The Baby and the Bathwater: Some Thoughts on Freud as a Postmodernist[1]

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ABSTRACT

Although many specific psychoanalytic ideas are tied to outdated energy concepts, the core of Freud's thinking reflects in many ways pioneering postmodern insights compatible with current cognitive and constructivist ideas and neurophysiological brain research. This paper shows how some psychoanalytic concepts such as the unconscious, the human need for meaning making, a divided rather than unitary self, the human tendency to self-deception and the importance of early life experiences have all acquired increasing importance, albeit sometimes in a modified form, in our current understanding of human behavior and human development. Traditional psychoanalytic therapy is questioned, but it is pointed out that the humanistic values and attitudes underlying psychoanalytic treatment continue to be honored in most non-biological therapeutic approaches.

It has been said that Freud's[2] ideas reflected the enlightenment era that elevated reason, rationality and the scientific method, the romantic era which emphasized the dark irrationality of the human soul, as well as the modernist era from which he took his hydraulic and steam engine metaphors. Indeed he had hoped that psychoanalysis would be recognized as an objective science undergirded by empirical research. It is possible that psychoanalysis owed its growing acceptance not to being a revolutionary thought movement, but precisely because its ideas reflected its culture in compelling ways (Cushman, 1995). Michel Foucault (1976) has pointed out, for example, that in spite of popular legend, nobody was actually shocked by Freud's sexual theories, but on the contrary, they mirrored the nineteenth century obsessional preoccupation with sexual matters not unlike our century's embeddedness in themes of violence. Yet, while Freud was thus a man of his time, he was also in many ways a postmodern pioneer. I shall highlight those aspects of his theory that are compatible with this, our current paradigm, encompassing the cognitive and neuroscientific revolution as well as social constructionism. I will thus focus more on the baby, rather than on the bathwater of psychoanalytic theory, selecting for discussion, by necessity, only a few ideas of the large body of psychoanalytic theory and practice.

Meaning Making

The current psychological and therapeutic literature revolves around the concept of meaning-making. According to the developmental constructivist Robert Kegan (1982): "the process of being human is the process of meaning-making" (p.12).

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2. All references to Freud refer to: *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (1953-1974). James Strachey Ed. London: Hogarth Press

Freud seems to have anticipated this development in certain ways since the treatment of psychoanalysis has precisely been directed at investigating the patient's individual, idiosyncratic ways of making meaning, i.e., of interpreting his or her experiences in the social world. By implication, psychoanalytic theory thus agrees with the idea that our perceptions are constructed and filtered through our thoughts and feelings, shaped through individual life experiences as well as by the cultural context that dictates how meaning should be interpreted.

Acrimonious political battles have evolved around Freud's repudiation of his so-called seduction theory. Freud is accused of not believing, around the turn of the century, the early seduction experiences that his patients supposedly reported, eventually preferring to label them as oedipal fantasies. At least three important hypotheses have tried to explain Freud's change of heart, some accusing Freud of cowardice in the face of public opposition to his theory (Masson, 1984) others speculating that Freud, as a loyal son, wanted to protect the reputation of his recently deceased father (Krüll, 1979). The latest chapter in this debate is the assumption that it was Freud himself who suggested to his patients, on a hunch, that they had been sexually molested in their childhood. He needed these accounts because they fitted in with theories which he was then developing and that he only reluctantly gave up when the clinical data did not seem to confirm his theory (Isra'ls & Schatzman, 1993). However much ambiguity there is about Freud's so called seduction theory, we can give him credit for insisting that even childhood seductions are filtered through a child's particular meaning-making frame.

Only about fifteen years ago Donald Spence's (1984) seminal book made a case that it is not historical, but narrative truth that is produced in psychoanalytic treatment with the aim of helping the patient to produce a life story that is sufficiently coherent, plausible and compelling to help the patient to move forward with less inner conflict. But Freud had already originally written repeatedly that the patient's memories are colored by their conflicts, desires and fantasies. It is true that Freud compared the digging up of memories to an archeological expedition, but archaeologists tell us that even archeological material, worn away by the ages, lends itself better to interpreted, i.e., narrative — rather than factual truth. The accuracy, reliability and even existence of repressed memories has recently raised another therapeutic/political storm, leading back to Freud's original speculations (Forrester, 1997).

While still in the realm of meaning making, we want to remember that Freud insisted, perhaps to a fault, that all our psychic manifestations are meaningful, with dreams as the *royal road to the unconscious* as a primary example along with the famous or perhaps infamous Freudian slips.

I believe it was precisely a new opportunity to make meaning out of puzzling behaviors that accounts for the immense popularity of psychoanalytic theory and most specifically its most central concept, the unconscious.

The Unconscious

It is forever being said that Freud discovered the unconscious — a dubious statement on two accounts. For one, the unconscious has a long and honorable pre-Freudian recorded history (Ellenberger, 1970). Second, as postmodernists, we view concepts as constructed rather than discovered. But Freud did put the unconscious on the forefront of the cultural map.

Freud characterized the unconscious as a dangerous force, a veritable cauldron of incestuous and aggressive drives, the source of psychic energy, libido, that needed to be modulated or repressed or sublimated for civilization to be sustained.This particular view of the unconscious might strike some of us as bathwater rather than baby. Yet, there are scholars who have celebrated Freud's view that there are parts of ourselves that are not totally subjugated to socialization and cultural oppression. Others say, in contrast, that culture participated in the very evolution of Homo sapiens and that there are no raw primordial human forces outside of culture (Geertz, 1973).

Gilligan (1996) raises yet another perspective regarding the role of civilization in the suppression of our aggressive drives. He suggests that civilization, far

from suppressing human violence, initiated it at a scale unknown to the earliest human cultures. He views "violence . . . [as] the tragic flaw of civilization" (p. 234).

The unconscious as a seething cauldron might be relegated to bathwater, but when we change the noun word of an unconscious mental structure to ubiquitous mental functioning, the concept has become a major explanatory tool, used by cognitive and neurosciences to describe our thinking. The seething cauldron operating within the rules of illogical "primary process" has been transformed into our Neural Memory Network which guides our actions (Ornstein, 1991). We have been learning that our actions, thoughts, and even higher mental processes — such as those involved in evaluation, judgments, and problem solving — are started by this neuronal network before we even have awareness of our own intentions. We know the results of our cognitive activities but not the processes that lead us there. Naturally our responses are informed by our memories, life experiences, and knowledge of the world, which have formed our neural pathways in the first place, but since these processes are no longer deliberate, we may call them unconscious (Campbell, 1989). It seems our mind functions more like a jazz band in which many independent players have to harmonize, rather than a symphony with a conductor in charge. At most, some scholars think, worrying about free will, the neural system may have some last- minute veto power (Spence, 1996).

These unconscious processes also include the tacit knowledge (Guidano & Liotti, 1983) of how to process information, how to remember things and how to construct an infinite number of sentences once we know a language. All of this occurs automatically without our conscious participation and even without our ability to reconstruct these processes.

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Neuroscientists teach us that perception proceeds along a two-step encoding process: stimuli enter our nervous system, they are scanned along multiple dimensions, and a decision is made to activate them or not, depending on our purposes, but whether they are activated or not, they remain in our memory system (Campbell, 1989). Intuition seems to be the result of having acquired such inactivated information and it may help to inspire us and to solve difficult problems (Bowers, 1984, 1987). Yet, the negative side of the subliminal stimuli, which influence our decisions outside of our awareness, is that they make us extremely vulnerable to manipulation by politicians, advertisers, and the media in general, requiring constant vigilance. Sometimes we are told to follow our heart in how we rear our children, or make difficult decisions, but it seems, the heart is a very unreliable guide. Only such a two-step encoding process allows us to speak about defenses.

Defense Mechanisms

We cannot ward off information unless part of us knows what to ignore. Freud certainly did not invent the human propensity for self-deception when faced with too much psychic assault on one's self-concept. We find it already in *Aesop's Fables*, going back to the old Greeks — remember the fox who thought the grapes she could not reach were too sour? It is a good example of how many psychoanalytical concepts were an extension of folk psychology, albeit in a systematic and modified way, and then in turn made an indelible imprint on our current cultural beliefs, in a perfect cybernetic circle.

Social psychologists have expanded the notion that we have little capacity for true introspection and that the analysis of situations and appraisal of circumstances goes on mainly at the non-conscious level (Nisbett and Wilson, 1977). Indeed we are usually required to act and respond much too quickly to allow for conscious deliberations.

When people are asked for the reasons for their behavior, they give plausible reasons for their likes, choices, and decisions — ones they have learned from their culture and subculture — which may or may not have anything to do with the presumed "real reasons" if indeed there is such a thing. Let us remember that all explanations are based on some interpretations. Other people's explanations may appear to us logical and compelling, indeed plausible, or else they are classified as lame excuses, self-deceptions, called defenses, in psychoanalytic language.

In a postmodern age, with many possible truths, defenses become the construction of reasons that we cannot sell to other people or sometimes not even to ourselves. People are called mad, bad, and sick when they develop meanings that they cannot sell to the culture at large. You must agree that this theory puts defenses in a very different light.

Modern clinical practice has turned to the possibility of reframing situations as a therapeutic strategy, an activity that usually consists of highlighting a different, perhaps neglected aspect of a situation. A crisis becomes an opportunity, loneliness is framed as solitude to be embraced, nagging is converted to loving concern and a child's misbehavior is defined as an attempt to keep the family together. I think defenses could be viewed as our patients' attempts at reframing situations that are too difficult to bear. It appears unfair that we take the liberty of reframing situations while calling the same strategy self-deceptive when our patients do it, albeit they may not be as skilled in reframing as we have now become.

Repression vs. Dissociation

Central to psychoanalytic theory is the axiom that repression is the first step of every other defense mechanism. Freud initially held a layered image of the mind in which the conscious was on the surface, the preconscious in the middle, and the unconscious at the bottom. Although he later replaced this so called topological theory with the structural theory of id, ego, and superego, the notion of depth psychology continues that prior metaphor. Indeed, even after this theoretical change, Freud continued to locate the truest and most authentic self in the deepest part of the soul with the associated belief that the only true human motives were either aggressive, self-centered, or otherwise anti-social.

Around the turn of the century, Freud and Pierre Janet had been working on similar ideas. Janet pushed dissociation as a major explanatory concept, which Freud shared at the beginning, but then diverged, shifting to the concept of *repression into the unconscious* which continued his depth metaphor with the assumption that the infantile forbidden drives had been driven into this unconscious depth.

Repression and dissociation resemble each other, and some theorists view repression as a variant of dissociation (Kihlstrom & Hoyt, 1984) yet they do have very different theoretical implications (Singer and Sincoff, 1987). Repression evokes an image of horizontal splits and a layered self; dissociation one of vertical splits and a divided self (Mitchell & Black, 1995, p. 217). In a divided self, the benign and malignant aspects of human nature lie side by side, and neither one needs to be more authentic than the other. Trouble arises only if socially unacceptable thoughts or feelings are disowned and unintegrated, lending the more generous and altruistic feelings a sense of dishonesty and inauthenticity. Although Janet's name has fallen into obscurity while Freud's name has ever more expanded over this century, it is the concept of dissociation rather than repression that fits our current knowledge of memory networks.

Knowledge can best be retrieved it if is embedded in a rich associational network. Some theorists think that conscious knowledge is associated with the self as agent (Kihlstrom, 1984). *Dissociated knowledge* is distinguished by lacking such a connection and having its own center of initiation, resulting in out-of-control behavior. If a person had several important centers of mental activity, the result might be a feeling-state of multiple selves. Such independent centers are now thought to get established as a protection against childhood trauma, such as physical and sexual abuse, leaving the person prey to eruption of dissociated experiences (van der Hart, et al. 1993).

This shift from repression to dissociation has important therapeutic implications. While traditional psychoanalytic therapy was a ferreting out of base motives that had been repressed, newer therapy focuses on integrating dissociated aspects of the self. The pro-social aspects of the self need not be repudiated, but only supplemented by its inevitable complementary shadows. When the theoretical image is that of a divided self, no choice has to be made between true and false motives, because the assumption is that human behavior is multifaceted. Therapy aims toward acknowledgment of both the visible and the repudiated parts of the self, with the hope that such wholeness would lead to more satisfying self-expressions.

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Yet, the last word has not been said in the debate whether repression or dissociation are more in line with current neurophysiological findings. In an elegant and concise paper, Eagle (1997) presents some of the research on the physiological correlates of a *repressive style*. Such a style characterizes people who use denial as a major defense against unpleasant affects, or potentially threatening emotional experiences, successfully avoiding anxiety, depression, and its associated psychiatric disturbances. However the cost of such a style, research suggests, is a more vulnerable immune system leading to heightened susceptibility to certain illnesses. Furthermore, research has indicated that expression, rather than repression, i.e., avoidance of thinking about disturbing or traumatic experiences, can lead to improved health. Eagle points out that while a "repressive style" does not duplicate Freud's idea of the repression of infantile drives into the unconscious, it leads back to his pre-drive theory formulations and affirms Freud's conception of the cost and benefits of all defense mechanisms. This empirical research also affirms some aspects of psychoanalytic treatment in terms of facing and airing upsetting experiences. Eagle thinks that such modifications of Freud's original ideas will lead to empirical validation of his creative central insights. Researchers have also found biological correlates of repressive styles, such as a "deficit in interhemispheric transfer of negative affective information" (Eagle, 1997, p.11) following up on Freud's own ambition to integrate meaningful self-expressions with neurophysiological processes.

Freud's important contribution to this whole scheme, regardless of the theoretical distinctions between repression and dissociation, was to label surface behavior as incomplete and deceptive. He helped us to see that surfaces mirror only one aspect of human motives and that each visible aspect of behavior carries within it, its very opposite. This is especially noticeable when prosocial motives are carried too far and turn under our very eyes into their opposite, such as too much love becoming toxic (Freud, S., 1988) or the determination to protect the unborn fetus leading to the murder of mothers who wish to abort them. Freud has taught us to suspect the 100% virtuous among us. Human development seems pervaded by the need to find some kind of balance between opposite strivings, an effort that often misfires.

While Freud rejected the idea of dissociation with its divided self, his psychic apparatus indirectly does pay homage to a multiple self.

The Psychic Apparatus

Postmodern philosophers have deconstructed the well-bounded unitary self of modernity (Anderson, 1997, pp. 217-226; Cushman, 1995; Baumeister, 1987) in line with the neuroscientific observation that the brain has multiple centers of independent decision making (Ornstein, 1991). It is thus arresting that Freud's tripartite self of ego, id, and superego anticipated this development of a many-voiced self.

Freud viewed the id as a reservoir of instinctual energy, the fuel that activated the whole

organism. In an age where we view the brain as supplying its own energy and not in need of fuel, the id could stand for that part of the brain network that activates bodily appetites and perhaps emotions. Or even more interestingly, Eagle (1987) suggests we could think of the id as standing for the disowned shameful and dissociated parts of the self which in psychotherapy, would have to become integrated rather than repudiated, a new version of Freud's dictum where id was, there ego shall be.

Freud saw the superego as a universal internalized conscience, acquired about age four or five, as heir to the Oedipus complex by which he roughly meant, the resolution of oedipal castration anxieties through identification with the father, i.e., his cultural values. Women being faced with the fact of their castration from birth, according to Freud, do not resolve their Oedipus complex and do not develop as absolute and high a level of superego development, lacking the pure sense of justice that men supposedly enjoy. You will not be surprised if I relegate such beliefs to a great deal of bathwater. I do so not only because of this absurd distinction between men and women, but because, first, it connects basic morality, meaning humanness, a wish to please, to care and be cared about, to the father, rather than to the mother where such predisposition might be more logically located, and second, because the theory seems to postulate the acquisition of morality as a developmental event, rather than a lifelong learning process. But I want to highlight another, more important point (Loewenstein/Freud, 1985).

I attended a psychoanalytically oriented social work school between 1946 and 1948, immediately after the atrocities of the Holocaust became known, horrors that many of us — including myself and my family — had only escaped by one hair. How can we talk about an internalized conscience in the light of history, I used to ask my teachers, but they looked puzzled and gave evasive answers. A theory of human behavior must include the Holocaust, which I shall let stand for large scale human atrocities in general. The theory of an internalized superego is faulty — and this criticism can be leveled to some extent against other psychoanalytic ideas — because it locates behavior, in this case morality, inside a person rather than in the sociocultural context where, in my view, it belongs.

Most people seek approval from others in their reference groups and few people are independent enough to make judgments that are contrary to what is generally accepted morality — the law of the land. Only such an understanding of morality can explain the atrocities of human history (Arendt, 1964). Locating morality and social justice inside individuals, rather than inside the society and culture and structural arrangements that shape people's values, strikes me as a conservative dubious position.

Eagle (1987) thinks that the Freudian superego, just as the id, is a good metaphor for the grim beliefs of childhood carried unexamined into adulthood, and that its very category as a separate psychic structure fits its dissociative function. It strikes me as a good use for that Freudian concept. This leads us directly to yet another meaning, that the unconscious has currently acquired.

The Cognitive Unconscious

The Freudian unconscious was full of uncontrolled emotions. I do not know why Freud who was so governed by rationality gave such short shrift to cognitive processes that even he thought were only the result of conflicts between the id and reality. Many of us have come to think that unintegrated beliefs are as troublesome as unintegrated feelings. It could thus be useful to distinguish cognitive unconscious processes (Eagle, 1987). There are, for one, the grim beliefs and rules that may have been acquired in childhood, remained undiscussed and unsymbolized and therefore uncontested and not fully conscious (Weiss, 1982). Eagle (1987) suggests that separation anxiety, survivor's guilt, and self-defeating patterns may all be the outcome of certain irrational "if/then" rules that we have unconsciously learned. A whole system of therapy has been established about the association between pessimistic beliefs and depression (Beck, 1976). It seems we fare better wearing rose-colored glasses (Taylor & Brown, 1988).

Apart from grim beliefs, there are, second, the multitude of cognitive unexamined cultural

assumptions in which we are embedded and which we take for granted. Our culture has divided us into two arbitrary genders, into hetero- and homosexuals, into several races, into tribal allegiances, into normal and abnormal — all distinctions which could be fashioned in some other ways (Freud, 1994). The process of consciousness raising, practiced in the early feminist days and continued by postmodern thinkers, is a process that re-examines these taken-for-granted cultural categories and assumptions.

The Baby of Psychoanalysis

In the vigorous rejection of Freud's instinct theory, and the idea that attachment only grows *out of* instinctual satisfactions, currently popular psychoanalysts like Stephen Mitchell (1988) have substituted a relational psychoanalytic theory for the former drive theory. In contrast to Freud, but in line with British object relations theorists, it views all human motivation from infancy on, as concerned with seeking and maintaining attachments as an essential wired-in human propensity. All other human needs are thought, here, to be secondary to that primary one. Perhaps this fits in with Stein Bråten's (1988) thought that infants are born with a companion-space.

There are other writers who elevate striving for competence or self-esteem as the overriding human motivation, and yet there are others who warn us away from seeking such overriding motives (Eagle, 1984). Some current infant researchers think that the pendulum of ignoring biological considerations has swung too far. They point to the vital part that the mother figure plays in maintaining homeostasis and a moderate arousal level, protecting the baby from too much excitation, yet providing sufficient forms of tactile, perceptual, and cognitive stimulations. These theorists think that the provision of these stimulations leads to well-being and therefore creates bonding, rather than emphasizing the inborn need for bonding (Eagle, 1993).

Freud's contention that our childhood experiences fatefully determine our adult character is a restatement of beliefs that were already suggested in the Bible. I consider it an uncomfortable and problematic axiom, but it has recently seen a revival, or let us say reinforcement, in many quarters. The newer versions of Freudian determinism have even moved the fateful years from Freud's three- and four-year-old Oedipal period to infancy. For example, Daniel Stern (1986) describes vividly how experiences become yoked in infancy to happy and painful emotions, with the possibility that those associations become quite rigid, for example an association between attachment and mistreatment. Bråten (1984) talks of emotional memory that becomes embedded in the body. Many of us have become persuaded that early attachment patterns become internalized as so strongly suggested by the British object relations, that they establish working models throughout life (Bowlby, 1988) and that they also create predictable chain reactions (Sroufe, 1991). Our new interest in post traumatic stress disorders strikingly supports this emphasis on the formative nature of childhood, at least when it is traumatic (Hermann & van der Kolk, 1987). Early trauma, in psychoanalytically based trauma treatment, needs to be uncovered and then integrated into the individual's main neuronal network, rather than remain rigidly dissociated in forms that limit, distort, and block unfolding development. Determinism seems to win out, at least in cases where traumatic experiences have occurred. On the other hand, an impressive body of research (Rutter & Rutter, 1993) points to discontinuities in development. It suggests that most children can survive minor traumas and less-than-excellent parenting, allowing personality to develop largely flexibly and adaptive to ongoing experiences.

This may be the moment to introduce Freud's emphasis on infantile sexuality, which is said to have shocked the good burghers of Vienna. The latter seems unlikely, given that much of childhood education had long been concerned with getting children over bad habits. The idea that infants are sensuous creatures and that caretakers' attitudes toward their bodies importantly contribute to their self-image and their later sexuality deserves to be respected. Freud is currently given credit for having paid attention to the body which other newer therapeutic theories have neglected. Freud's convic-

tion of the centrality of sexual motivation strikes me as very androcentric. Only a man could have invented a theory in which sexuality has such a central role, going along with Ethel Person's (1983) suggestion that male identity leans on sexual expression which therefore becomes paramount to a sense of self, which is not true for women.

Psychoanalytic Treatment

I will end this paper by saying a few words about psychoanalytic treatment and its development. I find it quaint, at my age, that some people are willing to lie on a couch, four or five times a week over several years in search of mental health, happiness, inner harmony, etc. I might understand such extreme measures being justified for deeply troubled people, but psychoanalysis has proven itself either ineffective or noxious for such people. It was initially only recommended for predominantly well- functioning persons, although this has changed with later modifications (Kohut, 1984). We must also remember that the increasing length of psychoanalysis has been a historical development, probably about to be eclipsed. I also object to a treatment that creates unusual dependency and often even unrequited love, while it has the patient's autonomy as a goal. I am suspicious of all processes in which means and ends are contradictory. So far the bathwater.

The baby to be valued, however, is that Freud substituted a benevolent talking cure for the destructive and punitive treatments of his time. Moreover, psychoanalytic treatment strategies keep reappearing in different

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therapeutic schools with quite different theoretical frames. Family therapists think, for example, that they have invented such counterintuitive techniques as prescribing *the symptom*, but Freud invented them before they did. Depressed patients were not cheered, angry patients were not morally exhorted; but invited to air their feelings to the fullest extent. When patients developed a passionate love/hate relationship with their therapist, Freud called it transference and rather than stifling it, he simply elevated it to the centerpiece of his therapy. Narcissistic patients were not scolded for their self-absorption, but invited to submit to a form of treatment in which self-absorption was a central prescription. Some of these techniques have meanwhile been questioned, but they were originally creative leaps.

Modern constructivist and narrative therapeutic interventions have surprisingly many areas of overlap with psychoanalytic therapies (Anderson, 1997; Gustafson, 1992). They are all nonpunitive, and nonjudgmental, a bedrock attitude introduced by psychoanalysis. They are all reluctant to be too goal oriented, in that they do not focus on symptoms but introduce new distinctions through novel questions — in the form of interpretations in psychoanalysis. They all presume that patients do the best they can, given their history of emotional and cognitive learning. There is agreement that pathology, however self-destructive, is a solution to a problem that an individual faces. Psychoanalysis has resemblance to the newest postmodern schools of narrative therapy which is about helping patients escape a negative life story of which they have become captive, and construct a coherent productive and optimistic new story which will enrich their sense of self (Edelson, 1994; Anderson, 1997).

Freud wanted the psychoanalyst to be a detached scientist ready to make correct interpretations; as well as an archeologist digging to the depth of the unconscious, and even a detective ferreting out true motives and dangerous self-deceptions. All of these roles have been fundamentally challenged. Yet, we can admire Freud as a pioneer for having espoused as long as one hundred years ago, a benign

healing method that involved the telling of stories.

The Freudian legacy is in some ways a cloudy one (Crews, 1993). I would prefer to think that my grandfather's overweening ambition had not damaged his integrity. It is also possible that few of us could survive the intense scrutiny that Freud's life has received, with an examination of every careless comment in his innumerable letters (Freud Museum, 1992), airing of every thoughtless and unkind act that he ever committed. When I was almost fourteen years old and Hitler entered Vienna, I asked my teacher of religion why God allowed Hitler. He explained: "*If your grandfather makes certain decisions, you don't question them. The same is true for God.*"

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