

# Psychotherapy reading list

(or, Should I go into therapy?)

## **Against Therapy, Jeffrey Masson, Flamingo 1992**

To my mind Masson is a genius. A timely critique of psychotherapy. He looks at the historical roots of therapy and present day practice and finds dishonesty everywhere. He doesn't offer an alternative and those reading this book who are 'in' therapy may feel he isn't addressing them. It is not a self-help book; though he does tentatively suggest that supportive groups of people who have had similar experiences offering self-help is the best way to provide support .

## **Why Freud Was Wrong: Sin, Science and Psychoanalysis, Richard Webster, Fontana 1996**

Quite a long book. In parts excellent. Webster carries out a detailed forensic examination of the letters and texts of Freud and demonstrates his lying. The book contains some shocking material about the 'cocaine episode' - something not widely advertised by psychotherapy. Freud recommended a cocaine treatment for a case of morphine addiction and when the patient became addicted to cocaine as well did not admit this but rather claimed the treatment a success. Even more shocking is the case of the botched surgery he arranged for a young girl apparently based on some mistaken ideas about the role of the nose in some neuroses. Webster argues that Freud had a deep-seated psychological need to become famous and wealthy and distorted his work repeatedly until he found a way to do this.

There is also a clear and convincing though theoretical exposition of the dynamics at play between a psychoanalyst and their patient.

Really, this book can't be praised enough. There are two matters I would take issue with; having done irreparable damage to psychoanalysis Webster concludes rather strangely that he isn't against all psychotherapy and some is quite good. Since most modern psychotherapy has its roots in Freudian analysis this is odd. Secondly, he states that anyone who says that Freud has some merit is making the mistake of still holding on to some 'residual piety' . He doesn't really demonstrate this; to show that Freud lied about matters, that his theories tend to depend on a kind of circular logic where Freudian theories are used to interpret material which is then used to prove the theories, to show that his patients didn't recover is all great. But it doesn't totally demolish all of Freud's insights. I found myself reading the passages from Freud which Webster quotes and often thinking that there were psychological insights here of some value - while not accepting the system (or religion as Webster might have) of the psychoanalytic church.

Webster ends with a call for a new kind of 'holistic positivism'. While claiming to be a positivist he does offer a correction - which allows what some might call common-sense or intuition to guide empirical science. I haven't done this part of the book justice I am aware.

Despite its faults a devastating take-down of psychoanalysis.

### **Therapy Culture, Frank Furedi, Routledge 2004**

An insightful work of force and scholarship. A profound critique of contemporary culture. Furedi looks at how emotionalism and the values of therapy are becoming pervasive. He argues that far from this being an emotional liberation the tendency to 'get it out into the open' is in fact a way of making emotions shallow. He argues that the professionalisation of emotional handling (how often do we read of survivors of any disaster that they are 'receiving counselling'?) is linked to a process of targeting informal relations. All this contributes to a diminished sense of selfhood.

His critics from within the psychotherapy camp say that Furedi is being 'nostalgic for the fifties' but this slinging an emotional 'diagnosis' at him rather than offering a rational criticism seems rather to support Furedi's view of the trivialisation inherent in 'Therapy culture'.

This book is essential reading for anyone trying to understand where we are at.

### **H. J. Eysenck, Decline and Fall of the Freudian Empire, 1985**

Written from the point of view of a behaviourist. I was surprised by the imagination and humanity of this work. Eysenck offers a very useful critique of Freudian dream theory and a general overview of the unscientific nature of psychoanalysis without sounding like he does not value the realm of literature and art. In itself a sufficient take-down of psychoanalysis.

### **Jeffrey Masson, The Assault on Truth: Freud's Suppression of the Seduction Theory, Ballantine Books 2003**

Freud's initial theory of hysteria and neurosis was the somewhat astonishing claim that these always resulted from childhood seduction - what we would now call child sexual abuse. Subsequently he changed this theory; the seductions his patients had described to him were in fact phantasies. The theory finally emerged as the Oedipal theory; children phantasise about sexual union with the parent of the opposite sex, development involves a healthy repression of these feelings. Neurosis occurs when the repression goes wrong in some way. Masson argues that the dropping of the seduction theory marks a shift in Freud's work from pioneer to fraud. The seduction theory was unpopular and unlikely to bring him many friends. This is an important work; psychoanalysis and in its soft-packaging variant of

psychotherapy continues to this day (despite appearances to the contrary) to ignore the abuse suffered by patients and indeed often to perpetrate further abuse.

Masson again shows a deep understanding of what psychoanalysis is all about.

**Nietzsche, Genealogy of Morals, (1887. Various editions. e.g. Oxford World Classics, 1996)**

In the third essay 'What is the meaning of Ascetic Ideals' Nietzsche offers a critique of Christian priests. The underlying context is his theory of two moralities; a morality of the noble, ascendant, people and a different morality of the slaves, the downtrodden and humble. He describes the priest as the guardian of the ascetic ideal, an ideal which "is derived from the protective and healing instincts of a degenerating life". This essay is intended as a criticism of the ascetic ideal and its embodiment in the person of the Christian priest. Without any changes at all the criticism rings out too against psychotherapy. The priest offers consolation, he "renders the sick to a certain extent harmless" (Chp. 16, p107 in above edition), he uses an excess of emotion to anaesthetize pain, he enjoins people to feel a Christian love of their neighbour. This all comes from weakness and a degenerating life-force, not strength. From Nietzsche's point of view (were he to have lived to see the rise of psychotherapy) psychotherapy can be seen perhaps as the last gasp of Christian, ascetic, morality.

**Anti-Oedipus, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, 1984 The Athlone Press**

A difficult work which presumes some knowledge of psychoanalytic trends. The essential critique seems to be that the productions of the unconscious are first and foremost just that - the productions of 'desiring machines'. The authors eschew the interpretative approach which is used in their view to castrate patients. The Oedipal theory is seen as a chain, hung round the neck of the patient - something which he must conform too to get better. In fact while the parents are important to the child they are not the sole points of reference for the child's developing libido, there is no three-point system in reality. The child engages with all the world. The prevalence of the Oedipal theory in psychoanalysis is linked to a de-historicisation in psychoanalysis.

It isn't clear to me if the authors believe in psychoanalysis but are trying to purge it of the Oedipal theory or whether they don't accept psychoanalysis at all. *I will expand this review later.*