

Psychoanalysis and Theism

Adolf Grunbaum

Introduction

The topic of "Psychoanalysis and Theism" suggests two distinct questions. First, what is the import, if any, of psychoanalytic theory for the truth or falsity of theism? And furthermore, what was the attitude of Freud, the man, toward belief in God? It must be borne in mind that psychological explanations of any sort as to why people believe in God are subject to an important caveat. Even if they are true, such explanations are not entitled to beg the following different question: Is religious belief justified by pertinent evidence or argument, whatever its motivational inspiration? Freud's usage, as well as stylistic reasons of my own, prompt me to use the terms "religion" and "theism" more or less interchangeably, although in other contexts the notion of religion is, of course, more inclusive.

Freud declared himself to be an atheist. But I submit that when he offered his psychological account of religious allegiances, he did not succumb to the temptation of arguing for atheism by begging the question. He understood all too well that a purely psychological explanation - however unflattering - of why people embrace Judaism, Christianity or Islam does not itself suffice to discredit theism. Therefore, I claim, he did not fall prey to the well-known genetic fallacy, which is often called "the reductionism of nothing but." As he himself pointed out, those who commit this error overlook that the validity or invalidity of a doctrine as well as its truth or falsity are still left open by the psychological causes of its espousal. Thus, in a section on "The Philosophical Interest of Psychoanalysis," Freud wrote:

[P]sycho-analysis can indicate the subjective and individual motives behind philosophical theories which have ostensibly sprung from impartial logical work. . . . It is not the business of psycho-analysis [itself], however, to undertake. . . criticism [of these theories]. . . for. . . the fact that [the acceptance of] a theory is psychologically determined does not in the least invalidate its scientific truth. (SE 1913, 13: 179)1

Like Nietzsche before him, Freud had become an atheist in his student days.² Then, in 1901, at the age of 45, he offered his first published psychiatric diagnosis of religion as an obsessional neurosis. He did so in order to

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illustrate his psychological account of superstition (SE 1901,6: 2589). As for the credibility of theism, he had reached a dismal verdict: "it is precisely the elements. . . which have the task of solving the riddles of the universe and of reconciling us to the sufferings of life - it is precisely those elements that are the least well authenticated of any" (SE 1927, 21: 27). But note how careful

he was to stress the logical priority of his atheism vis-a-vis his psychology of theism:

Nothing that I have said here against the truth-value of religion needed the support of psycho-analysis; it had been said by others long before analysis came into existence. If the application of the psycho-analytic method makes it possible to find a new argument against the truths of religion, tant pis [so much the worse] for religion; but defenders of religion will by the same right make use of psychoanalysis in order to give full value to the affective significance of religious doctrines. (SE 1927, 21: 37) .

In the same vein, he declared: "All I have done - and this is the only thing that is new in my exposition - is to add some psychological foundation to the [evidential] criticisms of my great predecessors" (SE 1927,21: 35).

Apparently, Freud will be walking a tightrope. As we saw, he was very much aware that it is one thing to provide a psychogenesis of religious belief, and quite another to appraise that belief epistemologically, with a view to estimating its truth value. Yet, as he just told us, he also claimed that, after all, the psychogenesis of theism can have a supplementary philosophical bearing on the question of the truth or falsity of religion. And he sees his own contribution to the debate as being one of elucidating precisely that supplementary import. Hence, if we are to examine the philosophical case that Freud tries to make for atheism, we must first consider the evidential merit of the explanatory psychological hypotheses on which his psychogenetic portrait of religion relies.

My first task will be to develop the purely psychological content of Freud's theory of religion, but with a view to passing an epistemological judgment on its major psychological assumptions. These pivotal hypotheses are of three main sorts. Yet, only two of these sorts are psychoanalytic in the technical sense. Thus, only two-thirds of Freud's psychology of religion depends on the epistemic fortunes of his psychoanalytic enterprise. Later, I shall endeavor to articulate and appraise his sophisticated effort to harness his psychogenetic account of theism in the service of his irreligious philosophical agenda.

Freud's Psychogenesis of Religion

A short book entitled *The Future of an Illusion* is one of Freud's several major writings on religion (SE 1927,21: 3-56). Just what claims did he make about belief in God by characterizing it as an "illusion"? As he tells us "we call a belief an illusion when a wish-fulfilment is a prominent factor in its motivation, and in doing so we disregard its relation to reality, just as the illusion itself sets no store by verification" (SE 1927,21: 31). Thus, this sense of the term "illusion" is both psychogenetic and epistemological. It requires that the wish-fulfilling character of the belief-content be an important motivating factor in its acceptance, whereas the availability of supporting evidence played no such psychogenetic role. In brief, Freud calls a belief an illusion, just when it is inspired by wishes rather than by awareness of some evidential warrant for it. Hence, as he uses the label, it is psychologically descriptive but epistemologically derogatory.

Yet clearly, it is then still an empirical question of actual fact whether any given illusion, thus defined, is true or false. Someone's wish-inspired belief to have bought a winning ticket to the Pennsylvania lottery may well be pathetically ill-founded, but just may turn out to be true after all. Christopher Columbus's conviction that he had discovered a new, shorter sea-route to the orient was at once wish-inspired and false. In the vast majority of cases, middle-class girls who have believed that a prince charming will come and marry them were concocting mere fantasies. Yet, in a few instances, this hope was not dashed. Hence Freud points out (SE 1927, 21: 30-1) that an illusion is not necessarily false. Nor is a false belief necessarily illusory. For example, the belief that the earth is flat may be induced mainly by inadequate observations, rather than by wishes. To qualify as an illusion, even a false belief needs to have been prompted mainly by a wish, rather than by known evidence.

There is an important subclass of false illusions whose generating wishes are complex enough to include unconscious desires. For example, according to Freud's theory of paranoia, the false notions of persecution entertained by a paranoiac are held to be inspired by repressed homosexual wishes, and by the operation of two unconscious defense mechanisms. Freud uses the term "delusion" to refer to such psychogenetically complex false illusions (SE 1927, 21: 31, 81; 1911, 12: 59-65; 1915, 14: 263-72; 1922, 18: 225-30). Thus, he also speaks of delusions of jealousy, delusions of grandeur, and the delusions associated with heterosexual erotomania.] In brief, every delusion is a false illusion, generated by requisitely complex wishes. Thus, a false illusion can fail to qualify as a delusion, if the desires that inspire it lack the stated psychogenetic complexity. But how do both illusions and delusions matter in Freud's philosophy of religion? They do, because the nub of his own philosophical argument for atheism will turn out to be the attempt to demonstrate the following: The theistic religions are delusions, rather than just illusions; in fact, they are mass delusions in important parts of the world.

It is to be borne in mind that these two technical notions differ importantly from the senses of "illusion" and "delusion" encountered in the *Psychiatric Dictionary* published by the Oxford University Press. By contrast to Freud's wish-laden notion of "illusion," the *Oxford Psychiatric Dictionary* uses the same term to denote a false sense perception produced by a real external stimulus, as in the case of some mirages. Thus, when a straight pencil or glass tube is partially immersed in water, we have the so-called visual illusion that the submerged portion has bent and forms an angle with its free upper part, though it is actually still straight. In virtue of thus being induced by a real stimulus, an illusion in Oxford parlance differs from a hallucinatory sensation, which has no source in the subject's environment, but is produced endogenously.

Evidently, the Oxford sense of "illusion" requires that the perceptually induced belief be false, whereas Freud's wish-laden notion does not insist on a generic attribution of falsity. And instead of requiring a particular external physical object to be the eliciting cause, his concept calls for a psychological state. Later, when we address Freud's philosophical aim, we shall see just how the definition of "delusion" in the *Oxford Psychiatric Dictionary*; seriously diverges from his, no less than its notion of illusion does. In Oxford parlance, it is a matter of definition that there cannot be any mass delusions, but only idiosyncratic ones.

By saying that Freud's psychogenetic portrait of theism depicts it as a collection of "illusions," we have so far merely scratched its surface. That portrayal has at least two other major features.

1. The relevant illusions pertain to the fulfillment of those time-honored and widely shared human yearnings that the theologian Paul Tillich dubbed "ultimate concerns." Thus, in this context, Freud's accent was not on illusions - however strong - that are entertained only temporarily, or by only a relatively small number of people, let alone on more or less idiosyncratic ones. A purely wish-inspired belief that your favorite team will win the Super Bowl does qualify as an illusion in the Freudian sense. But this illusion is both demographically and temporally parochial. By contrast, his theory of religion claims importance for evidentially ill-founded beliefs that envision actual "fulfilments of the oldest, strongest and most urgent wishes of mankind" (SE 1927,21: 30). As he tells us, these beliefs, though still widespread today, were already held by "our wretched, ignorant, and downtrodden ancestors" (SE 1927,21: 33). These forebears, we know, did not have the joys of American football. Therefore, we can refer to the sort of illusion already entertained by our ignorant, primitive ancestors as "archaic," if not as venerable.

2. A further, even more important psychological earmark of theism, in Freud's view, is that this doctrine is engendered by the cooperation or synergism of three significantly different sorts of powerful, relentless wishes. And for each of this trio of wishes, he offers a distinct scenario that specifies their content and mode of operation. Hence let us consider the relevant triad of hypotheses in turn.

As he points out (SE 1927,21: 33), the first set of these psychogenetic assumptions features wish-motives that are largely conscious or "manifest," instead of being the repressed wishes postulated by psychoanalytic theory. Accordingly, this component of Freud's triadic psychology of religion does not rely on any of his technical psychoanalytic teachings. But what are the relevant archaic conscious wishes? He explains eloquently:

[T]he terrifying impression of helplessness in childhood aroused the need for protection - for protection through love - which was provided by the father; and the recognition that this helplessness lasts throughout life made it necessary to cling to the existence of a father, but this time a more powerful one. Thus the benevolent rule of a divine Providence allays our fear of the dangers of life; the establishment of a moral world-order ensures the fulfilment of the demands of justice, which have so often remained unfulfilled in human civilization; and the prolongation of earthly existence in a future life provides the local and temporal framework in which these wish-fulfilments shall take place. Answers to the riddles that tempt the curiosity of man, such as how the universe began or what the relation is between body and mind, are developed in conformity with the underlying assumptions of this system. (SE 1927, 21: 30)

Understandably, therefore, the protector, creator and law-giver are all rolled into one. No wonder, says Freud (SE 1933, 22: 163-4), that, in one and the same breath, Immanuel Kant coupled the starry heavens above, and the moral law within as both being awe-inspiring. After all, Freud asks rhetorically, "what have the heavenly bodies to do with the question of whether one human creature loves another or kills him?" And he answers: "the same father (or parental agency)

which gave the child life and guarded him against its perils, taught him as well what he might do and what he must leave undone" (SE 1933, 22: 164).

Therefore, Freud deems it to be quite natural that man is receptive to the psychological subordination inherent in compliance with authority, especially authority that is claimed to derive from God. In this vein, Freud would presumably say that the Roman Catholic clergy astutely potentiates the religious fealty of its faithful by requiring them to call its priests "Father," to refer to the Pope as "the Holy Father," and to the Church itself as "Holy Mother Church." Again, Freud might adduce that when parents are asked by their children to give a reason for their commands, many an exasperated, if not authoritarian, mother or father will answer with finality: "Because!" No wonder, then, that religious systems too can secure the acquiescence of their believers, if they teach that the will of God is mysterious or inscrutable, and that some of their tenets transcend human understanding. In sum, it is one of Freud's recurrent psychological contentions that theism infantilizes adults by reinforcing the childish residues in their minds (SE 1927, 21: 49; 1930, 21: 85).

But even the liberal Catholic theologian Hans Kring goes so far as to say: "All religions have in common the periodical childlike surrender to a Provider or providers who dispense earthly fortune as well as spiritual health."⁶

The motivational account cited from Freud thus far is not predicated on psychoanalytic theory. Small wonder, therefore, that it was largely anticipated by earlier thinkers. At about age 18, Freud studied philosophy with Franz Brentano. Thereby he was exposed to the ideas of the early nineteenth-century German atheist-theologian Ludwig Feuerbach,¹ whose writings made a lasting impression on him. According to Feuerbach's psychological projection theory, it was man who created God in his own image, rather than conversely. Being dependent on external nature, and beset by the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, man projects his cravings and fantasies outward onto the cosmos into a figment of his own imagination.

Feuerbach took it to be the task of his atheistic theology to demystify religious beliefs by showing in detail how God was an object "of the heart's necessity, not of the mind's freedom." Freud (SE 1927, 21: 35, 37) used psychoanalysis to yield a further demystification by specifying additional, repressed feelings of human dependency on a father figure that would enhance the substance and credibility of Feuerbach's psychological reconstruction of religious history.

Likewise strongly influenced by Feuerbach, Karl Marx wrote: "Religion. . . is . . . the protest against real distress. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, just as it is the spirit of an unspiritual situation. It is the opium of the people.,,⁹ In Marx's time, opium was the most available painkiller and could be bought without any prescription. As he uses the name of this drug, its meaning is largely descriptive rather than pejorative. But Marx appreciated insufficiently that an impoverished nineteenth-century industrial proletariat and peasantry are not the only groups in society that crave supernatural consolation for the trials and tribulations of life. Freud took into account, much more than Marx did, that a good many of the rich and privileged in society also seek religious refuge from the blows of existence. At least to this extent, Freud was closer to Feuerbach's view than

Marx was. Recently, Sidney Hook drew a germane comparison between Feuerbach and Marx, declaring Feuerbach to have been "more profound":

[W]hen Marx says, "Religion is the opium of the people," he is really echoing Feuerbach. In Feuerbach's day it wasn't a disgrace to take opium. It was a medicine, an anodyne. It was the only thing people had to relieve their pain. Feuerbach was really implying that under any system there will be tragedy, heartache, failure, and frustration. Religion, for him (he regarded humanism and even atheism as a religion), serves that function [of relieving distress] in every society. Marx ridiculed this view because he was more optimistic than Feuerbach. He believed that science would solve not only the problem of economic scarcity but all human problems that arise from it. He ignored other human problems. Feuerbach seems to me to be more realistic about most human beings.10

Insofar as Freud's psychogenetic portrayal of religion depicts it as the product of conscious wishes, his account draws, I submit, not only on Feuerbach, but also on common-sense psychology. After all, at least prima facie, it is rather a commonplace that people seek to avoid anxiety, and that they therefore tend to welcome the replacement of threatening beliefs by reassuring ones. Hence, for brevity, we can refer to this component of Freud's triadic psychology of religion as "the common-sense hypothesis," which is not to say, however, that it is obviously true. Each of the other two components of his trinity is a set of psychoanalytic claims, asserting the operation of repressed motives. And yet they differ from each other, because one of them relies on Freud's theory of the psychosexual development of the human individual, while the other consists of ethnopsychological and psychohistorical averrals pertaining to the evolution of our species as a whole. Accordingly, we shall label the psychoanalytic assumptions relating to the individual as "ontogenetic," but will refer to the ethnopsychologica! ones as "phylogenetic."

As previously emphasized, the legitimacy of any psychogenetic portrait of religious creeds depends on the evidential merit of the explanatory psychological hypotheses adduced by it. Even the commonsense component of Freud's triad is subject to this caveat. Invoking the criticisms of his great predecessors, he took it for granted that there is no cogency in any of the arguments for the existence of God offered by believers. But he coupled this philosophical judgment with the daring motivational claim that the faithful who nonetheless adduce such proofs had not, in fact, themselves been decisively moved by them, when giving assent to theism. Instead, he maintained, psychologically this assent is emotional or affective in origin:

Where questions of religion are concerned, people are guilty of every possible sort of dishonesty and intellectual misdemeanor. Philosophers stretch the meaning of words until they retain scarcely anything of their original sense. They give the name of "god" to some vague abstraction which they have created for themselves; having done so. . . they can even boast that they have recognized a higher, purer concept of God, notwithstanding that their God is now nothing more than an insubstantial shadow and no longer the mighty personality of religious doctrines. (SE 1927, 21: 32)

In brief, he is telling us that, motivationally, the dialectical excogitations offered as existence proofs are post hoc rationalizations in which an elaborate

intellectual facade takes the place of the deep-seated wishes that actually persuaded the theologians. Speaking epigrammatically in another context, Freud quotes Falstaff as saying that reasons are "as plenty as blackberries" (SE 1914, 14: 24). Hence, Freud could not have disagreed more with Edward Gibbon, who reversed the order of motivational priority as follows, though perhaps only tongue-in-cheek:

Our curiosity is naturally prompted to inquire by what means the Christian faith obtained so remarkable a victory over the established religions of the earth. To this inquiry an obvious but satisfactory answer may be returned; that it was owing to the convincing evidence of the doctrine itself, and to the ruling providence of its great Author. But as truth and reason seldom find so favourable a reception in the world, and as the wisdom of Providence frequently condescends to use the passions of the human heart, and the general circumstances of mankind, as instruments to execute its purpose, we may still be permitted, though with becoming submission, to ask, not indeed what were the first, but what were the secondary causes of the rapid growth of the Christian church? ll

It would seem to be basically a matter of empirical psychological fact whether the common-sense constituent of Freud's psychogenetic portrait of religion is sound. Yet, it is not clear how to design a cogent test even of this hypothesis. For note that the required design needs to have two epistemic capabilities as follows: (1) It needs to yield evidence bearing on the validity of the functional explanation of religious belief as being anxiety-reducing; presumably this explanation postulates some kind of stabilizing psychic servo-mechanism that reacts homeostatically to psychological threat. Furthermore, (2) the required test needs to be at least able to rank-order the intensity of the wish to escape from anxiety, as compared to the motivational persuasiveness of the theological existence proofs. Perhaps oscillating anxieties of believers who went through cycles of doubt and belief have already gone some way toward meeting the first condition by Mill's method of concomitant variations. In any case, it would seem that an explicitly fideist belief in the existence of God - which avowedly is not based on any arguments - calls for psychological explanation in terms of wish-motives. The second requirement, however, seems to be a tall order indeed, although it does not warrant putting a cap on the ingenuity of potential empirical investigators. It too must be met, because of Freud's bold claim that even the best of the arguments for the existence of God would not have convinced the great minds who advanced them, unless stronger tacit wishes had carried the day, or had prompted these intellects to prevaricate. But note that, so far, Freud's portrayal of the motives for religious belief has studiously refrained from claiming that this belief is false.

[. . .]

Let us turn to the two psychoanalytic ingredients of Freud's triad, consisting of his ontogeny and phylogeny of theism. In their case, we must ask, I claim, even whether there is good evidence for the existence of the repressed wishes postulated by them. Insofar as even the very existence of these hidden desires is questionable, one remains less than convinced, when told that they contributed significantly to the initial genesis and later persistence of religious creeds.

It is a major tenet of Freudian theory that psychopathology is rooted in the psychic conflict created by unsuccessfully repressed desires. Guided by this model of mental disorder, his ontogeny and phylogeny diagnose religion as a mixture of syndromes, featuring oedipal, paranoid, and obsessional elements. Yet he explicitly allowed that there are several interesting differences between, say, the illusions of a paranoiac and religious beliefs. For example, the specifics of the former are idiosyncratic, while the latter are usually shared, sometimes even widely (SE 1907,9: 119-20; 1927,21: 43-4). Let us now consider, in turn, some of the highlights of the ontogeny and the phylogeny.

In 1901, in his *Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, Freud traced superstitions to unconscious causes (SE 1901, 6: 258-60). The psychological mechanism operative here, we are told (SE 1913, 13: 92), is that of transmuting feelings and impulses into external agencies by projection or displacement.

[P]sycho-analysis can also say something new about the quality of the unconscious motives that find expression in superstition. It can be recognized most clearly in neurotics suffering from obsessional thinking or obsessional states - people who are often of high intelligence - that superstition derives from suppressed hostile and cruel impulses [footnote omitted]. Superstition is in large part the expectation of trouble; and a person who has harboured frequent evil wishes against others, but has been brought up to be good and has therefore repressed such wishes into the unconscious, will be especially ready to expect punishment for his unconscious wickedness in the form of trouble threatening him from without. (SE 1901,6: 260)

Obsessional neurosis features relentlessly intrusive, anxiety-producing thoughts, rumination, doubt and scruples, as well as repetitive impulses to perform such acts as ceremonials, counting, hand washing, checking, etc. One might include here perhaps the reported practice of a world-famous logician to cover his handwritten address on envelopes with transparent nail polish as prophylaxis against moisture. The hypothesized causes of a disorder X are said to be the "etiology" of X. Derivatively, the term "etiology" is also used to refer to the pertinent causal hypothesis, rather than to the presumed causes themselves.

[. . .]

Freud's psychopathological ontogeny of theism is not confined to obsessional neurosis. He thought that the Oedipus "complex constitutes the nucleus of all neuroses" (SE 1913, 13: 157, 129). Thus, we learn, the pathogens of obsessional neurosis are interwoven with those of the Oedipus complex. In its so-called "complete" form of ambivalence toward each parent, that complex is produced by the conflict between affectionate sexual feelings, on the one hand, and hostile aggressive feelings of rivalry, on the other, which are entertained toward both parents in the psyche of all children between the ages of three and six.¹² The special focus of these affects is the powerful, protective and yet threatening father, who has replaced the mother in her initial role of providing food and protection (SE 1927,21: 24). Being too disturbing to be entertained consciously, these emotions are repressed.¹³ It may be asked at once how the oedipal conflict can be deemed pathogenically relevant, if all people experience it in childhood, while only some become strikingly neurotic. The Freudian answer is that people

do differ in regard to their success in resolving the infantile Oedipus complex (SE 1925, 20: 55-6). But some ambivalence toward the father figure lingers on into adulthood.

Hence the cosmic projection and exaltation of this authority figure as a Deity in publicly approved fashion has an enormous appeal. As Freud puts it: "it is an enormous relief to the individual psyche if the conflicts of its childhood arising from the father-complex - conflicts which it has never wholly overcome - are removed from it and brought to a solution which is universally accepted" (SE 1927, 21: 30). By the same token, a true child-father relationship is achieved, once polytheism yields to monotheism after man "creates for himself the gods whom he dreads, whom he seeks to propitiate, and whom he nevertheless entrusts with his own protection" (SE 1927, 21: 24).

Indeed, the psychoanalytically fathomed, unconscious wishes of the adult's residual Oedipus complex are held to combine .~)'nergistical{y with the urgent desire for relief from the conscious fears of enduring vulnerability, fears which are life-long intensifications of the child's dread of helplessness (SE 1927, 21: 23-4). The product is the belief in an omnipotent God, who is thought to love any of us, even if no one else does.

[. . .]

But what are the actual empirical credentials of Freud's sexual etiology of obsessional neurosis, and of his oedipal ontogeny of theism? In the context of the conjugal family, this oedipal plot calls for not only an erotic love-hate triangle prior to the age of six, but also a redemptive denouement of the guiltladen parricidal wish by projective exaltation of the father into God. It is a clear moral of my recent book¹⁴ that, far from having good empirical support, at best these obsessional and oedipal hypotheses have yet to be adequately tested, even prior to their use in a psychology of religion. A fortiori, the psychoanalytic ontogeny of theism still lacks evidential warrant, with the possible exception of the psychogenesis of the doctrine of the Virgin Birth of Jesus. Until and unless there is more warrant for the ontogeny, it is surely at least the better part of wisdom to place little explanatory reliance on it, brilliantly suggestive though it may be.

But Freud was not content to confine himself to explanatory reliance on the conscious quest for anxiety-reduction, and on his ontogeny of theism. Rather, he went on to develop a psychoanalytic phylogeny of theism (SE 1913, 13: Essay IV, 146ff). In his view, this historical ethnopsychology is a valid extension of psychoanalysis. He reasoned as follows:

The obscure sense of guilt to which mankind has been subject since prehistoric times, and which in some religions has been condensed into the doctrine of primal guilt, of original sin, is probably the outcome of a blood-guilt incurred by prehistoric man. In my book Totem and Taboo (1912-13) I have, following clues given by Robertson Smith, Atkinson and Charles Darwin, tried to guess the nature of this primal guilt, and I believe, too, that the Christian doctrine of to-day enables us to deduce it. If the Son of God was obliged to sacrifice his life to redeem mankind from original sin, then by the [Mosaic] law of talion, the requital of like by like, that sin must have been a killing, a murder. Nothing else could call for the sacrifice of a life for its expiation. And if the original sin was an offence against God the Father, the primal crime of mankind must have been

a parricide, the killing of the primal father of the primitive human horde, whose mnemonic image was later transfigured into a deity. (SE 1915, 14: 292-3; cf. also SE 1939, 23: 130-1)

Yet there is still the question of how Freud conjectured the motive for the inferred parricide. As he tells us: "Darwin deduced from the habits of the higher apes that men, too, originally lived in comparatively small groups or hordes [footnote omitted] within which the jealousy of the oldest and strongest male prevented sexual promiscuity" (SE 1913, 13: 125). In each of these hordes or families, the dominant male imposed such erotic restraint on his younger and subordinate male rivals by controlling their sexual access to the women of the clan. But this prohibition did not sit well with these rivals. Freud speculates that, driven by their ensuing hostility, and being cannibals, they banded together into a brother clan to kill and eat their own father (SE 1913, 13: 141-2). Yet they soon began to quarrel over the sexual spoils of his harem. Thus, they became highly ambivalent about their parricidal achievement. The memory of the homicide itself was repressed, and thereby generated guilt.

The resulting filial remorse, in turn, issued in two major developments: (1) the delayed enforcement of the father's original edict against incestuous sex within the clan made exogamy mandatory, thereby generating the incest taboo (SE 1913, 13: 5-6), and (2) the prohibition of parricide turned into the expiatory deification of the slain parent. As Freud put it: "the primal father, at once feared and hated, revered and envied, became the prototype of God himself" (SE 1925, 20: 68).

Freud assumed that over the millennia, our primitive ancestors re-enacted the parricidal scenario countless times (SE 1939, 23: 81). And, as a convinced Lamarckian, he believed that racial memories of it, cumulatively registered by our primitive ancestors - but subsequently repressed by them - were transmitted to us by the inheritance of acquired characteristics. Thus, at least each male has supposedly stored this phylogenetic legacy in his unconscious, including the resulting sense of collective guilt over the primal crime (SE 1939, 23: 132). Hence, shortly before Freud's death, he confidently announced that "men have always known (in this special [Lamarckian] way) that they once possessed a primal father and killed him" (SE 1939, 23: 101). He explicitly credits the Scottish biblical scholar Robertson Smith and the anthropologist J. G. Frazer with the recognition that Christian Communion is a residue of the eating of the sacred totem animal, which in turn appeared to Freud to hark back to the eating of the slain primal father (SE 1925, 20: 68).

As he sees it, by combining ethnography with psychoanalysis, he has discerned a third set of strong wishes that unite synergistically with the other two classes of his triad, and make the psychogenesis of belief in God-the-Father the more imperative. Therefore he proclaimed: "We now observe that the store of religious ideas includes not only wishfulfilments but important historical recollections. This concurrent influence of past and present must give religion a truly incomparable wealth of power" (SE 1927, 21: 42).

Moreover, the ontogeny of the Oedipus complex is, at least in its earlier stages, developmentally similar to its conjectured phylogeny. And this psychogenetic parallelism seemed all the more credible to Freud, because he saw it as the psychological counterpart of Ernst Haeckel's biogenetic law. According

to Haeckel, the embryonic ontogeny of each animal, including man, recapitulates the morphological changes undergone by the successive ancestors of the species during its phylogeny. No wonder that Freud felt entitled to regard the early ontogenetic development of moral dispositions like remorse and guilt in each of us as both a replica and a phylogenetic residue of the primal father complex of early man (SE 1923, 19: 37).

At this point, standing at the portal of death in 1939, Freud is ready to deploy his repressionetiology of neurosis, together with his ethnopsychological retrodictions. And he joins them to explain the characteristic irrationality of traditional theism as follows:

A tradition that was based only on communication could not lead to the compulsive character that attaches to religious phenomena; It would be listened to, judged, and perhaps dismissed, like any other piece of information from outside; it would never attain the privilege of being liberated from the constraint of logical thought. It must have undergone the fate of being repressed, the condition of lingering in the unconscious, before it is able to display such powerful effects on its return, to bring the masses under its spell, as we have seen with astonishment and hitherto without comprehension in the case of religious tradition. (SE 1939, 23: 101)

As we learn on the same page, the "return" of the religious tradition refers to the reawakening of the repressed memory of ancestral totemistic parricide. And this reanimation was supposedly effected by two epoch-making episodes, each of which Freud claimed to be historically authentic: First, the murder of Moses by the ancient Hebrews, who rebelled against his tyrannical imposition of the intolerable prescriptions of monotheism; thereafter, "the supposed judicial murder of Christ" (SE 1939,23: 101).

Daring and ingenious though it is, Freud's psychoanalytic phylogeny of theism is dubious, if only because it assumes a Lamarckian inheritance of repressed racial memories. Furthermore, contrary to the uniform evolution of religions required by his account, more recent historical scholarship seems to call for developmental pluriformity.¹⁶ And if there are such differences of religious history, it becomes more difficult to sustain the historical authenticity of the common parricidal scenario postulated by Freud's phylogeny. Overall, Kiingl⁷ emphasizes that hitherto no primordial religion has been found. Indeed, "the sources necessary for a historical explanation of the origin of religion are simply not available." Meissner devotes a chapter¹⁸ to the scrutiny of Freud's psychoanalytic phylogeny of Mosaic monotheism. Writing from the standpoint of biblical archeology, exegesis, and anthropology, Meissner reaches the following verdict: "Subsequent years have subjected the whole area of biblical studies and criticism to a radical revision that makes it clear that the fundamental points of view on which Freud based his synthetic reconstruction were themselves faulty and misleading." ¹⁹

Freud's Argument for Atheism

Having maintained that, psychogenetically, theistic beliefs are illusions, Freud deploys the following dialectical strategy on behalf of atheism: he aims to show that religious illusions, in particular, are very probably false. For that purpose, he deems it relevant - rather than ad hominem - to point out that religious illusions, though still widespread, were already commonly held by our

ignorant, primitive ancestors. We shall designate any beliefs of such primitive vintage as "archaic," for brevity.

Freud makes only very cursory mention of the dread of the "evil eye" (SE 1919, 17: 240). But this belief is presumably archaic and still rampant. According to its adherents, the covetous glances of some persons have the malignant power to injure or kill people and animals, even involuntarily. Among the Greeks and Romans, as well as in the musical *Fiddler on the Roof*, spitting was used as a supposed antidote to the poison of the evil eye. Other gestures too - often intentionally obscene ones - were regarded as prophylactics on meeting the dreaded poisonous individual. By extension, praise for one's possessions or good fortune was thought to be an omen of bad luck. Thus, when I was a boy in Germany, even educated people who reported being in good health would protectively hasten to add the German word "unberufen," which literally means "uncalled for" or "unauthorized." Not to be outdone by Germans, Americans say "knock wood" with equal prophylactic efficacy. Presumably, no one has ever run a controlled study to determine whether envious glances have the pernicious effects envisaged in the evil eye doctrine. But it is safe to say that if there were any such dire effects, the wealthy and successful of this world, who have been known to dread evil eyes, would not fare nearly as well as they actually do. Hence we may conclude that the archaic belief in the evil eye doctrine is false.

How then does Freud invoke the archaic character of theism as a means of discrediting religious belief? He puts it as follows:

To assess the truth-value of religious doctrines does not lie within the scope of the present enquiry. It is enough for us that we have recognized them as being, in their psychological nature, illusions. But we do not have to conceal the fact that this discovery also strongly influences our attitude to the question [of truthvalue] which must appear to many to be the most important of all. We know approximately at what periods and by what kind of men religious doctrines were created. If in addition we discover the motives which led to this, our attitude to the problem of [the truth of] religion will undergo a marked displacement. We shall tell ourselves that it would be very nice if there were a God who created the world and was a benevolent Providence, and if there were a moral order in the universe and an after-life; but it is a very striking fact that all this is exactly as we are bound to wish it to be. And it would be more remarkable still if our wretched, ignorant and downtrodden ancestors had succeeded in solving all these difficult riddles of the universe. (SE 1927, 21: 33)

In context, the opening disclaimer in this statement as to the scope of his inquiry is an ellipsis for his aforementioned tribute to his atheistic predecessors. Presumably, by "religious doctrines," Freud means here beliefs, including totemism and polytheism, that eventuated in theism. And, in view of the phylogenetic history he postulated for theism, that religious belief qualifies as "archaic." Though the word "theism" was apparently coined in a book by Cudworth as recently as 1678, the belief itself antedates the birth of Christ by nearly a millennium, at least among the Jews. In its traditional form, it asserts the existence of an omnipotent, omniscient and omnibenevolent paternal creator - at once immanent and transcendent who is accessible to personal communion with us. This divine being is to be respected, loved and feared. In fact, normally, compliance with His ethical demands holds out the promise of

heaven, though there have been theists who disbelieved in personal immortality. On this construal, at least some forms of Buddhism and Taoism do not teach belief in the existence of God, as was noted by Supreme Court Justice Hugo L. Black in a decision he wrote in 1961.²⁰

To reconstruct the logical framework of Freud's own case for atheism, we can encapsulate his argument in the following syllogism (SE 1933,22: 168; 1927,21: 33):

Premise 1: All archaic, evidentially ill-supported illusions are very probably false.

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Premise 2: Anyone's belief in theism is an archaic, evidentially ill-supported illusion.

Conclusion: Anyone's belief in theism is very probably false.

Note that since Freudian illusions are, by definition, evidentially unwarranted, the modifying adjective "evidentially ill-supported" in the two premises is redundant. But it is there for the sake of emphasis. Furthermore, observe that by talking about the belief-states of all theists, both the second premise and the conclusion are, in effect, making claims about all known versions of theism, except those that no one ever took seriously enough to believe them. Formally speaking, this syllogism is deductively valid, if we can regard probable falsity as a property of some beliefs. Hence the warrant for presuming its conclusion to be true depends, of course, on the epistemic merits of the two premises. In effect, the first premise says that the world being what it is, archaic illusions are, so to speak, too good to be true. The second premise, however, is a terse assertion of Freud's psychogenetic and epistemological thesis that religious beliefs are indeed archaic illusions; it states that these creeds were prompted not by cogent evidence, but by the need to fulfill a trio of "the oldest, strongest, and most urgent wishes of mankind" (SE 1927,21: 30). Freud is making use of the fact that a belief-state can be characterized motivationally, while its content can be appraised as to the evidence for it, if any, and also as to its truth-value.

Consider the first premise. It would seem that he took it to be a legitimate induction from the discreditation of various archaic illusions by scientific advances. But prima facie, one might think that an example of his own from the history of alchemy furnishes evidence against the universal claim of Premise 1, which is that all archaic illusions are probably false. As he points out: "Examples of illusions which have proved true are not easy to find, but the illusion of the alchemists that all metals can be turned into gold might be one of them" (SE 1927,21: 31). When Freud allowed in 1927 that the wish-inspired guess of the alchemists might perhaps be redeemed after all, he was presumably referring to the transmutation of elements known from the radioactive decay of metals of high atomic weight, such as uranium and thorium. Though relevant, let us ignore questions of practical and economic feasibility, and suppose that all base metals can be turned into noble ones, as desired by the alchemists. Then this state of affairs would not refute Freud's first premise, which claims only that any archaic illusion is very like *Iv* to "... " be false, rather than that it is categorically false. Besides, even the Greek and Egyptian alchemists of old probably towered in intellectual sophistication over the members of Darwin's primal hordes. Hence even these early alchemists presumably do not

qualify as primitive and wretched ancestors by Freud's standards. And if not, then the belief in alchemy - though psychogenetically and evidentially an "illusion" for centuries - does not count as an "archaic" illusion.

Anyone who is still inclined to quarrel with Premise 1 will find it sobering to bear in mind how very difficult even science finds it to come up with true theories. Indeed, the history of science - both ancient and modern - is largely the history of discarded theories. Hence even for scientific theories that are now well-supported by evidence, it is a reasonable induction from the past that they, too, will be found wanting in due course. Moreover, success has eluded Karl Popper and others who have tried to develop a technical notion of relative proximity-to-the-truth or comparative verisimilitude, such that consecutive scientific theories would demonstrably get ever closer to being true. As we know, these bleak results have bedeviled the so-called "realist" philosophies of science. Thus, even the Australian aborigines of 12,000 years ago, if now alive, could be looking at Premise 1 undauntedly and say to Freud: "Tu quoque." Therefore, the discreditation of archaic illusions by scientific advances, which presumably legitimates Premise 1, seems to pose a paradox: if the great scientific theories themselves eventually turn out to be false, by what right can Freud, or anyone, rely on them to scorn archaic illusory beliefs as sheer superstitions?

We have reason to think that Newtonian physics, and perhaps even general relativity theory, are partly wrong. But that does not prevent either from yielding otherwise unavailable, often stunningly accurate predictions of, say, the trajectory of the interplanetary Voyager 2, and of Halley's comet. Again, the current theories of neurotransmitters may well turn out to be wrong in some respects. Yet, the fact remains that dopamine and related medications - though of limited efficacy - control the symptoms of Parkinson's disease far more reliably than exorcistic rituals based on archaic illusions, such as shamanism, sorcery, occult art, thamaturgy,

demonology, voodoo, hoodoo, incantation, mumbojumbo, hocus-pocus, and abracadabra. More often than not, the manifestly true predictions made by scientific theories - as distinct from their more speculath.e hypotheses - suffice to discredit archaic beliefs, such as that of the evil eye, which claims small amounts of visible light to be injurious, if not lethal. Thus, such discreditation does not stand or fall with the truth of the major scientific hypotheses themselves. Indeed, in striking contrast to the tenacity with which people cling to illusory beliefs, the methods of the scientific enterprise seem to have the following distinction: they are the only means of choosing theoretical beliefs that allow observational evidence to override, sooner or later, the appeal to wish-fulfillment.

It emerges after all that, though the history of science is the history of abandoned theories, scientific advances redound to the credibility of Premise 1, instead of leaving it devoid of support. Therefore, we can permit that premise to stand.

As for Premise 2, however, we need to recall our earlier hesitations and doubts. Let us grant Freud that theists have produced no proofs for the existence of God that are cogent, either severally or even collectively. Then there still remains the motivational question whether some of the faithful, when giving assent to theism, had not, in fact, been decisively moved by supposed proofs, rather than

by deep-seated wishes. To be sure, the existence of a conscious wish for anxiety-reduction by reassuring beliefs is well attested. Yet it is not clear empirically that every case of religious belief can be attributed psychogenetically either to this wish or to the more speculative unconscious oedipal craving, let alone to the questionable repressed desire to expiate the parricidal guilt of Freud's Lamarckian phylogeny. Note that this caveat in regard to repressed oedipal wishes and parricidal guilt is not a matter of generic doubts as to the psychic operation of a mechanism of repression; instead, the doubts pertain to the existence of the specific sorts of repressed wishes invoked here by Freud, and to their explanatory role as the actual causes of the belief-phenomena he claims to explain. For his part, Freud thought that precisely by being so strong and urgent, his trio of wishes were psychologically theogenic. Anyway, the second premise seems to be the weak link in Freud's deductively valid syllogism.

Still, we can allow that all cases of belief in God may perhaps be inspired by consobus favoritism for consoling beliefs over ominous ones, combined with any repressed wishes that do turn out to have such psychogenetic credentials. [. . .]

Notes

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1 All references to Freud's writings in English will be to the Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, translated by J. Strachey et al. (London: Hogarth Press, 1953-74), 24 volumes. Each reference will use the abbreviation "SE," followed by the year of first appearance, volume number, and page(s).

2 As a young student in Vienna, Freud took a course on the existence of God from Franz Brentano. For details, see W. J. McGrath, *Freud's Discovery of Psychoanalysis* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986), pp. 101-20.

3 J. Laplanche and J. B. Pontalis, *The Language of Psychoanalysis* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1973), p.296.

4 R. J. Campbell (ed.), *Psychiatric Dictionary*, 5th edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), pp. 307-8.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 157.

6 H. Kung, *Freud and the Problem of God* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1979), p. 120, italics added. For a critique of Hans Kung's theological views, see H. Albert, *Das Elend der Theologie* (Hamburg: Hoffmann & Campe, 1979).

7 Reported in P. E. Stepansky, "Feuerbach and Jung as Religious Critics - With a Note on Freud's Psychology of Religion" in P. E. Stepansky (ed.), *Freud, Appraisals and Reappraisals* (Hillsdale, NJ: The Analytic Press, 1986), pp. 231-2.

- 8 Quoted in Stepansky, "Feuerbach and Jung as Religious Critics," p. 223.
- 9 L. S. Feuer (ed.), Basic Writings on Politics and Philosophy, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, Doubleday, 1959), p. 263"
- 10 S. Hook, "An Interview with Sidney Hook," Free Inquiry 5 (Summer 1985): 24-33.
- 11 E. Gibbon, Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire (New York: Peter Fenelon Collier, 1899), p. 523.
- 12 Laplanche and Pontalis, The Language of Psychoanalysis, pp. 282-6.
- 13 O. Fenichel, The Psychoanalytic Theory of Neurosis (New York: W. W. Norton, 1945), pp. 91-'8; Laplanche and Pontalis, The Language of Psychoanalysis, pp. 282-6.
- 14 A. Grunbaum, The Foundations of Psychoanalysis: A Philosophical Critique (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984).
- 15 F. J. Sulloway, Freud. Biologist of the Mind (New York: Basic Books, 1977), pp. 274-5, 439-42.
- 16 Kung, Freud and the Problem of God, p. 67. 17 Ibid., pp. 70-1.
- 18 W. Meissner, Psychoanalysis and Religious Experience (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press), eh. 5.
- 19 Ibid., p. ix.
- 20 Cf. W. Safire, "Sees Appeal," The New York Times Magazine (January 26, 1986): 688.