

Review: Burston, Daniel (2007). *Erik Erikson and the American Psyche: Ego, Ethics, and Evolution*. Lanham, Maryland & Toronto: Jason Aronson, paperback, 219 pages.

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Born in Israel, Daniel Burston grew up in Toronto and completed his doctorate at York University under the direction of Paul Roazen. I recall serving in the late eighties as one of the examiners at his defense of his thesis on Erich Fromm, later published as the first of a series of publications on Fromm (Burston 1991), R.D. Laing (Burston 1996, 2000), critical responses to the controversial film *The Passion of the Christ* (Burston & Denova [Eds.], 2005), and other topics. At the time, I confess I lacked the prescience to anticipate that he would develop over the next decade or so into an historian of psychoanalysis of the first rank. *Erik Erikson and the American Psyche* establishes him as, in addition, a perceptive psychoanalytic thinker in his own right, an important cultural critic or public intellectual, and an elegant and engaging writer.

Burston describes how, after enjoying considerable celebrity both within and outside psychoanalysis, by the mid to late seventies Erikson's reputation and influence went into decline owing, in part at least, to a savage attack on his work and his character by Marshall Berman (1975) that was followed by a range of critiques by other authors, including Roazen (1976), that Erikson failed to adequately rebut and from which he never quite recovered. Berman depicted Erikson as what Rycroft (1985) called a father ablator due to his dropping of his Jewish adoptive father's name (Homberger) for one that seemed to both deny his Jewishness and imply self-creation (Erik Erik's son). Burston reviews all this in a balanced and sympathetic way, providing for this theorist of identity, identity crisis and identity diffusion the biographical context insufficiently appreciated by Berman and other critics.

Drawing heavily on Friedman's (1999) authoritative biography and other sources, Burston describes how Erikson's Jewish mother had lied to her son about his paternity (claiming Homberger as his father) and when her lie was discovered lied again (claiming as the father her former husband, Salmonsens, who had deserted her and subsequently died). When in turn that lie was exposed, she refused to the end of her life to reveal the true identity of her son's father. While both she and her Jewish husband were short and dark, Erik was blonde, blue-eyed and unusually tall. He had been mocked and rebuffed by the Jewish community as a boy and only ambivalently accepted by his adoptive father. He overheard whisperings among both his mother's and his adoptive father's relatives regarding the mystery of his paternity.

No wonder Erikson developed a severe, near psychotic, adolescent identity crisis, one that he was eventually able to creatively transform into his acutely empathic understanding of the conflicts and crises of adolescence and youth, much as Harry Stack

Sullivan had been able to creatively utilize his adolescent psychosis as a source of insight into schizophrenia. Burston points out that, regrettably, the decline of Erikson's influence coincided with the pharmacological revolution in psychiatry, so that today's troubled adolescent tends to be quickly medicated, often without receiving the kind of detailed and empathic psychosocial investigation and understanding Erikson advocated and offered.

As if the mystery surrounding his paternity were not confusing enough, Burston informs us that Erik's Jewish mother was an avid reader and admirer of Kierkegaard and urged her son to revere the existential core of Christianity. Erikson imagined his father to have been a Danish Christian. He married Joan Serson, a devout Canadian Anglican whose influence contributed to his gradual move toward Christianity. Although never baptized, in his later years he was apparently attending Episcopal services with Joan and engaging in ongoing conversations with their parish priest.

Burston outlines Rycroft's (1985) idea that it is not unusual for people, future analysts included, to be drawn to psychoanalysis precisely to attempt to recreate themselves by attaching themselves to substitute parents (their analysts) of their own choosing (a kind of enactment of the family romance). But Burston points out that rather than being a father ablator Erikson was a father seeker, finding admirable substitute fathers in Freud, Luther, Gandhi and Jesus (another figure of somewhat uncertain paternity).

In Burston's view, it was Erikson's deep, filial loyalty to Sigmund Freud, not so much to his daughter Anna who had trained him, that caused him to downplay and even obscure the depth of his revisionist departures from Freudian, ego psychological orthodoxy. In extending Freud's stages of epigenetic development through adolescence, youth, young adulthood, the middle years to old age, Erikson implied a far greater capacity for development and change beyond childhood than Freud acknowledged. In addition to significantly broadening the conceptualization of the conflicts and crises of each stage, for Erikson the bodily zones which for Freud were the *sources* of the drives became instead simply *vehicles* for varying modes of relatedness.

All in all, despite his deep respect for the master, Erikson was in fundamental disagreement with what he described as Freud's "centaur model of man" as a creature half beast and half human, his conception of the fundamental human conflict as one between the forces of nature and those of culture, his view of our sociality as something not in itself biologically grounded but rather superimposed upon our biology, and his projection of our distinctively and perversely human aggression onto the "beast" in us when, as Erikson recognized, only humans are beastly while animals never are. In Burston's estimation, it was Erikson's deep need for belonging and acceptance by the psychoanalytic "family" that caused him to minimize such fundamental differences instead of elaborating the lucid critique hidden in his excessively polite and deferential writings.

With few exceptions, psychoanalysis has from the beginning attempted to cloak itself in a "value-free" scientific garb and to obscure what Philip Rieff (1959) saw clearly enough: that Freud's was "the mind of a moralist." The psychoanalytic enterprise has an

intrinsically ethical dimension: “Where id was there shall ego be. It is a work of culture, not unlike the draining of the Zuider Zee” (Freud, 1933, p. 80). Erikson saw this clearly, writing that “Any psychotherapist ... who throws out his ethical sentiments with his irrational moral anger, deprives himself of a principal tool of his clinical perception” (Erikson as quoted by Burston, p. 153). His formulation of the psychoanalytic theory of development as a process in which successful transcendence of the conflict and crisis at each epigenetic stage results in the development of a particular *virtue* (hope, will, purpose, competency, fidelity, love, caring, wisdom) threatened to undermine the positivistic facade that psychoanalysis had adopted to disguise its ethical existentialism. Burston points out that left-wing critics like Berman and Roazen viewed such talk of virtues as a regressive attempt to reintroduce a pre-psychoanalytic, conservative moralism into a discipline that, in their opinion, it had transcended. In my view, it entailed a forthright admission of what psychoanalysis had always intrinsically been.

Burston writes that “by the early to mid-sixties Erikson felt the manifest inadequacy of Freud’s theory of conscience” (p. 63) as constituted in early childhood during the resolution of the Oedipus complex and not changing or developing appreciably after that. For Freud conscience initially consisted of two intrapsychic agencies. The superego as “heir to the Oedipus complex” involves turning aggression toward the oedipal rival against the self, generating self-punishment. The ego ideal as “heir to primary narcissism” involves projection of perfectionism into the future and onto idealized others, generating shame when the ego fails to live up to its ideals. Erikson attempted to undo Freud’s later merging of the two under the single term superego, reinstating the ego ideal as the positive and the superego as the negative conscience.

Erikson’s attempt to build on the ego ideal as a mature or positive conscience, in contrast to the cruelly punitive superego, fails to recognize that superego and ego ideal are ultimately inseparable. Failure to live up to one’s ego ideal results in superego attack for this very failure. Freud was quite right to merge them for they are two sides of the same coin. Both superego and ego ideal, negative and positive conscience, generate immature, essentially narcissistic states of self-flagellation on the one hand and shame or self-mortification on the other, neither of which are of any use to the injured party. Such self-preoccupied states of shame and self-punishment are quite distinct from mature moral concern for and reparative action toward others.

Fortunately, modern Kleinian theory points the way to a solution (Carveth 2006). Both shame and self-punishment operate on the narcissistic, paranoid-schizoid level, as distinct from the depressive anxiety or capacity for concern that obtain on the level of the depressive position. So in addition to the superego and ego ideal that inflict narcissistic states of self-torment, there is the mature conscience capable of transcending such negative narcissism in favor of the mature guilt, depressive anxiety or concern for others that drives toward reparation. Erikson was quite right to identify the failure of Freudian ego psychology to properly understand conscience. Regrettably, due to their unfamiliarity with and bias against Kleinian theory, neither Erikson nor Burston were able to resolve this problem.

Aside from this limitation, *Erik Erikson and the American Psyche* represents a timely reminder of valuable contributions that have fallen into neglect and that are well worth our renewed attention, especially now that we have been alerted by Burston to the penetrating critique that was somewhat obscured by Erikson's excessive need not to give offense to orthodoxy.

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Brief Bio

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