
Thompson presents an attempt at synthesizing phenomenological studies made by Scheler, Sartre, and Merleau-Ponty with the psychoanalytic tradition. Thompson also tries to synthesize the two approaches of Laing and Lacan. Crucial for Thompson's integrating effort is his understanding of the concept of desire. Thompson follows Lacan in using Hegel's interpretation of the concept of desire. This in turn allows for incorporating an essential insight present in Freud's case studies that tends to be absent in his metapsychological studies: Human beings need and look for recognition by others and are therefore emotionally dependent upon others. By conceptualizing human beings in physical terminology through his concept of libido, Freud prevents the conceptualization of the emotional dependence of human beings. Conceptualizing human beings by means of the concept of desire brings that dependence into focus. Thompson does not follow Lacan slavishly, though. He was a student of R. D. Laing and thus is privy to an alternative tradition (which includes the whole school of object relations: Klein, Winnicott, Rivière) with which to think about human psychopathologies.

The book has already received great praise by R. D. Laing, by William Kerrigan (a professor in English), and by John Muller (a clinical psychologist). I want to concentrate on the philosophical relevance of the book.

The philosophical significance of the book is clear from a passage in Chapter 1. Thompson makes it clear he will dispute "the prevailing American image of the ego as 'monarch of the self' [which] was ordained by early twentieth-century thinkers of the American Enlightenment—James, Pierce, Dewey, and Mead—who celebrated the belief that people can change themselves by act of will" (p. 1). Thompson challenges that idea by the following line of argumentation drawn from several traditions: "According to Scheler the child gradually begins to experience himself as himself, with feelings, ideas, and inclinations of his own, through a necessary painful emancipation from his environmental attachments. While this view is not unfamiliar to most developmental theorists, Lacan would propose just the opposite. That is, it is through the child's identifications
and attachments to his environment that his self is formed in bad faith” (p. 15).

For me, the most impressive achievement of the book is that we witness an author succeeding in bringing the reader to see many old problems from a new perspective. The new perspective is presented in a way that is intuitively convincing, because it provides new insights along the way. Particularly enjoyable is Thompson’s redescription of a series of negative emotions. Thompson accepts as a starting point Scheler’s and Sartre’s insistence that emotions are our way of being in the world. Resentment, anger, revenge, hatred, malice, envy, spite, greed, and touchiness are interpreted as results of a failure in early human relations, where the relevant others do not provide the necessary structural support for the child. The child in turn responds by refusing to accept the law of desire (I like to be liked, I am dependent upon others for the sense of my own worth). Thompson thus shows that the child is both victim of others and victimizer of himself, thereby satisfying the basic demand of Hegelian logic: A subject’s position in the world is the result both of the doing of others and of his own doing. Thus Thompson writes: “Resentment is a product of the child’s encounter with others who fail to recognize his demands for recognition and his awesome need for their attention” (p. 71). “Resentment appears through the culmination of a progression of maneuvers the ultimate intention of which is relief from frustration through death of one’s own desire [italics ours]” (p. 73). “One such maneuver is the defensive identification with others whom one feels to have what one lacks. The purpose of the maneuver is to obscure the difference between me who lacks something and the other who seems to have something. This maneuver is however reminding the deprived person that the other is not so deprived. He then becomes compelled to downgrade that other. The result is that the emotionally deprived person now subverts his desire by denying the value of its object” (p. 76).

Thompson then continues with a redescription of the positive feelings of, for instance, joy as only “giving ourselves a rest” (p. 79). For me this is a less convincing thesis. It is also a far shorter passage and less rich in new insights.

There are also a number of rich theoretical insights in the book. Thompson gives us a reason why aggressivity is symmetrical to the mirror stage. Lacan indeed makes that claim. Here is the way Thompson provides the reason for the claimed symmetry in Lacan: “[In the mirror the child] perceives himself outside himself as a unified gestalt in marked contrast to the internal fragmentation. At one stroke the child experiences