Book Review

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The Ego and Analysis of Defense (second edition)

Paul Gray, Jason Aronson,
New York, 2005, 360pp.

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As the title indicates, Paul Gray places himself squarely in the tradition of Anna Freud and the Ego Psychologists. Since the book has had such an impact, and is at the time of this writing the centerpiece of internet discussions, it seems useful to comment on its influence and to place it in context.

Gray has influenced analytic technique by calling attention to following closely the analytic material with an eye and ear toward strengthening the patient's self-observation. Positing this as a primary goal of psychoanalysis allows Gray then to demonstrate how he works, and defines his successes in pursuing his object, which, broadly speaking, can be characterized as defense analysis. The clarity thereby achieved is clearly useful, and has exerted a mighty influence over analytic technique.

Gray advocates paying close attention to process, following Freud's injunction. In “On beginning the treatment” (1913), Freud writes: one “must be careful not to give a patient the solution of a symptom or the translation of a wish until he is already so close to it that he has only one short step more to make in order to get hold of the explanation for himself” (140–141). This statement of Freud's Gray takes as his touchstone. But, unlike Freud, Gray seems to have little difficulty sorting out what is near the surface and what is deeper. He describes

himself as one who works at the point of contact between drive derivatives and consciousness, enabling his patients to think and inquire with increasingly greater freedom.

Gray's clarity is seductive; he gives unambiguous accounts of the aims of analysis. To one patient, he explains that “the aim is to understand the ways you have been able to keep these parts of yourself out of awareness, and why that has been necessary. As a result, you’ll come to have better access to them and, if you wish, may choose some different solutions than the involuntary ones that trouble you now” (p. 189). He urges another to “to study these involuntary inhibiting reactions based on repeated versions of previously conflicted and obstructing experiences” (p. 191).

Such interpretations and such focus can certainly be seen as admirable. Gray is the analyst most systematically to apply the principles of ego psychology. And he has no counterpart in his enthusiasm to join theory and practice. Viewed with the perspective of time, however, not only do his interpretations seem somewhat cold and their language infelicitous, but also the single-mindedness with which Gray pursues his descriptions and interpretations would seem to have a price. Missing are not only his own failures in achieving his objectives (i.e., strengthening his patient's ego's and powers of observation), but also his assessment of the ways in which his patients cling to pieces of their “outer” lives, together with what this means. Since material from outside the analysis tends to be viewed as “resistance,” Gray misses the confused feelings and emotional meanings of his patient's experiences. Gray's technique depends upon examining the material of the session closely to dredge what is close to consciousness. It is as though the Ego Psychologists and Gray worked on a dredging machine that measured the depth of the water by what it could bring up.

The clarity for which Gray has been lavishly praised has other prices, since a number of questions are not addressed: how to judge the distance between the present material and what is conscious; how to define both defense and conflict. When conflict dealt with is subsumed under the rubric of defense analysis, it gives rise to more questions. What happens to conflicts that do not lend themselves to defense analysis? What happens to “real” conflicts between analyst and analysand? And what happens to the conflicts of the analyst?

Gray writes critically of "the extent to which a great deal of analytic technique was bypassing the ego. As a result, analysts could not demonstrate fully and analyze the otherwise internalized, primarily defense-motivated portions of the ego labeled *superego*" (xxiii). Apart from the awkward English, there are a number of assumptions here that seem worth attention. Obviously, Gray does not like analytic technique to "bypass the ego." Many analysts, whether self-psychologists or interpersonalists, however, hold that analysis can work in a variety of ways that includes significant nonverbal and undefinable, and intuitive dimensions. One of the virtues of self-psychology is to distinguish the sense of self from the ego, and the vulnerability and narcissistic sense of injury from the judgments of inadequate ego strength. And Kleinians hold that the depths of analysis, not their surface, hold the key to analytic progress.

Gray goes on to elaborate his position. It is the objective of psychoanalysis to increase "the ego's capacity to tolerate drive derivatives." There are "clearly observable defensive reactions to conflictual drive derivatives" (p. xxiv). Here this reader longs for limpid prose. What does Gray mean by "tolerate"? How does he define a "drive derivative"? How can he say that anything in analysis is "clearly observable"? And, finally, how can drive derivatives ever be "clearly observable"?

Such questions become yet more troubling when Gray begins his case discussions distinguishing "inside" and "outside" with alarming clarity. A young woman tells him that she is delighted at overcoming her shyness at work, and has requested from her boss permission that the company pay for a week of research. Gray observes that she is expressing "distance from the analytic setting and from the analyst." One wonders here at the various negotiations over vacations and absences of the analyst, as well as at the negotiations over the analytic frame. Gray mentions none of this. The onus is placed entirely on the patient for distancing herself from the analyst, and the role of the analyst in all this is significantly missing.

With his cumbersome passive-voice style, Gray writes: "A preference has been indicated for adjusting this focus so as to observe data limited essentially to inside the analytic situation" (p. 25). Is what he is observing "data"? Can inside and outside be so easily divorced? This reviewer has his doubts.

Gray's attitude is, by his own admission, authoritative. One section of the second chapter is entitled “Predilection for an authoritative analytic stance” (p. 50). This presents problems for the analysis of the superego, the site of what Wurmser has called “the inner judge.” Gray concludes his comments on the superego: “superego analysis is possible only to the extent that aggressive drive derivatives are truly returnable to the ego's voluntary executive powers.” Again, trying to see through the glutinous prose, Gray seems to be saying that only when the superego is understood as part of the ego (and therefore conscious) can it be analyzed. As Gray defines analysis, then, it depends upon “voluntary executive powers.” One of the drawbacks to such a voluntarist position is to do away with any conception of consciousness that does not conform to his notions of will or to the precepts of Ego Psychology. Gray's focus, by his own admission, limits his field of attention.[1] But he claims that the gains outweigh the drawbacks. Theoretically, of course, the will of the analyst can hamper, rather than strengthen, the will of the analysand. But this is a possibility left unaddressed by Gray, whose belief that analysis strengthens the will of the analysand seems to be boundless, as does the strength of the will of the analyst whose job it is to strengthen the analysand's ego. Furthermore, Gray does not consider distortions in the analyst's view of the patient's will.

Indeed, Gray does not disguise his disdain for interpersonal approaches, which, he believes, can never be dignified by calling them “analytic.” He targets Ferenczi, and then Sullivan, Kohut and Klein, none of whom, in his view, practice “psychoanalysis.” What *they* do is psychotherapy; what *he* does is psychoanalysis.

Such orthodoxy in defining psychoanalysis as what the author practices, and those who differ substantially in theory and technique as practicing “mere psychotherapy” is hardly a virtue in our contemporary world, where there is such a crying need for the *defense* of psychoanalytically oriented psychotherapy. Holding out analysis (and the ego strength required to undertake it as the prerequisite of “analysability”) as the gold standard, and viewing everything else as “less than” is an unfortunate legacy that is better left behind.

Gray's book, however, is likely to remain a classic inasmuch as it puts Ego Psychology into practice and focuses on technique with unwavering attention. Gray bridges the gap between theory and

technique, making of the whole a coherent body. But this reviewer wonders whether it is not in the breach between theory and practice that practitioners grow, and allow their patients room to change.

Notes

1 Gray writes: "In every variation of listening to or perceiving analytic material, the analyst must choose some perspective on the material, usually on the basis of his conceptual orientation for analyzing the data" (p. 226). Note that Gray believes that practitioners "choose" their perspective, and that therefore the results are positive. He goes on to criticize the idea of "free-floating attention," noting that Freud formulated it before he hit upon the "structural concept of the ego."