



## Freud is Dead, Long Live Freud!: Revisiting the Freud Wars

A Review of

*The Late Sigmund Freud: Or, The Last Word on Psychoanalysis,  
Society, and All the Riddles of Life*

by Todd Dufresne

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Reviewed by

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Do you remember the “Freud wars?” Though we still hear distant rumbles from the battlefield today, they lasted roughly from 1979 to 2000, and were raging most fiercely in the 1980’s. At that time, Freud and his followers were subjected to scathing attacks from Frank Sulloway (1979), Elizabeth Thornton (1983), Jeffrey Masson (1984), Alice Miller (1984), Adolph Gruenbaum (1984), Frederick Crewes (1986), Mikkel Borch-Jacobson (1988) and Peter Swales (1989), among others. The Freud critics of that era were generally quite forceful and articulate. Their books and articles sold extremely well, while rejoinders from the psychoanalytic community were often feeble, unfocused, or simply unintelligible to non-psychoanalysts. With rare exceptions, those who challenged the “Freud bashers,” as they were sometimes called, were not making a case that the culture at large found compelling. They were simply preaching to the choir.

Who was responsible for this sad spectacle? Many blame Freud’s critics, but it is quite pointless to blame any of them individually. They were all part of an anti-Freudian backlash that gripped the English-speaking world. Besides, whatever you may make of their motives, some made important contributions to Freud scholarship. Despite lingering reservations and the passage of time, I still recommend some of their books and articles to my graduate students. Among these are those of a formidable scholar named Todd Dufresne, who is a Professor of Philosophy at Lakehead University, and author of numerous books and articles on the history and theory of psychoanalysis. (Indeed, he publishes little else.) Some of his previous titles include *Tales from the Freudian Crypt: The Death Drive in Text and Context* (2000), *Killing Freud: 20th Century Culture and the Death of Psychoanalysis* (2003), and *Against Freud: Critics Talk Back* (2007). That being so, the title of his latest book, *The Late Sigmund Freud: Or, The Last word on Psychoanalysis, Society and All the Riddles of Life* (2017), though quite amusing, comes as no surprise. Like its predecessors, this book’s title conveys the impression that—in its author’s opinion—Freud is dead, or should be, anyway. Since Freud actually passed away in 1939—some 78 years ago—these titles obviously do

not refer to Freud himself, but to his robust hold on posterity, and to his followers and epigones, who, with rare exceptions, Dufresne greets with scathing humor and disdain.

At the same time, however, the book's title is a deliberate *double entendre*, since the book itself deals intimately with Freud's later, mostly cultural and political writings. Dufresne claims—correctly, for the most part—that *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* (1921), *The Ego and the Id* (1923), *The Future of An Illusion* (1927), *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930), and *Moses and Monotheism* (1939) have been unjustly neglected since the sixties and seventies, when philosophers like Herbert Marcuse, Norman O. Brown, Paul Ricoeur, and others sought to understand “psychoanalysis, society and all the riddles of life” through in-depth readings and critiques of these important texts. So, “The Late Sigmund Freud” can be read as a declaration announcing that Freud is dead, or as a reference to the book's subject matter—or both, in some fashion.

Moreover, Dufresne boldly claims the proverbial “last word” on Freud's legacy, which—rightly or wrongly—remains a topic of seemingly inexhaustible interest and relevance to scholars and clinicians around the world. In so doing, perhaps, he is exhibiting a measure of identification with Freud himself who, as Dufresne points out repeatedly here, was well known for his audacity (or in Freud's own idiom, his *chutzpah*). The difference is that Freud took his grandiose fantasies in stride, and more often than not, he expected his followers to follow suit. By contrast, Dufresne uses extravagant claims to poke fun at himself. After all, anyone who has followed his work thus far knows with absolute certainty that Dufresne *already* has another Freud-themed paper or book in the preliminary planning stage, if not now nearing completion. So, one wonders what his next title will be. Perhaps something like *Freud is Dead Again—No, Really!: A Belated Addendum to My Previous “Last Word.”*

With that said, this book is not merely a reiteration of Dufresne's previous themes and ideas. On the contrary, it builds impressively on his previous scholarship, deepening and expanding it in several directions simultaneously, especially with respect to an important precursor, Friedrich Nietzsche, and two erstwhile admirers who became early critics of Freud—Romain Rolland and Herbert Silberer.

Although Dufresne's agenda is mostly critical, of course, this book is also a kind of grudging *homage*. It certainly is the most generous appraisal of Freud that Dufresne has delivered to date. Most of this material appears in his concluding chapter, where he credits Freud with the genius to pose all the “right” questions about human existence, and the courage to follow his own (often wild) conjectures to their ultimate logical conclusions, irrespective of how they squared with conventional wisdom or prevailing scientific consensus. The fact that the answers Freud gave to these “big” questions were ultimately quite mistaken, says Dufresne, does not detract from his stature as one of the bolder, more worthwhile speculative thinkers of the 20th century. While useless therapeutically, Dufresne insists, Freud's later work is exemplary as a “productive fallacy,” one that goads us to reflect more deeply on the human situation than we would have otherwise.

Is psychoanalysis useless therapeutically? Dufresne and his colleagues have argued—usually with considerable justification—that the clinical “evidence” Freud and his immediate followers mustered on behalf of psychoanalysis was often disguised autobiography or wildly adulterated to make their data fit the prevailing theory and that Freud and his followers treated even very cogent and sympathetic critics of their movement quite shabbily (e.g.

Sulloway, 1991). And sadly, most psychoanalytically oriented clinicians have been too defensive to give their arguments along these lines a fair hearing. It is also true, as Dufresne says repeatedly, that classical psychoanalysis—four times a week, on the couch—seems doomed. If not actually dead yet, it is on life support (Burston, 2012.) But it is also important to note that Dufresne himself is not a clinician, and despite the tawdry circumstances of its birth, psychodynamic psychotherapy (of various kinds) still affords many patients considerable insight and relief, and has a very respectable track record when compared to other therapeutic modalities. Dufresne studiously ignores this robust and expansive empirical literature, which has grown enormously since the 1990s, no doubt partly in response to the “Freud wars.”

Still, I do share much of Dufresne’s ambivalence toward Freud. After all, Freud scorned the suggestion that experimental psychology had anything useful or illuminating to contribute to psychoanalytic theory (Roazen, 2000). Yet the mechanistic materialism espoused by Freud’s neurological mentors, Ernst Brucke and Theodor Meynert, and which Freud adhered to throughout his life, was legitimated entirely through a series of ingenious 19th century experiments in physics and biology (Fancher, 1996). Despite this fact, and his own background as a medical researcher, Freud maintained that training in the humanities and social sciences is eminently suitable as a preparation for analytic training, and frequently quoted the works of poets, playwrights, and novelists to “prove” his theories. But in his own estimation, anyway, Freud remained an unwavering positivist, who never doubted that one day, a new generation of scientists would vindicate his ideas, providing a kind of Rosetta stone, or a demonstrably correct and reliable method for translating his major discoveries back into the language of physics and chemistry. What do we do when someone so contradictory demands our credence and our loyalty, and scolds us for our skepticism if we withhold either?

Clearly, before he became respectable, Freud was an outsider’s outsider, because he wanted to have it both ways. He wanted to possess the aura, authority, and prestige of the natural sciences, while theorizing in a way that deified or circumvented all their customary rules of evidence. He wanted to recruit and credential people from the humanities and social sciences, while stubbornly insisting that they were really doing “natural science.” The results, as Jose Brunner pointed out, are intractable ambiguities in the way classical psychoanalytic theory and technique are articulated—sometimes as a hermeneutic (or even an “archeological”) enterprise, sometimes as a kind of pseudo-experimental procedure, and often, improbably, as a heady mixture of both. This fusion (and confusion) of methodological perspectives was sometimes very fertile and fruitful, and sometimes fatal to his enterprise (Brunner, 2000.)

This book is must reading for anyone interested in the history and historiography of psychoanalysis, but it has some minor shortcomings, too. For example, Dufresne claims that Freud’s later, cultural and political works are all unintelligible without taking *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) into account, a claim that is somewhat exaggerated. These books were all intricately intertwined in Freud’s own mind, to be sure. But there are also many features of Freud’s social psychology and his musings on religion and “group psychology”—including his notion of cultural regression, which develops apace after 1920, but in the first instance, antedates the death drive by seven years—that can be applied or critiqued independently of his theory of the death drive (Baumeister, Dale, & Sommer, 1998; Billig, 1999, Brunner, 2000). I also disagree with some of Dufresne’s remarks concerning Freud’s theory of anti-Semitism, and his characterizations of Erich Fromm and

Herbert Marcuse and their respective takes on Freud's "metapsychology." That said, anyone interested in Freud's life and times will find this an extremely rewarding book.

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