Psychoanalysis or Mind and Meaning, by Charles Brenner, is a book not to be reviewed so much as appreciated. Brenner tells us that he has spent two years collecting in one place all the conclusions about the way the mind works that he has arrived at over his more than fifty years as an analyst. He reached these conclusions by proceeding as all scientists proceed, developing hypotheses or theories, collecting data, and then determining whether or not the data support or contradict those hypotheses and theories. And on more than one occasion, he has framed a new conclusion to replace his earlier conclusions or the conclusions of others, including Freud’s. For example, he is most convincing when he marshals the data against Freud’s conclusion that there is a principle of mental activity that is beyond the pleasure principle.

By way of a historical aside, he tell us that, while he was still a candidate at New York Psychoanalytic Institute, he attended a session in which the question was raised of whether or not psychoanalytic theories had factual evidence to support them. He summarizes the facts that Freud had marshaled in support of the repetition compulsion. Although he does not say so directly, the reader is likely to conclude from Brenner’s discussion of the repetition compulsion that, in this instance, he agreed with Freud’s method but not with Freud’s conclusion.

Brenner acknowledges that Freud also had doubts about the data, that conscious unpleasure can cover over unconscious pleasure, that pain can gratify a masochistic wish or a need for punishment. But Freud, not letting it go at that, postulated a death drive that “offers strong evidence in favor of the view that repetition is more important in mental life than are the attempts to gain pleasure and avoid unpleasure” (p. 16), Brenner notes. He points out
that Freud’s evidence here is not psychological in nature. Arguments about the tendency of all protoplasm to die have “nothing to do with observations made by using the psychoanalytic method of investigation” (p. 16).

In 1964, Brenner (along with Jacob Arlow) argued—persuasively, for many—against the priority of the economic and topographical metapsychological points of view in Freud’s theorizing, and made the case for the structural model in a stronger fashion than even Freud did in 1926. But Brenner has also gone on more recently to modify his own views and move from a model of psychic structure with potentially reifiable structures—id, ego, and superego—to more functional categories and processes. The ego becomes the person, drive becomes wish, and the superego becomes a compromise formation, as I wrote in my introduction to a festschrift for Brenner, anticipating by a decade the direction he was taking:

It is conceivable that Brenner will eventually articulate a model of the mind in conflict in which the interpretations of the elements of conflict is such that the traditional concepts of id, ego and superego become superfluous. What Brenner offers us is an ego which is not a fully integrated agency informed by the primary process but is dynamically indistinguishable from a neurotic symptom: a language of persons and individuals instead of a one of hypothetical mental structure: a view of the child motivated above all by the need to win his or her parents’ love. [p. 11]

For me, the most powerful concept that Brenner champions is that of compromise formation. It can be found early in Freud, but was never given the pride of place by Freud that Brenner gives it. The concept of compromise is based on facts, the observation of the components of mental conflict—wish, defense, affect, guilt, and

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adaptations, as well as, in particular symptoms, behaviors, inhibitions, and personality traits—in short, of everything that is part of mental life. The concept of compromise formation is the algebra of how the mind works and the path to the essential task of psychoanalysis in determining meaning.

Chapter 4 of Brenner’s book is the best primer on how to conduct an analysis that I have read. In twenty-three pages, he presents an approach to psychoanalytic technique that both the beginning candidate and the seasoned practitioner will find useful. He also makes the important point that psychoanalysis is not defined by position or furniture, lying on a couch or sitting in a chair, or by the number of weekly visits. It is defined by an analytic attitude—the search for meaning, the effort to understand, the conviction that everything a patient says or does is a potentially useful source of information about the patient’s conflicts and compromise formations.

Earlier, Brenner wrote: “What words one uses in constructing one’s theories [are] . . . less important, in most instances, than what meaning the words have in terms of the new data and new generalizations about those data that constitute psychoanalytic theory” (p. 208). This statement reflects his disinclination to supplant the language of Freud’s discoveries with trendier terms (self-object, container, projective identification, and intrasubjectivity come to mind) that offer no real gain in conceptual understanding or explanatory power.

This volume demonstrates that Brenner is not a revolutionary, but a modifier, to use Bergmann’s term. He is an extender who innovates by addressing the meaning of traditional psychoanalytic concepts—drive, defense, superego, affect, transference, countertransference, and regression. But this book, perhaps a final statement from Brenner, demonstrates that his contributions culminate in significant reformulations that are part of a process by which
Freudian thinking in psychoanalytic discourse accommodates the growth of psychoanalytic knowledge.

Brenner’s book can also be read as a challenge to alternative schools to provide a comprehensive and coherent presentation of their fundamental principles and concepts; thus, he also challenges the notion of psychoanalytic pluralism. Brenner is offering us his total composite theory,\(^5\) whose principles I and many of my colleagues find persuasive; these principles should continue to be studied by the broader psychoanalytic community.

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