

On *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Philosophy and Psychoanalysis

An Interview with Martin Bergmann

In the consulting room of the Bergmann home overlooking Central Park in New York, we spoke of the impact of Freud's 1930 work on psychoanalysis and on the culture of psychoanalysis. Our talk ranged freely over the intricate and the simple, the abstract and the everyday, as Martin reflected on his and the world's changing responses to long-held tenets of psychoanalysis.

—Jane Kupersmidt

JK—Martin, you have said you think of this book as indicating, despite Freud's later disclaimer, that psychoanalysis is as much of a *Weltanschauung* as it is a therapy, really a philosophy more than a therapy. Even more problematic for the field, moreover, is the fact that psychoanalysis is a strange mixture of expertise and philosophy.

MB—I wouldn't say it is a philosophy more than a therapy, but it is a therapy based on a philosophy. Patients consult us for our expertise and they get our philosophy. We suffer from a mixture. The fact that we are licensed by the state implies that we are experts. But what are we experts at? The mechanic understands the structure of the car—he is the expert of the car. We are looking at the soul but we are looking at it from a certain perspective. It's a problem because we are not really experts. There are different experts all dealing with the same thing, and the state certifies all of us.

JK—Does the problem also have to do with the public expectation, and the fact that the mixture is so unclear? We're very involved with the philosophy but we don't acknowledge it as being our matrix.

MB—That's interesting. In my opinion, when the therapist does not know what to do with a patient, what that means is that his paradigm has deserted him. We operate out of paradigms, and this is a different matter. My whole idea is that eventually psychoanalysis will free itself from the paradigms and be increasingly interested in what I call the integrative or coordinated interpretation, a varied way of thinking which is more directed toward the individual person. When we try to cure we have to convey to patients that we understand their uniqueness. Under Freud's influence, analysts tried to follow more paradigmatic interpretations, but we have to have enough creativity to be continually interested in the variation. If we're too interested in the schema, we're in danger of imposing it on the patient. Freud had nothing else to say—I give you a paradigm, now use it. When a patient and therapist meet, it's the patient who is in intrapsychic conflict meeting an expert in a paradigm. The paradigm person says to the patient, "Let's look together at your trouble from my paradigm and it will help you." Sometimes it helps, sometimes it doesn't.

JK—We know that for general readers *Civilization and Its Discontents* is a real journey, a powerful marker in the history of ideas. What do you think it is for psychoanalysis now?

MB—As I said, I see *Civilization and Its Discontents* as an attempt of Freud to make a step from psychoanalysis to a philosophy of life. It was in part based on a certain disappointment that came about with the structural phase. Freud addresses the world with an anxiety that emerged after he realized the power of the destructive drive or the death instinct.

JK—Is it read very differently by those with a general interest and by psychoanalysts, who have another expectation?

MB—An example of an analyst's reaction to that book was Waelder's response when he relegated it to Freud's personal philosophy, not binding on psychoanalysis. So whole generations tried to free psychoanalysis from the death instinct. Even Anna Freud did that,

with all her loyalty to her father. Arlow and Brenner don't even list the death instinct in their index. The only one who took the death instinct really seriously was Melanie Klein.

JK—What is Freud taking on here that he had not dealt with earlier?

MB—It's the rearrangement. Each individual idea is somewhere already but the way he put it together was new because he addresses the question of the whole future of civilization. The whole question of what will happen to the world is paramount in his mind. He was always a philosopher by inclination, but repressed the urge in the service of his therapeutic work. This isn't the first time—already after 1920 it's noticeable that he's turning away from psychoanalysis as a therapeutic procedure, and more toward the world as subject of the struggle between libido and the death drive.

I can tell you my idea of the death instinct as distinguished from Freud's idea. The death instinct may be confined only to human beings. When I see how a cockroach tries to avoid being killed, I say to myself there is no death instinct there. But in human beings it's different. You see, we are the only ones who know about that, though God knows we have done everything possible by the creation of religion to deny it. But nevertheless we know about it. And then we also gave up a considerable amount of instinctual gratification to make civilization possible. So we had, as Freud points out in *The Ego and the Id*, the transformation of object libido into narcissistic libido, which also increases aggression. So in this process of civilization, we inadvertently aided and abetted the aggressive drive.

I remember when I was in Africa on a safari, what struck me was seeing that animals kill only when they are hungry. Once they are satisfied, the lions lie there with the other animals around them, and don't display any wish to attack. The human being is different—the human being wants to kill for the sake of killing. So the death instinct is the malady of the human being and of civilization, not a general biological law, not, as Freud thought, a wish for the organic to return to the inorganic. To the patient who cannot tolerate the idea that she is aging and will die, I try to convey that there is no living without dying. The very concept of life implies that it is of short duration. But it's only we who know that. So far as we know, this thought has not occurred to the rest of the plant and animal kingdom.

JK—As far as we know... Freud describes what is there in the world as he sees it, and he has sometimes been associated with a kind of pessimism after this book.

MB—I don't think it's fair to classify the book as pessimistic—he was calling the world's attention to a danger. That's not pessimism—it's different. To predict something that will happen and try to summon the forces to combat it is not pessimism. You see, it's a mistake to look at holding to the reality principle, and pointing to dangers which everybody likes to deny, and to call that pessimism. If somebody sees that a disease is going to spread and calls attention to it, one shouldn't call it pessimism. It's a call to action.

JK—Where Freud is sometimes called a pessimist is in his view of the limitations of human nature, and the fact that, if human nature could be ameliorated, tragedy could be avoided. But that doesn't seem possible.

MB—You raise an interesting question, what do we mean by pessimism?

Pessimism I would say is a reflection of one's own inner state. Maybe Freud was pessimistic, but the book is not pessimistic. You can use the word *pessimistic* about, for example, his views on the League of Nations—that kind of pessimism, yes. You see, he was not in favor of the currents in utopian socialist ideas or the easy solutions that marked the beginning of the twentieth century. There were a whole lot of ideas about how to solve everything.

Progressive vs. Conservative Trends

JK—You've talked about the fact that the lifting of repression was allied with notions of progress, but later psychoanalysis turned away from any idea of progress, and in some ways became associated with the forces of conservatism.

MB—This is really my own understanding. As I see it, the topographic phase was an immensely optimistic phase, and it's also a pleasure to be an analyst under the topographic phase. You see, what a child could not handle got repressed. An adult in this view can handle the same material by either agreeing with it or not but he doesn't have to repress—a most optimistic idea. We as adults can manage our instinctual needs, whereas as children we had to repress them. Now, in the transition to the structural phase, Freud became increasingly aware of the limitations of the therapeutic process. Much of what he transferred to the structural phase was based on observation. For example, Freud learned to recognize the enormous power of the unconscious sense of guilt. He was unaware of that in the topographic phase. He also learned to recognize the immense power of the repetition compulsion, and the power of the negative therapeutic reactions. Now, all of those put limits on what the therapy can do, but it was based on clinical observations to a significant extent. I'm not denying the state of Europe and his cancer—all of those things played a role in his thinking. But the ideas that he promotes when he's talking about the structural phase are clinical ideas. His pessimism was significantly affected by the fact that the optimistic results of the topographic phase just didn't take place, or when they took place they didn't last as long as he had hoped. There was a more difficult reality out there that had an effect on his formulations.

JK—And once that occurred, psychoanalysis became allied with the forces of conservatism?

MB—Yes, because you see in the beginning in the topographic phase where it is relatively easy to cure, then one is connected to the progressive forces. On the other hand when you realize that there is a destructive urge in man that is of considerable proportions, then you are naturally not likely to believe that a mere change in the (psychic) economy is going to make you happy. You realize there is a negative force which is deeply rooted in our nature.

JK—And that means that men need to be governed.

MB—Yes, quite right. He became more platonic. He looked at the ideals of revolutions, but he asked what will you do after you finish killing the exploiters? And of course he was completely right.

JK—That's a very rough message, that the dynamics that govern each life and therefore the lives of nations are doomed to repetition.

MB—He says, "danger of repetition..." he doesn't say it will happen, he always says it may well happen and you have to watch. He doesn't give up, he just recognizes the enemy—and that's a very important distinction.

Sublimation

JK— A different subject: Why do you think Freud couldn't go further with the idea of sublimation in *Civilization and Its Discontents*?

MB—Sublimation is a very, very difficult topic.

JK—How so?

MB—Well it's a concept we can't very well define, but we need it very much. Freud actually came to the definition of sublimation for two opposite reasons. One reason was that he had put such an emphasis on sexuality. Once he did that, he had to account for the nonsexual activities that we nevertheless engage in with great zest, so he called them-sublimations. The other reason was to reassure the timid world that psychoanalysis is not going to bring in the destruction of civilization. That is most pronounced on the last page of the Clark University lectures, where Freud said we need more instinctual gratification but we are also going to be able to sublimate. So the sublimation was to reassure the world that greater liberation will not lead to chaos in civilization. But that does not mean that we really understood what sublimation is or that we had a very good definition of it. Two books have appeared which do throw a completely new light on the question of sublimation. One is the

little book by Loewald on sublimation and the other is the long chapter on sublimation in Andre Green's *The Work of the Negative*.

JK—And where do they stand in relation to Freud's concept?

MB—That's a long story. I'll try. Loewald essentially thought that psychoanalysis brings about not only the cessation of intrapsychic conflict but reconciliation. Once the intrapsychic conflict has led to reconciliation, a new energy becomes available. And he considered this new energy that comes as a result of treatment, sublimation.

JK—You have said that the fact that even Loewald could not come up with a satisfying discussion of sublimation was an indicator of the difficulty of the concept.

MB— I must say that I very seldom have heard psychoanalysis ending in this triumphant note, that my inner battle has turned into reconciliation. We are not that good! He visualized something that is devoutly to be wished, but I'm not sure it's realistic. You have improved certainly, but I have yet to see a patient who leaves psychoanalysis with a triumphant sense that now I have an enormous amount of energy available to me and I can do great things. A little bit of that one sometimes gets, but not typically.

JK—Andre Green's approach stays closer to Freud's as a point of departure.

MB— Yes he does, but he sees what other analysts did not wish to see, that sublimation is the result of neutralization and neutralization leads to the increase in the aggressive drive.

JK—Then sublimation links to an increase in aggression.

MB—He takes Chapter 3 of *The Ego and the Id* very seriously. Everyday experience points to the fact that love turns into hate and hate turns into love. Take a couple that were once in love, and see how they are connected to each other, no longer with love, but with hate, so hate is also a serious connection. Now this idea of love turning into hate, and hate into love, Freud could not accept, because that would have undermined the dual instinct theory. So in a very famous tour de force, Freud stated that there is a neutral energy which comes from the transformation of object libido into narcissistic libido and this neutral energy is thrown either to the side of the libido or to the side of aggression. So he postulated a third energy, but not only is that very cumbersome, but this neutral energy always seems to favor the aggressive drive. Green did not shy from looking at it. Green had the courage to look at the tragic implications of the structural phase which Hartmann and his generation did their utmost not to notice and not to deal with. But Green sees the limits of sublimation based on the fact that to the extent to which you need neutralized energy you also weaken the forces of the libido. Not completely different, but more extreme than what Freud says.

JK—And what do you make of the fact that *Civilization and Its Discontents* is also Freud's most extended, if not most satisfying, discussion of happiness?

MB—First of all, he considers happiness to be very brief. That is of course a philosophical view, but I don't think that he considers the many other aspects of life [other than instinctual gratification] that make us happy, even though temporarily. He doesn't consider here, although he does in another paper, the beauty of art as a consolation—or his own pleasure in writing the book. Then I'm not sure whether Freud, when he postulated that happiness can only be experienced for a short time, was aware that he was putting himself at odds with much of Western philosophy. Happiness in a reduced sense is a problem of the economics of individual libido and everyone has to find out for her- or himself the particular fashion best suited to her or his character. Freud is silent here about what psychoanalysis can achieve to bring about greater happiness. In any case, the well-analyzed person may not be happy but is definitely better off.

JK—Yes, Freud here talks about the dangers to civilization but, significantly, does not enumerate the dangers of the destructive drive to the individual.

MB—It's not a therapeutic book, or a guideline of what to do with the destructive drive of the patient, and in the whole of *Civilization and Its Discontents*, there is not one reference to therapeutic efforts.

JK—Martin, you drew my attention to a letter Freud wrote to Lou Andreas-Salomé, in which he spoke of the book very disparagingly—I'll quote:

“It deals with civilization, guilt feelings, happiness, and similar lofty matters, and is strikes me as very superfluous in contradistinction from earlier works, in which there was always a creative impulse. But what else should I do? I can’t spend the whole day in smoking and playing cards. So I wrote, and the time passed that way quite pleasantly. In writing this work I have discovered afresh the most banal truths”¹ (July 28, 1929 letter to Lou Andreas-Salomé).

MB—This kind of remark shows an interesting aspect of Freud’s relationship to narcissism. Freud transferred all his narcissism to psychoanalysis, so whenever he speaks about psychoanalysis he is confident, he is assertive. When Marie Bonaparte writes him that he is a great discoverer like Plato, he answers, “No, I just had the good fortune to make a great discovery.” This by itself is an interesting fact, that the creator can transfer his narcissism to the creation. That’s what Freud did—he belittles himself but he never belittles the product. Interesting idea.

A Problematic Text

JK—There are several ways this book has been problematic for psychoanalysis. You’ve mentioned all the grief Freud caused psychoanalysis through what he says about women. Is that part of why you think this particular book may no longer speak to students of psychoanalysis?

MB—One gets easily antagonized, yes. Now that most therapists are women, it’s been very embarrassing. But not only that, according to Freud, because women don’t have the castration anxiety, they should not develop superego. If they don’t have a superego, they should not know what melancholia is. Now, all of that was not true. That was a very serious offense. It offended a whole generation of women and it was a pointless encumbrance on the analytic process. Also, the whole outlook is not what an eager young therapist wants to hear.

JK—Another theme so clearly laid out in this book is Freud’s rejection of religion. Now that psychoanalysts are in dialogue with, for example, Buddhists, and we find committed adherents in training institutes, do we still consider Freud’s atheism as fundamental, and is psychoanalysis itself a faith?

MB—Well that’s the whole battle! Freud insisted that if we belong anywhere we belong to science, which is his equivalent to saying we are part of the Enlightenment, but now there are efforts to amalgamate psychoanalysis with various religious views.

JK—It’s more whether an anti-religious stance is integral to psychoanalysis.

MB—Freud said yes, because to be religious implies that you are forever a child. But now with the experience of Hitler and Stalin and Mao Tse Tung behind us, we realize that atheism on a political scale creates even more problems than religion.

JK—Clearly, Martin, you do take psychoanalysis to be a philosophy.

MB—Yes. Freud understood something about human nature. Philosophy can only grow out of who we are, and if we grasp more correctly who we are we are more likely to build a more realistic philosophy.

JK—In that sense, and given the state of affairs in the world today and the history of the last century in Europe—how do you understand optimism, in a more sophisticated definition?

MB—Well, just as I don’t like the word *pessimism* I don’t like the word *optimism*, because pessimism and optimism in psychoanalytic terms are usually the result of the first year of life, depending on what kind of nursing experience you had. How valuable is that? It’s a predisposition that by itself is irrational. If you have a dark perspective, then your darkness is based on the experience of your infancy, not based on the evaluation of the world. Probably Freud was a pessimist, but I’m trying to differentiate between whether the adult did not have a good babyhood and what his views are.

JK—This book, with its rather intense dose of realism about the likely future of civilization, places the greatest emphasis on the value of being able to really tolerate reality. That in and of itself is not pessimistic.

MB—Yes. Jane, please emphasize that these ideas in a strict sense have nothing to do with optimism and pessimism, which are based on the nursing experience. Let's have tea.



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¹ Jones, E. *The Life and Work of Sigmund Freud, Vol. III, 1919-1939: The Last Phase*. New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1957, p. 448.