I have been asked to review On Freud’s “Negation”, one of a series of books entitled Contemporary Freud: Turning Point and Critical Issues. In each, a seminal article by Freud is used as the reference point for contemporary clinicians and theorists to recapitulate, expand or reformulate Freud’s initial ideas. This book is edited by Mary Kay O’Neil and Salman Akhtar.

It is important to remember that, as the series editor Leticia Glocer Fiorini states in the opening page, this publication is a deliberate effort at “gathering psychoanalysts from different geographical regions, representing, in addition, different theoretical stances, in order to be able to show their polyphony. She reminds us of the “extra effort” the reader must make to discriminate relations and contradictions these different analysts pose that have yet to be reconciled in any one theory of mind.

“Extra effort” might be a bit of an understatement. I, as any reviewer must acknowledge at the outset, am somewhat bound by my training and clinical experience. Many of the thinkers contributing to this volume have conceptual frameworks far removed from my own. Their ideas and concepts feel strange and uncomfortable to me whereas, to others, they may seem obvious and immediately graspable.

In addition, as this volume is to serve as a kind of psychoanalytic “buffet”, none of these authors are comprehensively represented. Each article appears to represent a small sampling of the body of thought of these significant thinkers in our field. On the negative side, the reader must thus struggle to orient himself in each presentation only to then leave the new material in abeyance as he must struggle with the next author’s conceptualizations. On the positive side, this is a special opportunity to be exposed to the ways modern psychoanalysts from very different perspectives the world over are rethinking and elaborating psychoanalytic data, theory and technique.

This volume, after a brief introduction by Salmon Aktar, begins with Sigmund Freud’s original paper and its core concepts. Freud states that by using the signifier “no”, an individual allows for the emergence into consciousness of intellectual knowledge of the repressed while the associated affect remains repressed. On the one hand the “no” is a defense but, by allowing repressed information into consciousness, it greatly
enriches thought and allows for greater understanding. The capacity to relate has another important benefit: negation is critically related to the formation of judgment: judgment of both quality (difference) and existence (reality testing). These developments are central to the formation and functioning of the pleasure ego. The goodness or badness, the “quality” of things initially leads to an early decision as to whether the ego wants it “inside” or “outside”. This polarity Freud states corresponds to “the opposition of the two groups of instincts which we have supposed to exist. Affirmation—as a substitute for uniting—belongs to Eros; negation—the successor to explosion—belongs to the instinct of destruction.” As the ego struggles against unpleasure it is forced to seek satisfaction in the “real” world. Thus existence of a thing entails not a finding, but a refinding of the satisfying object as it exists in the external world.

We, as analysts, are familiar with the “No” as part of a structured defense such as reaction formation but negation and the full spectrum of denial and disavowal is particularly relevant where a surfeit of aggression and destructiveness exists as in borderline conditions and psychosis. It is this greater, more global and more destructive aspect of negation, in general, with holds these authors’ attention.

It would behoove any reader of On Frued’s “Negation” to start with the epilogue written by Mary Kay O’Neil. This overview is extremely helpful to appreciate the various contributors and their different areas of interest. I could not hope to duplicate her efforts at summarizing the perspectives of each individual thinker and can only offer the briefest of descriptions of some of the contents of this dense work. I hope that in doing so I can in some way prepare the reader for what lies in store.

The volume begins with an article by Bonnie Litowitz whose training is in psycholinguistics. She reviews the developmental sequence from motor negation (spitting out or waving away) through refusal and the development of the semantic ‘no” at fifteen months.. She demonstrates how negation deepens thought by its potential to propagate multiple meanings e.g. “the swan is not black….it is not the swan that is black… it is not the case that the swan is black” (page 24). But in addition, the development of the semantic “no” also represents the earliest of object relations (Spitz) and the beginning of a dialogue (with parental figures) which will result in the increasing clarification and differentiation of opinions and attitudes between the self and others. As Litowitz says “Language is acquired in the context of
caretaker-child interactions”. The older rejection, spitting out models in Litowitz’s opinion coexist with later more discriminatory models of negation. Rather than simply being superseded they can at times be active and detectable in clinical material of patients.

In general, most of the authors in this collection focus on the broad “work of the negative” (Green) in patients where the effects of the negative and the operation of a Death instinct is profound. These are patients for whom classical psychoanalytic models seem ineffective; patients with a surplus of negative behaviors: unstable ego structures, severe pathological masochism, intense “acting out”, primative psycho-physiologic states.

Jorge Canestri emphasizes the difference between negation as outlined by Freud and a more severe “shattering or splintering” process of disavowal which result in a break with reality. He demonstrates this horizontal split in the ego’s reality sense can so be profound that his patient could believe both ideas simultaneously from childhood: “Either there was no difference between the sexes or the situation could be remedied” (page 48).

Brian Robertson uses the negative as an opportunity to reexamine the meaning and clinical manifestations of negative therapeutic reaction (NTR). He wishes to restrict its use to the specific clinical situation in which it was first described: the clinical deterioration and erupting negativism seen after a piece of good analytic work which would ordinarily lead the analyst to anticipate improvement. He underscores its relation to Freud’s idea of the operation of the death instinct, while offering an interesting supposition that NTR is a reaction to “the individual’s experience …of being possessed, invaded or mastered by the object (an unconscious transference phantasy of mother /analyst intervening without empathy, adequate boundaries, or a real sense of the other.)

Ilany Kagan discusses psychic holes as it pertains to denied memories/phantasies of the holocaust. She underscores how these hidden (denied) realities in the lives of the parents can be relived and unconsciously re-experienced by their offspring.

Antonino Ferro in the last article explores counteracting the “negative” by using the creative potential of the analytic dyad. He leans heavily on Bionion
ideas of alpha and beta elements and the need to undergo a “transformation into creativity”.

Cesar and Sara Botella, again underscoring a kind of elemental “negative” before language and before conflict, use Freud’s ideas of the primal horde to elaborate on a Oedipus complex of the Id, a parricide that is mindless and predates the structured Oedipus of Ucs. They argue for the need for a transformational process which via figurability allows for the successive development of the later structured Oedipus. They are influenced heavily, as are a number of the other contributors, by the work of Andre Green (see below.)

Joachim Danckwardt explores the negative in dreams reminding us that in Freud’s earlier formulations of the unconscious, it, like the dream, cannot render a “no”. The dream must either link contradictory ideas as in Freud’s dream of the open air closet, transpose affects or, in the case of his patient, represent “negation” by consecutive dreams. In the manifest content of the second dream the patient dreams of a ghostly figure which is subsequently interpreted as his analyst. This then is the dream’s effort to “white out” the analyst following the previous day’s painful interpretation.

This “whiting out” is a central idea in the long and complex article by Andre Green “The work of the negative and hallucinatory activity”. His ideas are far too complex to recapitulate here; however a thorough reading of this article could act as a good introduction to this important current contributor to psychoanalytic theory. Green starts by revisiting the phenomenon of negative hallucination and states that it demands explanation of two different categories: the former, hallucination, and its relation to perception, dreams, and unconscious representation, and the latter, the “negative” as it relates to more clearly recognized phenomena of splitting, repression and negation. He states that the need to deny an undesirable, intolerable perception can lead to a negative hallucination which does not attack the preconscious representation but acts by disavowing the perceived object itself. Green references Cotard syndrome in which deeply depressed individuals claim they have no internal organs. Many of Green’s ideas are extremely difficult to understand, highly theoretical and require reading and rereading multiple times.
I found of great interest Green’s reexamination of the development of the pleasure ego. He points out, as analysts have previously done, that the pleasure ego is a necessary structure for development but indicates that its existence is less a development than an achievement. The early pleasure ego (and its ties to the development of judgment and reality testing) and hallucinatory wish fulfillment are dependent on the mnemonic trace/experience/perception of satisfaction. Hallucination, postulated to be the infant’s earliest way of dealing with frustration and deprivation, in actuality, requires a back drop of satisfactions at the hands of the earliest caretaker in order to create the satisfactions secondarily hallucinated. Clearly grossly aberrant caretaking then can be expected to alter the quality of the satisfaction or accentuate the negative.

The work of the negative is seen as especially strong in those patients who demonstrate “pregenital fixation.. the fragility..of the ego’s defenses which are both rigid and in danger of breaking down…the prevalence of splitting…the fore-closure of symbolic formation, absence of capacity for representation…object relations marked by an intolerance of separation” (page 131). The classic psychoanalytic model links neurotic repression acting on preconscious word-representations of unallowed satisfactions which themselves are tied to unconscious wordless memories of satisfactions/phanatsies in the Ucs. But this model already presupposes a level of organization which is belied by the facts of perversion, psychosomatosis, negative hallucination, and psychosis. Here repression can act directly, more in the form of disavowal to “erase” (“white-out”) whole segments of perception, and can interfere with memory of analytic work or even words spoken in analytic sessions. Such intense anxiety occurs that such a patient, in Dr. Green’s words, “will be overwhelmed if the object (analyst) is no longer there…and [even when there]…is threatened by a kind of hallucinatory (negative) realization ..which affects the quality of the transference …the return of the repressed [is seen as] a fulfilling actualization. The connotation of restitutive repetition is not recognized in the transference which seems to unfold with the atmosphere of a trauma is in full swing.” The analysis then “is more a question of a return of a psychic event needing to be exhausted.

Jorgen Luis Maldonado expounds on the negative as it pertains to the analyst-analysand relationship particularly in narcissistic patients. Such a patient is one who in his damaged state, identifies with the phallus which is seen as having absolute value. The therapeutic relationship and the analyst
himself are seen intrinsically as threatening his defensive phantasies of perfection and elicit an effort to destroy. “The patient asks the analyst for help, but…this overt request is transformed into something different which consists in emphatically denying the existence of the object (page 188)” The result is a trench warfare in which the analysand attempts to demolish and destroy the analyst and his understanding.

These articles are, for the most part, quite theoretical. Often these theories deal with mental events that are beyond and before language. I have some doubt as to how much we can meaningfully conceptualize about a world that is without or before words. To my mind, Winnicott’s ability to use elliptical poetic forms to describe primitive and disturbed mental states seems somehow particularly fitting and useful. And finally our work as psychoanalysts is more poetry than science, more heart than philosophy.

As different as these authors are it would appear that they all sense something is missing (negated?) from our understanding of our more afflicted patients. An examination of negation in all its forms (the death instinct?) and the significant ways this process interferes with an accommodation to reality and the capacity to grow is clearly needed. This volume should stir the reader’s interest and imagination and will hopefully lead to even more fruitful understanding of Freud and psychoanalysis as it is practiced today.