

Free Associations: Psychoanalysis and Culture, Media, Groups, Politics
 Number 87, December 2022 ISSN: 2047-0622
 URL: <http://www.freeassociations.org.uk/>



Morris Eagle, *Toward A Unified Psychoanalytic Theory: Foundation in a Revised and Expanded Ego Psychology*, London: Routledge, 2022. ISBN978-0-367-76753-2, 341 pages.

Reviewed by Daniel Burston

Morris Eagle's latest book is a thorough and thought-provoking reflection on the possibility of unifying the disparate schools of psychoanalysis under the umbrella of a revised and expanded ego psychology, an ambitious and impressive undertaking that has elicited fulsome praise from Peter Fonagy, Glen Gabbard and Jerome Wakefield. Given the sheer number of psychoanalytic orientations competing for adherents nowadays, however, many skeptics argue that this is an impossible task, because the models of the mind and methods of treatment advanced by these diverse school are fundamentally incommensurable. But Eagle is undeterred, arguing that a unified theory is both possible and highly desirable for analytic theory and practice, and for analysts and patients alike.

“Where id was, there shall ego be”. So said Freud, who described his dictum as the “the categorical imperative of psychoanalysis”. One interpretation of this maxim is that analytic treatment seeks to render the unconscious conscious, and to make the ego the center of psychic life. Eagle takes this line of thought farther, arguing that Freud here “addresses the question of psychobiological drives achieving representation in the subjective experience of ‘I desire’ or ‘I need’ or ‘I fear’. For example, how does one get from the biological level of neural firings, hormonal secretions, low blood sugar to ‘I am hungry’ or ‘I have sexual desire or a sexual fantasy’; Freud was quite familiar with Kant’s writings. His concept of the ego or I can be traced back to conceptually to Kant’s ‘transcendental ego’ in the sense that in both contexts, the ego or I is the precondition for experience, that is, makes possible experience as my experience, as well as the unity of consciousness (p. 271)”

Ironically, perhaps, Kant did not believe that psychology actually could be a *bona fide* science at all. But as Eagle points out, ego psychologists like Anna Freud and above all, Heinz Hartmann, sought to fulfill Freud’s ambition of transforming psychoanalysis into a general psychology. As a result, says Eagle, ego-psychological research anticipated many of the concepts and findings in contemporary research on executive functions and affect regulation from *outside* the psychoanalytic domain, and more often than not, the latter could be translated back into the language of the former, should we decide to go that route. Nevertheless, Eagle also concedes that Heinz Hartmann rejected a fundamental assumption of Freud’s meta-psychology, namely that the pleasure principle (and hallucinatory wish-fulfillment) precedes the reality principle. At issue here was Freud’s contention that the infant lacks any adaptive traits or capabilities; that its mother acts as the infant’s “reality principle” until the infant starts to acquire a capacity for delayed gratification and ego strength. Here Eagle points out that Hartmann “recognized

that Freud's formulation left no room for the existence of 'inborn apparatuses' that are adapted to reality and that develop according to maturational processes in a wide range of environments . . . Hartmann developed this idea further by stating . . . that the reality principle in the broader sense would historically precede and outrank the pleasure principle" (p. 27); an assertion that provoked disbelief and dismay in orthodox Freudian circles, and among many dissident psychoanalytic theorists as well.

Eagle acknowledges that ego psychology once enjoyed near hegemonic status at American psychoanalytic institutes, but that more recent schools of psychoanalysis relinquish the attempt to transform psychoanalysis into a general psychology, cultivating their own little gardens or domains of clinical experience, ignoring the larger field. Why are there so many different schools, then? Eagle references ". . . the role played by the authoritarian and dogmatic attitudes of the Freudian establishment toward new theoretical formulations that were deemed 'dissident' or 'revisionist' . . ." This state of affairs - which both encouraged and resulted from an excess of Freud piety, in this author's opinion - dictated that ". . . if the views of the dissidents were to be heard and represented . . . there was little choice but to establish their own schools . . . and professional journals" (p. 276.) Consequently, Eagle reasons ". . . one can understand the preference for pluralism over unity and integration on the part of many psychoanalysts who may equate integration and a more unified theory with a return to dogmatic hegemony (p. 276)."

Agreed. And Eagle is realistic and generous enough to acknowledge that "dissident views" and their corresponding schools often call our attention to clinical phenomena and facets of human experience and behavior that are not given sufficient credence or attention by Freud and his followers. But he also points out that there is a hidden danger - and indeed, a curious irony - in the seemingly endless proliferation of new schools. Each of them is inclined to reproach classical Freudianism and ego psychology with promoting and defending some sort of reductionism in their theories of motivation and methods of interpretation. And each of them eventually becomes guilty in turn of propounding reductionist formulas of their own. Thus, the ostensible solution becomes a part of the problem, and the renegades and revisionists of yesteryear end up fashioning their own orthodoxies and power structures, most of which are at least as problematic and riddled with blind spots as the original culprit; a state of affairs that obviously will have adverse consequences for patients, and well as for the status of psychoanalytic theory in the broader scientific community (Oy vey! Sound familiar?)

That being said, I don't dispute the desirability of developing a unified body of psychoanalytic theory, nor do I dismiss the actual and potential dangers of thoughtless or unbridled pluralism, which Eagle addresses very cogently. But I remain skeptical as to whether or not it is actually possible to achieve unification at this point, and anticipate stiff resistance to this proposal from a number of quarters. On the one hand, we must reckon with the fact that many schools and institutes in the psychoanalytic world today will wish to retain their own power structures and spheres of influence, and therefore prefer to continue competing with other orientations for candidates, rather than surrender their claims to difference and/or superior insight and/or technique. On the other hand, we

live in a capitalist, consumerist society that values and promotes the importance of personal choice, and this is as true of the educational and psychoanalytic “marketplaces” as it is of any other sphere. Future psychoanalysts will likely prefer to choose the school that most aligns with their own preconceptions, and their sense of how the mind works, or to choose one of the more popular “brands” available to them – like the current craze for Lacanian psychoanalysis, which sadly, Eagle does not address.

But while I am skeptical of the long-term prospects for creating a unified psychoanalytic theory, we can take steps toward creating a climate in which it *might* become possible. One would be to reintroduce Freud into the curriculum of many psychoanalytic training institutes, where candidates seldom, if ever read Freud carefully, thoughtfully, and in his own words anymore. Instead, they tend to get fragmentary glimpses of his ideas refracted through the lens of the newer orthodoxy’s pet prejudices. This partisan and presentist approach conveys the disastrous impression that Freud is no longer relevant, no longer necessary – a waste of time, in fact. Needless to say, Freud should not be taught dogmatically – nor can he be, really; not any longer. That being so, analytic candidates should be invited to wrestle constructively but at some length with Freud’s ideas before arriving at their own conclusions about him and his ideas. As things stand currently, however, many, if not most institutes have succumbed to market pressures, and there is nothing more baffling or disconcerting than the spectacle of a newly minted psychoanalyst who is confident in his former teachers, and firmly assured of his own competence to practice, but has scarcely read a word of Freud.

Another move that might enhance the climate for renewed attempts at transforming psychoanalysis into a more unified theory and/or general psychology would be to incorporate rigorous courses on the history of psychoanalysis in the curriculum of training institutes. These courses should be taught by independent scholars who are not beholden to or aligned with any particular school or orthodoxy. Every generation, when it reaches a certain age, is astonished at the ignorance of its predecessors and thinks it knows better. That seems to be human nature. And while this state of affairs can foster much needed intellectual innovation and growth, it can also promote a harmful decline in intergenerational identification and the transmission of knowledge, so that the wisdom of the past gets lost in the shuffle. If candidates learned how their preferred orientation(s) evolved in response to earlier perspectives and were encouraged to engage with Freud again, we might get a little closer to Morris Eagle’s goal. In the meantime, anyone with a deep interest in the history and future of psychoanalysis will benefit from reading this learned and lively book.

Daniel Burston is the author of many books and journal articles on the history of psychoanalysis, psychoanalysis and politics and Critical Theory. His recent efforts include *Psychoanalysis, Politics and the Postmodern University* (Palgrave MacMillen, 2020), *Anti-Semitism and Analytical Psychology: Jung, Politics and Culture* (Routledge, 2021) and *Critical Theory and Psychoanalysis: From the Frankfurt School to Contemporary Critique* (with Jon Mills, Routledge, 2023.)