenon which any style of therapy must either understand or, by ignorance, exploit.

I have no quarrel with the author's intended goal, but sooner or later any therapist must learn that wanting, even wanting very much, that patients be better does not make them so. The word can bring the cure in psychoanalytic therapy, but it is not the word as wish, but as naming which frees the patient to hear himself.

Gerald J. Gargiulo  
10 East 76th St.  
New York City, 10021