Freud as a Critic of Religion

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Introduction

1.

After having presented his therapeutic tool in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1899), and developed the topography of the soul in “3 Essays on Sexuality” (1905), Sigmund Freud was ready to take psychoanalytic theory and apply it to the wider domains of human culture. Since 1907, an analogy he perceived between obsessive actions and religious practices urged Freud to start dealing with the religious phenomenon as a neurosis in a series of works. He offered its diagnosis in *Totem and Taboo* (1913) and its prognosis in “The Future of an Illusion” (1927). The last years of his life were devoted mainly to the most controversial application of this critique of religion in *Moses and Monotheism* (1938/9), exemplifying his theories on the case history of Judaism.

The theories Freud propagates in his works on the subject are not less than outrageous. Not only is his criticism of religious beliefs and institutions severe and insensitive; the speculations he conjures regarding religion’s origins are also, scientifically examined, preposterous. Yet, they were to become formative milestones of secular thought and their content is of great cultural importance, if not because of its truth value, then for its mythic status. The story Freud tells in his works is one of the most pregnant and constitutive modern myths which form and embody the critical secular (and eventually not only the critical and secular) view of religion. It deserves, therefore, to be examined in depth; such an examination of Freud’s critical attitude to religion is the main axis of this paper.

The scientific untenability of Freud’s theories of religion owes mainly to the fact that in looking for theoretical support—archaeological, anthropological, and exegetical—Freud relies on some very precarious hypotheses. And if most of this can only be appreciated with the benefit of hindsight, there was one important theoretical presupposition Freud held onto that was the most dubious and unfounded of all; namely, the assumption of an ‘archaic heritage’ — that there are unconscious memory traces of events in the history of a group, which are inherited and active in a collective mind as in the individual psychology.

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This assumption is so unfounded, yet so pivotal to Freud’s work that Ernst Nagel suggested it should serve as the refutation of the whole Freudian Theory: “I must…ask whether the statement that some acquired characteristics are biologically inherited follows from Freudian theory…If it does, and apparently Freud believes it does, and since biological evidence indicates that the statement is false, why does not this fact constitute a refutation of the premises of the argument?”

Yet, Freud clung to it insistently: “…one is tempted to draw cautiously back, but there is no help for it, the attempt must be made – in spite of a fear that it will lay bare the inadequacy of our whole effort.” Or, as he says in Moses and Monotheism, “I must…in all modesty confess that nevertheless I cannot do without this factor in biological evolution…If it is not so, we shall not advance a step further along the path we entered on…The audacity cannot be avoided.”

The idea of an archaic heritage will accompany us, as a secondary axis, throughout this paper.

2. In his writings Freud utilises various critical instruments, as if he attacks religion on all fronts. Because of this, his theories may at times not be consistent with each other. Freud scholars may criticise him for this lack of consistency, try and explain the shifts in his models or try and harmonise them. However, for the sake of a methodological discussion it is precisely this variety of critical weapons in Freud’s arsenal that is fascinating, since it exemplifies different routes in which a critique can venture, and the different forms it can take.

Philosophically, in his works on religion Freud was no systematic critic. We should not necessarily ascribe to him a linear development in his forms of argumentation and therefore not proceed chronologically. Rather, we will try and isolate threads of argumentation which are present in different phases of his thought and read them with philosophical glasses, that is to say, examine them with a view to their methodological character. We will meet a number of epistemological arguments against religion, criticism which is implicit in a cultural-development theory, an argument from analogy, genetic and evolutionist explanations. We will try to

4 It is actually to different problems that Freud refers to here, namely, questions of tying the philogenesis to the Id and the Ego.
6 Moses and Monotheism, SE 23 p.100.
philosophically evaluate these arguments by enumerating objections which were raised or should be raised against them. We will mostly suspend our judgement concerning the truth value and scientific quality of Freud’s critical moves in order to see not what they achieve, but rather what they are trying to achieve. After we have found what seems to be Freud’s most effective critical weapon — the evolutionistic explanation of religion — we will inspect it, in the seventh chapter of this paper, in view of the categories of descriptivity and normativity, freedom and necessity.

Emancipation from Religion

There is one line of argumentation that is not to be found is Freud’s texts. Critics of religion throughout the centuries portrayed religious doctrines as a means to scare the masses into good behaviour, and the idea of God as a deterring force used for social policing. Others described religion as the ‘opiate of the masses,’ given to the masses for the same purpose: to lull them into social order and keep them submissive. Whether religion appears as the carrot or as the stick in their theories, critics present it as a tool for control and power exertion and call for emancipation from it.

Despite his blatant rejection of religion, it is important not to count Freud among such anti-clerical critics. Unlike them, Freud alleges no outright conspiring, cynical abuse of the faith of the masses by ecclesiastic authorities or by other power figures up the social ladder who have some vested interest. He does not see in religion a deliberate deception of the people. According to him, religion is deeply rooted in the human psyche, perhaps too deeply; deeper, in any case, than a mere political scam could account for. It is important, here, to clarify this point because it touches upon a deep problem in his thought of religion.

In an early paper on “‘Civilized’ Sexual Morality and Modern Nervous Illness,”7 Freud gives a short prehistorical account — half symbolic story, half anthropological theory — in which he ties the development of religion with the founding processes of society and culture:

“Generally speaking, our civilization is built up on the suppression of instincts…The renunciation has been a progressive one in the course of the evolution of civilization. The single steps in it were sanctioned by religion; the piece of instinctual satisfaction which each person has renounced was offered

7 SE 9, pp.179-204.
to the deity as a sacrifice, and the communal property thus acquired was declared ‘sacred’. The man who…cannot fall in with this suppression of instinct, becomes a ‘criminal’, an ‘outlaw’, in the face of society.”

According to Freud, religion as well as civilization, are both carrot and stick; they provide the individual with comfort, fulfill his wishes, but do so in order to compensate him for the sacrifices they demand from him. Later, in “The Future of an Illusion” and in Civilization and its Discontents, Freud will develop the outlook he presents here on the antagonism between the individual and society and on religion’s role in its history. It is, however, important to note that while here it may seem that religion is considered as one with morality, and with other institutions of culture, Freud’s attitudes to them differ fundamentally.

Freud’s thought, as was well articulated by Herbert Marcuse, “is the most irrefutable indictment of Western civilization – and at the same time the most unshakable defence of this civilization,” for, it views the constraint that culture puts on man’s existence as “the precondition of progress.” The sacrifice of the Libido that is culture, to use Marcuse’s words, “has paid off well.” Freud describes the evolution of civilization, in the service of Eros, as not less than “the struggle for life of the human species,” and justifies the renunciation it demands from man. The demands of religion, on the other hand, he would see as illegitimate. Hence, it is a challenge for Freud, in his critique of religion, to separate religion from civilization, in view of the counterclaim that without religion there can be no social order, nor morality or culture.

In short, civilization demands an enormous sacrifice from the individual; and, yet, Freud does not question its legitimacy. It is, therefore, not merely because of the sacrifices religion demands from the individual that Freud opposes it.

**Epistemological Arguments**

“Of the three powers that may dispute the basic position of science (art, philosophy and religion) religion alone is to be taken seriously as an enemy.” In the 33rd new introductory lecture on psychoanalysis written in 1933, Freud locates psychoanalysis in the broader realm of science. He ponders the question of whether

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8 Ibid., pp.186-187.
10 Ibid., p.3.
psychoanalysis, as science, has an encompassing ‘Weltanschauung’ or can contribute to a formation of one in the same way religion, for example, does. He takes upon himself to represent science, against religion, in this discussion.

Freud defines ‘Weltanschauung’ as “an intellectual construction which solves all the problems of our existence uniformly on the basis of one overriding hypothesis, which, accordingly, leaves no question unanswered and in which everything that interests us finds its fixed place.”\textsuperscript{14} Yet ‘worldview’ would be a faulty translation, since what Freud discusses here is not a theoretical system, but rather a normative,\textsuperscript{15} evaluating one.

Freud’s main line of defence for science is the claim of neutrality. As a theoretical body, science confines itself to the mission of describing the world\textsuperscript{16} and claims a neutral stand regarding questions of values. In this sense, then, science would not provide us with a ‘Weltanschauung.’ It does not aspire to prescribe our behaviour, to guide us ethically, emotionally or aesthetically. It leaves those domains to alternative forms of discourse.

Religion, on the other hand, aspires to perform an unholy trinity of functions: the descriptive, informative function; the consoling, comforting and soothing one; and the prescriptive-normative, ethical one, which issues instructions and prohibitions. In the face of religion’s invasion of “the realm of reality,”\textsuperscript{17} science’s neutrality cannot be kept. If religion would content itself with providing consolation, Freud would have no issue with it. It is its trespass of the boundaries that encourages him, as a proponent of science, to step on to the battlefield. He proclaims that since religion tried to compete with science in its home-field of description by trying to inform us about the world, it is also bound to lose, and is now doomed on all other fields as well. Once “the scientific spirit has begun…to submit it [religion] to a critical

\textsuperscript{12}“The question of a Weltanschauung”, SE 22, p.160.
\textsuperscript{13}Ibid., pp. 158-182.
\textsuperscript{14}Ibid., p.158.
\textsuperscript{15}It is important to distinguish the senses of ‘normativity’ used here from other senses which became common in today’s psychological parlance. By ‘normative’ we mean “Prescribing or establishing norms or standards; prescriptive,” rather than ‘normal,’ ‘sane’ or ‘according to some accepted norms’ as it is sometimes used. See Andrew M Colman, A Dictionary of Psychology, pp.496-497.
\textsuperscript{16}It is important to note that psychoanalysis, much more than a descriptive project, is a therapeutic one. In that sense it will have prescriptive aspects, but not normative ones. It would still not evaluate emotions, thoughts or wills, and would only prescribe according to the underlying assumption of the patient’s wish to be freed of neurotic symptoms. Thus, allegedly, psychoanalysis remains normatively neutral.
\textsuperscript{17}Ibid., p.160. It is a serious theological question, though not of this paper’s concern, to what extent a religious system, which does not aspire to describe the world, is a religion at all.
examination…Religion was not able to stand up to this.”18 First to fall, then, would be religion’s claim to a descriptive function. The consoling and the prescriptive ones would follow suit.

Throughout Freud’s writings, we can discern diverse lines of argumentation — philosophical, meta-scientific — which deal with the epistemological status of religion as opposed to that of science. With these arguments he engages in a battle against the alleged descriptive function of the religious doctrines.

1. Freud argues that the source of religion’s two other functions, the prescriptive and the consoling, is, in fact, one. The old metaphor of God as a father demonstrates it: Just as the father is a source of emotional support, so is he a source of prescription in his awe- and fear-inspiring authority. Likewise, religion and the idea of God protect and console, command and demand.

In “The Future of an Illusion,” Freud reconstructs the way the descriptive function evolved from the consoling one: religious doctrines, which pretend to describe the world, are derived from wishes; they are therefore, by Freud’s definition, Illusions.19

There are philosophical arguments which deal with the delineation of the descriptive and the normative, or prescriptive, spheres of discourse, such as the “naturalistic fallacy” and the “is-ought problem.”20 The latter, for example, regards the logical, linguistic and philosophical fallacy of trying to deduce a prescriptive statement (about what ought to be) from a descriptive one (about what is). Freud’s argument against religion can be understood as a sort of an inverse claim: religion tries to deduce the descriptive, the ‘what is’ from ‘what ought to be,’ from what we wish there to be.

2. “Illusions [as opposed to hallucinations] need not necessarily be false.”21 Yet, their epistemological value is dubious, on account of the lack of credibility of their source. This line of argument served Freud both in analysing the origin of the Illusion inside the human mind, as well as when he comments on the transmission of religious

18 Ibid., p.166.
doctrines in the history of civilization. In “The Future of an Illusion” he presents both aspects of this argument together:

…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.22

Tradition is, therefore, disqualified here as a source of reliable information. We should not, according to Freud, believe our forefathers, since they “were far more ignorant than we are.”23 The sacred writings are likewise rejected, as they “bear every mark of untrustworthiness.”24 As yet another cause for suspicion, Freud presents the religious prohibition against questioning tradition, the texts and their authenticity. Needless to say, such a demand is regarded as illegitimate and preposterous by Freud, an enthusiastic proponent of the enlightenment ethos of the free striving for truth.

3.

After having discarded the source of evidence religion alleges for its doctrines, and having disarmed them of their immunity to questioning and examination, the doctrines of religion stand in the open, subjected to the verdict of scientific probing and vulnerable to criticism. A negative verdict can take two forms: It can state that the doctrines are refuted in the face of empirical evidence, or that they are irrefutable, which also can be said pejoratively. Freud seems to argue, alternatively, in both directions.

In “The Future of an Illusion,” Freud discards with disdain the ‘spiritist’s’ attempt to supply a religious doctrine — that of the survival of the soul — with such evidence.25 After having concluded there that the doctrines of religion are “so improbable, so incompatible with everything we have laboriously discovered about

19 “What is characteristic of illusions is that they are derived from human wishes”; “The Future of an Illusion”, SE 21, p.31.
20 The first was described by G.E. Moore, the second by David Hume. They are closely related, albeit not identical.
22 Ibid., p.33.
23 Ibid., p.27.
24 Ibid., Ibid.
the reality of the world.”26 Freud opens Civilization and its Discontents to face a new challenge, presented to him by the French author Romain Rolland. Rolland tackled Freud with the phenomenon of ‘oceanic feeling’: a sensation which many seem to share and therefore can be used, if not as objective empirical evidence, then as subjective phenomenological testimony for at least some truthfulness of the religious worldview.

Freud deals with the challenge by way of ‘interpreting it away’: understanding it as a religious feeling is mistaken, he claims, and suggests an alternative, psychoanalytic interpretation of oceanic feeling. He ties it to a distant memory of the primitive stage of life, prior to the ego-object separation, when a child is yet to perceive himself as distinct from his mother and the external world. In this way, Freud provides an explanation that simply makes the religious one redundant. He names his alternative ‘a genetic explanation.’27 At a later stage, we will take a closer look at how genetic explanations may be used to ‘explain away’, and thus, be critical explanations.

4.

Religion fails, then, to provide any kind of empirical evidence for itself. This verdict and the very demand that religious doctrines meet empirical standards are typical of the positivistic view that saw natural science as a paradigm to any legitimate discourse and its hypotheses as the model for any acceptable statement.28 Freud’s allegiance to the positivistic legacy is well known and attested. A little surprising, however, is a different tone we can hear in his words in “The Future of an Illusion”:

…let us return once more to the question of religious doctrines. We can now repeat that all of them are illusions and insusceptible of proof…Of the reality value of most of them we cannot judge; just as they cannot be proved, so they cannot be refuted.29

In the 1920s, positivism took a new form in Freud’s geographical environment, though not his social milieu. The Vienna circle not only viewed experience as the only legitimate source of knowledge, but also held the verification criterion of

26 Ibid., p.31.
27 Civilization and its Discontents, SE 21, p.65.
28 In “Beyond Illusion” (p.622), Rachel Blass ties Freud’s rejection of the doctrines of Religion to his ‘analytic stance,’ which sets similar requirements of evidence and reality as in positivist philosophy, only these requirements represent the ‘ethic of truth’ inherent in Freud’s thought and in the therapeutic practical context.
meaning, according to which statements that do not carry empirically testable implications are simply meaningless. Freud’s words seem to allude to this popular philosophical parlance. He actually adopts in this remark the language critique of logical positivism against theology and metaphysics. If this association of Freud’s epistemological stance with language philosophy seems odd, another remark of Freud’s may help to support it. Freud compares the procedure of science teaching to the attitude towards religious doctrines: “They are put forward,” he says of the teachings of science, “as the epitomized result of a longer process of thought based on observation…If anyone wants to go through this process himself, they show him how to set about it.”

The question whether Freud himself fails according to those same criteria or not, whether the same faults are to be found in his psychoanalytical theory and method is beyond our scope here, and has been extensively dealt with elsewhere. However, an interesting analogy with that discussion may be found in the way Freud, at one point, implies that religious ideas are meaningless pseudo-statements, while elsewhere rejecting them as refutable, albeit refuted. This double attack may remind us of the dialectics of discussion on the scientific status of psychoanalysis, where we find, on one hand, philosophers like Karl Popper, who presents psychoanalysis as a pseudo-science on account of the unfalsifiable nature of its statements, Ernst Nagel, who articulates a similar “suspicion that Freudian theory can always be so manipulated that it escapes refutation no matter what the well-established facts may be.” On the other hand, we find Adolph Grünbaum, who restores the verifiable and falsifiable status of psychoanalysis, only to show how, at least partly, it is refuted.

5.

In “The Future of an Illusion” Freud mentions two ‘last resort’ efforts, “desperate attempts” to save religion from scientific criticism by delimiting reason altogether. The first, Tertulian’s ancient catchphrase “Credo quia absurdum est,” would put religious faith above reason. Freud rejects this outright on account of its

30 Actually, the way he articulates this idea may even presuppose a stronger criterion than that of verification, not unlike Popper’s later demarcation criterion of falsifiability. 
32 Karl Popper, Conjectures and Refutations. 
33 Ernst Nagel, “Methodological Issues in Psychoanalytic Theory” in Psychoanalysis, Scientific Method, and Philosophy, p.44. 
35 SE 21., p.28.
having no binding, objective force. The second attempt is the ‘Als ob’ (‘as-if’) philosophy, which would subject reason to some utilitarian consideration, by promoting belief in some fiction (as if it was true) for practical reasons. Freud portrays this attempt as typical of ‘philosophy,’ in the pejorative sense that he sometimes grants this activity: artificial, unrealistic and detached from the nature of man’s normal way of thinking. An ‘Als ob’ way of thinking may be good for philosophers, but the normal, common man cannot content himself with it.36

Freud’s rejection of the ‘Als ob’ philosophy is of grave importance. It is part of a wider discussion he leads against the pragmatic objection to his criticism of religion, an objection raised in this paper by his (half-) imaginary religious opponent, which we will meet again at the end of our fifth chapter.

There is a very peculiar and fine point here. In claiming allegiance to his ‘God Λογος,’38 Freud rejects, in the name of ordinary man, a philosophical appeal to motives as justifying belief, whereas the main point of “The Future of an Illusion” is that, in effect, this is the way most of mankind functions — people do believe because religion fulfils their wishes. What easily clarifies this apparent contradiction is Freud’s epistemological credo: Motives and wishes do influence our beliefs de facto. They cannot do so when the influence is patent, namely, when the person becomes conscious of the fact that his wishes were the source of his belief. Lastly, motives and wishes should not be considered a legitimate source of belief or knowledge.

While some of what Freud says of religion is an original and weighty contribution to its critique, some of it merely recapitulates previous, common, and often well-known criticisms. Freud’s claims about the scientific and epistemological status of religious opinion are mostly of the latter sort. In general, they lack originality, at times they are also short of consistency and depth. They should, therefore, not be counted as the gist of his criticism.

36 Ibid., p.29.
37 See footnote 95, here.
38 SE 21., p.54.
Religion and Cultural Development

Judged from a narrow viewpoint, Freud’s version of cultural evolutionism as a methodological instrument in the use of the critique of religion is also unoriginal. However, in some respects it is possible to ascribe to him an original and substantial contribution in that domain.

In Totem and Taboo, Freud locates religion in a succession of historical systems of thought between the primitive, animistic worldview and the scientific one. He parallels the animistic system of thought to the narcissist stage of development in the child, in which the sexual instincts relate to the ego as their object.

In elaborating on the vicissitudes of the idea of the omnipotence of thoughts, Freud presents animism as the view in which magical omnipotence is ascribed to the self; in the religious phase it is ascribed to gods. The religious phase is, therefore, parallel to the psychological stage of object-choice in the child. The scientific stage is the equivalent to the maturity of a person who succumbs to the external world and is well adjusted to reality.

In locating religion on a scale of development, Freud draws on a rich tradition of socio-cultural evolutionism. Among its representatives we find quite a few prominent thinkers of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, primarily G.W.F Hegel, who located religion on a progressive scale of systems of knowledge and consciousness. Auguste Comte recognized the ‘theological’ stage of thought (itself divided into the fetishistic, polytheistic and monotheistic phases) as the primitive precedent to the metaphysical stage, followed by the positivist stage of science. James Frazer recognized in his The Golden Bough the three stages of Magic, Religion and science. Freud’s picture is very similar to that of Frazer, but his contribution is significant all the same, in that he develops a psychological understanding of the mechanism of growth and development that leads to the alleged succession, and deepens the analogy between this philogenetic process and the growth of the individual.

Placing religion on an evolutionary scale and suggesting it is an underdeveloped stage of humanity is, of course, not a neutral theoretical step. It implies a negative evaluation of religious thought, portraying it as underdeveloped.

40 An alternative to Comte’s picture, which portrays religion as the culmination of progress, was suggested by Pierre Duhem.
and inferior to science. Religious thought is found to be an unstable, unripe and incomplete thought whose only value is in its being a preliminary, even if perhaps necessary, step towards science.

There is an underlying premise at the basis of such development theories and their evaluative implications, a historical premise that is implied in the concept of development and evolution: that what comes later is better, that the more developed one is the right one. We should bear in mind that theories of cultural change must not always be so; we often find ‘golden age’ theories, which venerate the past, viewing history as degenerative, rather than progressive. According to these alternative views, to say that ‘it was once so’ would mean ‘so should it have been today.’ In progressive development theories of culture, ‘what once was’ points us in the direction from which we should move away, and if something is now as it once was – it is considered as arrested development, a retardation.

Aside from being derogatory, depicting religion as the puberty phase of human culture and thought also has weighty normative implications when the last phase of development portrayed in the theory is not considered to have been accomplished. It is when such development theories touch the axis of the present that they yield manifestos; such is the case with the theory of material determinism and “The Manifesto of the Communist Party.” The latter spells out the normative implications of the theory that is expounded in the former. Such is also the case in Freud: his cultural development theory is presented, as a descriptive theory, in Totem and Taboo and other works; “The Future of an Illusion,” in which he calls upon society to grow up, to perform the last step and leave religion behind is the manifesto which supposedly follows from the theory, the ‘ought’ that the ‘is’ implies. We shall return to this encounter between descriptive theories and manifestoes, and to some problems that are inherent in it, in the last chapter of this paper.

Evolutionary theories of culture presuppose evaluations, and therefore, have normative implications. Most of these theories from the nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth century carry the ideological mark of the enlightenment. The emotive metaphor of maturation is characteristic of this thought, and opens its seminal text: “Enlightenment is man’s emergence from his self-incurred immaturity.”

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41 Immanuel Kant, “An Answer to the Question ‘What is Enlightenment’,” 1784.
In “The Future of an Illusion” Freud, too, makes emotive use of the idea of mankind’s maturation, when he calls on humanity to leave puberty and childhood behind and reach the age of reason. This call is entrenched, however, in a theoretical psychological edifice. Immaturity in Freud’s work not only serves as a metaphor for religion, but is found to be analogous to it. Immaturity and religion are, thus, parallel manifestations of the very same mechanism.

This mechanism, however, is not a simple one of development and it is in this point that Freud’s account differs significantly from those who preceded him. It is no longer a steady, dialectical progression of the spirit or a linear organic process of growth. It is, rather, a drama of pathology and recovery. In order to examine this mechanism, a closer look at the analogy between religion and its counterpart in individual psychology is required.

In the following chapters we will examine the analogy which is used by Freud as a basis for the attack on religion; we then deal with the genetic explanation, and eventually with the evolutionistic one. These three forms of argument are the main critical tools in Freud’s thought, although they are not separate lines of argument; rather, they are different accounts we could give to the critical core of Freud’s work, three lines which are intertwined in his theories of Religion. We will, however, try to disentangle and examine them separately.

“A sacrilegious comparison”: The Analogy

1.

Freud’s first attempt to deal with the phenomenon of Religion, not as it is represented in the dreams or thoughts of a patient, but as a cultural phenomenon, is to be found in the paper “Obsessive Actions and Religious Practices,” which was published in 1907. In it, Freud proposes an analogy between the obsessive ceremonial practices of a neurotic person and religious behaviour.

Seemingly, claims Freud, the main difference between the two is that unlike the religious ritual, which is pregnant with symbolic meaning, the obsessive action appears to be foolish and meaningless. The main point of the essay is that, as far as psychoanalysis teaches us, obsessive action, far from senseless, has quite a significant

42 ‘The Future of an Illusion’, p.53. See also the use of this metaphor in Civilization and its Discontents, pp.97-98.
44 SE 9, pp.117-127.
meaning; it is merely veiled, hidden from us and from the neurotic person himself, concealed in his unconscious. Neurotic-obsessive behaviour, as well as Religious practices, involves a repression of an instinctual impulse (Triebregung), which is accompanied by anxieties and a sense of guilt due to an inner conflict between the impulse and its prohibition. The observance of both obsessive and religious ceremony provides a sort of “compromise between the warring forces of the mind,” a compromise which allows a small, controlled portion of the forbidden pleasure. In both, a mechanism of displacement takes place from the true meaning of the ceremonial to the symbolic ritual, whether it is religious or obsessive.

When inferring from analogy, one points to similarities between two phenomena, A and B, and claims that another quality, X, is also common to both. This is no decisive argument, but rather an inductive one. The more similarities pointed out to us between A and B, the more likely we are to be convinced that they also share X. The assumption behind this sort of argumentation is that a significant resemblance cannot be coincidental, but that it has to lie in some common essence.

When does an inference from analogy begin to threaten?; when that same quality X, which we take from one side of the analogy (A) to the other (B), is a quality that B would not be very pleased to adopt. Needless to say, when the quality X is ‘pathological’ or ‘neurotic,’ the analogy is indeed harmful. It is, however, important to note, that an inference from analogy can work both ways: when one claims that A and B are analogues, it can mean that in respect of quality X, phenomenon A is actually the same as phenomenon B, or vice versa; the direction is not determined by the analogy alone. Therefore, on the basis of the same analogy one could either venture to treat religion as a universal neurosis, or treat neurosis as deeply meaningful, perhaps even having some religious content.

When Freud maintains in this paper that the religious ritual is analogous to the obsessive one, his main direction of the analogical argumentation is from the religious act to the obsessive one. Obsessive neuroses are the object of this study, and its message is that they are meaningful, that they could and should be interpreted. In this paper Freud still grants the underlying content of “petty ceremonials of religious practice” a status of essential thoughts and values. Moreover, he still regards

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45 Ibid., p.124. This is the standard edition translation of the German concept ‘Trieb.’
46 Ibid., p.125.
47 Ibid., p.126.
obsessive neurosis as a “pathological counterpart” of religion, rather than boldly inferring that religion is itself pathological. Nonetheless, it is already clear that the analogy is a double-edged sword. In so far as the obsessive ceremonial regains its meaning, so that the alleged difference between it and the religious ritual disappears, the road opens to see religious ceremonial as a neurotic symptom. At the beginning of the paper Freud suggests that “an insight into the origin of neurotic ceremonial may embolden us to draw inferences by analogy about the psychological processes of religious life.” In its conclusion he writes about how “one might venture to…describe…religion as a ‘Universal obsessional neurosis’.” Here, the mechanism of Religious neurosis is only sketched and implied and is yet to be systematized or speculated upon, but it is this second argumental direction that Freud will develop in his later writings. Thus we can see, in the 1907 paper, the prehistoric phase of his critique of Religion.

2.

Instead of the apparent difference between neurotic and religious ceremonial (in terms of the meaningfulness of the latter) that he refuted, Freud’s suggestion was to draw the distinction between them in the character of the repressed impulses involved. Obsessive neurosis, he claims, is constructed on the repression of sexual impulses; religion on suppression of anti-social self-preservation instincts, that while they are not completely deprived of sexual components, their origin is mainly egoistic.

It was only in the following decades that Freud’s psychoanalytic thought was ripe enough to support his seriously venturing into the study of the origins of human culture. The core of this thought, however, is already present here — the antagonism which exists between the individual’s instinctual life and culture:

A progressive renunciation of constitutional instincts…appears to be one of the foundations of the development of human civilization.

The renunciation Freud refers to here, is the one demanded by religion:

The formation of a religion…seems to be based on the suppression, the renunciation, of certain instinctual impulses.
Although Freud seems to be utilising here the concept of ego-instincts of self-preservation, he is yet to develop the full-blown concept. The distinction between self-preservation and sexual instincts was consolidated towards 1915, only to be abandoned later, in favour of the distinction between life and death instincts. However, Freud was to abandon the idea that the instincts which lie at the bottom of religious neurosis are of the non-sexual type much earlier. Already in 1913, in Totem and Taboo, Freud locates in the hub of religion a psychological drama based on sexual instincts, that of the Oedipus complex. Disposing, thus, the basis for his former idea of the difference between the neurotic individual and the religious, Freud would have to redefine the relations between the individual and social psychology.

3.

The first three chapters of Totem and Taboo also present an analogy. This time, Neurosis is found to be analogous to the phenomena of Taboo, exogamy and totemism, common in primitive tribes. To draw the analogy, Freud bases his work on the observations of mainly nineteenth century anthropology, and on various theses which were brought up to explain these cultural phenomena. To the external resemblance between these phenomena and obsessive-neurotic behaviour, Freud adds the important common feature of emotional ambivalence, which reflects an underlying conflict between instinct and prohibition\(^{52}\) and is manifested in the double meaning of the concept ‘Taboo’: ‘sacred’ and ‘unclean’.\(^{53}\) A psychoanalytic interpretation of children’s animal phobia as displacement of their ambivalence toward their father helps Freud to tie the Totem — the tribe’s animal — to a father figure and conclude that “the totemic system…was a product of the conditions involved in the Oedipus complex.”\(^{54}\)

A theory that some anthropologists relied upon while trying to explain exogamy was suggested by Charles Darwin following his observations of the lives of primates. According to Darwin, prehistoric man may have also lived, like the primates, in patriarchal hordes in which one strong male overpowered the others and banished them while they were still young. Freud, however, expounds this theory further and adds the following episode:

\(^{52}\) *SE* 13, p.29.
\(^{53}\) Ibid., p.66.
\(^{54}\) Ibid., p.132.
One day the brothers who had been driven out came together, killed and devoured their father and so made an end to the patriarchal horde.\textsuperscript{55}

This story is the nucleus of Freud’s explanation. Assuming that totemism, exogamy and Taboo were practiced in ancient culture, the origin of our own, they are presented as the source of religious phenomena, and this way “the beginnings of religion, morals, society and art converge in the Oedipus complex.”\textsuperscript{56}

4.

The analogy presented in “Obsessive Actions and Religious Practices,” in \textit{Totem and Taboo} and in Freud’s later writings on religion is an analogy between the psychology of the individual and group psychology. These two realms relate to each other in different ways in Freud’s thought: not only are they viewed as analogous, in that similar — even identical — mechanisms of repression, latency and return of the repressed are active in both; they are also complimentary and mutually compensatory. Problems which are unsolved by social institutions,\textsuperscript{57} would be ‘solved’ by neuroses in the individual; and vice versa, collective neuroses may alleviate the burden of the individual “by forcibly fixing them in a state of psychical infantilism and by drawing them into a mass-delusion, religion succeeds in sparing many people an individual neurosis.”\textsuperscript{58} This is shown by Freud in the case history of the “wolf man,” where he even relates the “pathological products of his struggle against religion.”\textsuperscript{59}

Individual and group psychologies complement each other in other ways as well: “...the individual reaches beyond his experience into [collective] primaeval experience at points where his own experience has been too rudimentary.”\textsuperscript{60} This is why when an individual’s history cannot account for the nature and force of his neurotic behaviour, Psychoanalysis would turn to the earlier past — the common, ‘philogenetic’ past, as the place where trauma may have occurred.\textsuperscript{61} There is, then, also an explanatory reciprocity between Individual and group psychologies.

Yet, we should point to one important difference between individual and collective neuroses which is derived from this picture: on the level of individual

\textsuperscript{55} Ibid., p.141.
\textsuperscript{56} Ibid., p.156.
\textsuperscript{57} The claims of Psycho-Analysis to Scientific Interest, \textit{SE} 13, p.186.
\textsuperscript{58} “The Future of an Illusion”, \textit{SE} 21, pp.84-85.
\textsuperscript{59} From the History of an Infantile Neurosis, \textit{SE} 17, p.116.
\textsuperscript{60} Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis, no. 13, \textit{SE} 16 p.371.
\textsuperscript{61} Moses and Monotheism, \textit{SE} 23, p.99.
psychology, the neurotic differs from other individuals who processed and overcame the Oedipal stage. In group psychology, however, we all carry the burden of our philogenetic neuroses in us. Some of these neuroses erupt in individuals when their problematic ontogenesis has added to the burden and thus pushes for release. Still, we all share the neurotic yolk of the ‘archaic heritage.’

5.

As implied above, an analogy is, after all, nothing more than suspicious resemblance. It does not necessarily support an inference. In order for the critique to be full, one has to prove that, at the basis of the resemblance, therein lies an identity. Indeed, writing about “Obsessive Actions and Religious Practices” decades later, Freud explains that he wrote the former paper “without as yet understanding the deeper connections.” But, when he opens Totem and Taboo, Freud also seems to be still wary in drawing the inference from the analogy. He articulated his caution in these words:

A warning must be uttered at this point. The similarity between taboo and obsessional sickness may be no more than a matter of externals; it may apply only to the forms in which they are manifested and not extend to their essential character. Nature delights in making use of the same forms in the most various biological connections: as it does, for instance, in the appearance of branch-like structures both in coral and in plants, and indeed in some forms of crystal and in certain chemical precipitates. It would obviously be hasty and unprofitable to infer the existence of any internal relationship from such points of agreement as these, which merely derive from the operation of the same mechanical causes. We shall bear this warning in mind, but we need not be deterred by it from proceeding with our comparison.

Incidentally, Freud’s choice of metaphor is interesting and sophisticated. Freud could have been aware that the resemblance may actually lead to finding common biological, chemical or physical structures, which would be the ‘essential character’ of, and ‘internal relationship’ between corals, plants and crystals. Indeed, after having presented all ‘externals’ — the similarities between the individual neurotic phenomena and the collective cultural ones (Taboo, totemism, religion), Freud goes on to prove the identity that was suggested by the analogy by psychoanalysing and

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63 SE 13, p.26. Incidentally, Freud’s choice of metaphor is interesting and sophisticated. Freud could have been aware that the fractal resemblances may actually lead to finding common biological, chemical or physical structures, which would be the ‘essential character’ of, and ‘internal relationship’ between corals, plants and crystals.
historically explaining religion itself — through its origins — as neurosis. In other words, he proceeds to demonstrate how the ‘essential character’ of these two types of phenomena is also one: the Oedipus complex. But did he manage to avoid the pitfalls of analogical inferences that he warned himself of?

To use Freud’s metaphor: If we knew that at the basis of the visual characteristics of corals and plants lies a quality that has to do with their organic nature, we could not have extended the analogy to the anorganic crystals and chemical precipitates. Freud’s reasoning from individual psychology to group psychology may involve such a problematic extension.

In order to complete the analogy, and claim for the existence of a mechanism of neurosis in Religion, Freud has to assume, just as he does regarding the individual mind, the existence of a ‘collective mind’ and in it an unconscious faculty in which a repressed memory could pass on through the generations, over a very long period of latency. The difficulty is not only to presume mere transmission of past events (such as the father’s murder) through generations: “For one can hardly deny that mankind has a common store of thoughts, which is transmitted from one generation to another.” Tradition is just such a form of transmission, only it is conscious. Also, the problem is not only to accept inheritance of unconscious material — this is something we constantly accept when we talk of instincts, for example. Finally, the problem is not to presume that acquired contents are kept unconscious; the problem is combining all these together and assuming transmission of unconscious, acquired material. At the end of Totem and Taboo Freud writes:

No one can have failed to observe, that I have taken as the basis of my whole position the existence of a collective mind, in which mental processes occur just as they do in the mind of an individual. In particular, I have supposed that the sense of guilt for an action has persisted for many thousands of years and has remained operative in generations which can have had no knowledge of that action...It must be admitted that these are grave difficulties; and any explanation that could avoid presumptions of such a kind would seem to be preferable.

A collective mind, answers Freud himself, is a necessary condition for any social psychology. Without assuming this faculty, in which such unconscious memory traces

65 For Freud’s own avowal of the need to assume inherited transmission rather than tradition see Moses and Monotheism, SE 23, pp.99-100.
66 Ibid., p.158.
are kept, the two sides of the analogy would remain two phenomena, which could not be more than coincidentally similar. However, “if we assume the survival of these memory traces in the archaic heritage, we have bridged the gulf between individual and group psychology: we can deal with peoples as we do with an individual neurotic.”

Indeed, we can fathom a concept of a collective mind and make it intelligible in various discourses of humanities and social sciences. However, the existence of an unconsciously transmittable memory, what Freud would name ‘archaic heritage,’ (archaische Erbschaft) is a much pricier hypothesis. It may be that the high cost of it deterred him from relying on it in his next works on religion and encouraged him to ‘avoid presumptions of such a kind,’ pursuing instead different lines of argument and other types of explanation in “The Future of an Illusion” fourteen years later. Notwithstanding, and despite the doubts he expresses in the lines quoted above, Freud never abandoned his mythical story about the prehistorical murder, nor the hypothesis of the archaic heritage.

**Genetic Explanation and its Discontents**

Genetic explanations, such as the one presented by Freud in *Totem and Taboo*, are causal explanations of a phenomenon by way of pointing at its source, its history and its development. Genetic explanation is, then, the next critical tool we should now examine.

1.

After unfolding his theory about Totemism and concluding the prehistoric chapter on the origins of religion, Freud goes forward to surmise the historical sequel: the birth of the idea of God. First, appears the figure of the tribal God. The totem meal, which was really an unconscious memorial for the devouring of the murdered father, metamorphosed into sacrifice; the God was separated from the animal, the object of the meal, and became one of the diners, the central subject. The patriarchal authority was later taken and introduced into the state by the ‘divine kings,’ and then

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67 Moses and Monotheism, SE 23, p.100.
68 Totem and Taboo, SE 13, p.150.
culminated in the monotheistic idea, which embodies the dramatic, almost final, victory and vengeance of the father.

Just as there are criticisms of phenomena which do not attempt to explain them genetically, there are also genetic explanations which do not criticize the phenomena they explain. For instance, in “The Future of an Illusion,”\(^\text{69}\) and in \textit{Civilization and its Discontents}, Freud also provided an explanation of the origins of morality, civilization and art, an explanation that does not, and has no intention to, threaten the validity of the explained.\(^\text{70}\) As was already mentioned in the first chapter of this paper, Freud would claim that now, as before, civilization and morality are needed to protect man from nature and from his fellow men. Freud’s account, therefore, justifies civilization and morality to a large extent. On the other hand, Freud’s historical account of religion comes to explain it away, explain it so as to dismantle it of its value and validity. When, then, and how, is an explanation, ‘an explanation-away,’ a critique?

When a given phenomenon is explained by an \textit{explanans}, an alternative \textit{explanans} may compete with it. However, when the verity of the former \textit{explanans} is the necessary condition for the validity and value of the \textit{explanandum}, the alternative new \textit{explanans} may threaten to explain away the phenomenon itself, to undermine it. This is one way an explanation can criticize: when it comes to replace a justifying, validating explanation.

In the case of Freud’s genetic explanation, the \textit{explanandum} is religion, its rituals, the faith in God and in providence. The former \textit{explanans} is the religious one: religion and faith in God abound because God exists and reveals himself, or is revealed to our ancestors. Such explanations lead a symbiotic relationship with their \textit{explananda}: As long as a revelation story of a living God seems to be the best possible explanation to the abundance of faith in him, this abundance can serve as evidence to the story of revelation and to the existence of a living God. The authority of religion’s commandments and prohibitions, the credibility of the holy writ, the weight of the idea of God — all these depend upon the verity of the religious explanation. Freud, as others before him, proffers a new explanation: an historical,

\(^{69}\) pp.10-14.
\(^{70}\) “…it is very far from my intention to express an opinion upon the value of human civilization”, \textit{Civilization and its Discontents}, p.144.
anthropological, psychological account, which makes the religious explanation redundant, and depicts faith and religion as any other anthropological, psychological phenomena, only with the additional flaw that it pretends to be more than it really is.

2.

To our ears, as well as to the ears of many of Freud’s contemporaries the mythical story of the patricide sounds bizarre and naïve. It has indeed contracted many, mostly justified, assaults. Yet, it is worthwhile to linger on the explanatory value of this story and understand its scientific appeal.

There is a form of argument which deduces from a group of phenomena the plausibility of the best and most simple explanation. It is one of the legitimate and promising ways to suggest a scientific hypothesis. This is what Freud hoped to do here: to tie, with the help of one compact narrative thread, a variety of phenomena, of psychological and anthropological observations and theories. A central problem in his suggestion, however, and this is a difficulty that Freud himself raises, is that there is a simpler explanation than the story of ‘the deed.’

Ironically, this alternative is implied from Freud’s own analogy with neurosis: “What lie behind the sense of guilt of neurotics are always psychical realities and never factual ones…May not the same have been true of primitive men?…the mere hostile impulse against the father, the mere existence of a wishful Fantasy of killing and devouring him, would have been enough to produce the moral reaction that created Totemism and Taboo.”

Freud’s decision in the end of this book that, notwithstanding, “in the beginning was the Deed,” rather than fantasy alone, caused many to raise an eyebrow. Peter Gay wonders if it was not for the literary consideration, and the wish to end the book with Goethe’s dramatic words — ‘in the beginning was the Deed’ — that “Freud firmly stood by his improbable reconstruction.” This, however, cannot explain Freud’s insistence on this premise, twenty five years later, in Moses and Monotheism.

71 Totem and Taboo, pp.159-160.
72 Ibid., p.161.
73 In the words of Goethe, quoted by Freud as the closing sentence of Totem and Taboo, ibid., p.161.
74 Peter Gay, Freud: A Life for our Time, p.331.
75 There, Freud brings an argument which echoes his early ‘economic’ thinking. In rejecting former explanations, he writes: “There is an element of grandeur about everything to do with the origin of religion…and this is not matched by the explanations we have hitherto given. Some other factor must be involved…something of the same order of magnitude as what has come out of it, as religion itself.” It is, then, because of quantitative, economic-like considerations, that Freud surmises that the thought alone could not have been responsible, Moses and Monotheism, p.128.
psychoanalyzed him in order to explain this insistence. In any case, it made the book’s entire content unacceptable for anthropologists just as much as it was considered an abomination by the faithful.

3.

We have seen how at the heart of the analogy between individual neuroses and religion there lies the problematic assumption of an unconscious archaic heritage in the collective mind. By way of the genetic explanation of Totem and Taboo, Freud cannot circumvent this problem, since he still needs this premise. This could be the reason why, in “The Future of an Illusion” and in Civilization and its Discontents, Freud seems almost to avoid these speculations and find an alternative, an explanatory bypass to connect the gist of his explanatory, the Oedipus complex, with the explanatory, religion. This bypass moves only in the territory of individual psychology: according to the explanation in “The Future of an Illusion,” the religious illusion has its source in the helplessness of man, in his fears and in his wish to be protected, guided, comforted and instructed by a powerful father figure who would not fail the way the biological father does when one grows up. This is just as much a genetic explanation as the story of the patricide, except that it avoids philogenetic speculations; nothing here rests on an assumption of a collective archaic heritage. The same is true of Freud’s answer to Romain Roland that we have already mentioned here, where he explains the allegedly religious ‘oceanic feeling’ as a memory of an early childhood experience.

One might have thought that, due to their frailty, Freud deliberately replaced philogenetic speculations with hypotheses that are less costly, and that he actually gave them up. He may have actually done so for a while; if so, he still returned to hold on to them in Moses and Monotheism.

Let us turn again from questions regarding the scientific value of Freud’s own theories to questions regarding their philosophical value and function. It still remains to be seen how exactly the explanatory, Freud’s genetic explanation, related to the validity and value of the explanatory, religion. Moreover, is religion really rendered invalid as a consequence?

4.

See, for example, Bluma Goldstein, Reinscribing Moses pp.99-136, and Ilse Grubrich-Simitis, “Freud’s Study of Moses as a Daydream.”
One common objection may be raised at the outset: Freud points to the origin of a phenomenon and expects us to infer from this its value. One could blame him then for falling for the famous genetic fallacy, for mixing the question of origin with the question of value.\(^\text{77}\) It may well be that the origin of religion is a psychic motive, be it need, fear or a sense of guilt. Its origin may even be found in a hideous murder or in the sinister drives of the Oedipus complex — this may sound very critical at the demagogic level, but has no logical bearings whatsoever on the value of religion, be it its truth value or its moral one.

Freud was aware of the danger of genetic fallacies. In “The claims of Psychoanalysis to scientific interest,” he admits that after it had indicated subjective and individual motive behind theories “it is not the business of psychoanalysis” to undertake criticism of the theories, for, “the fact that a theory is psychologically determined does not in the least invalidate its scientific truth.”\(^\text{78}\) In “The Future of an Illusion,” he also declares that “to assess the truth value of religious doctrines does not lie within the scope of the present inquiry,”\(^\text{79}\) since in that paper he locates their origin in the human wishes, as illusions, and “illusions need not necessarily be false.”\(^\text{80}\) Exposing the psychological source of religious illusions does not inevitably falsify them.

Not only does Freud concede psychoanalysis’ say about the truth value of religion; he sometimes goes so far as to suggest that psychoanalysis could even be adopted by religion itself. Two years after writing his essay on “Obsessive Actions and Religious Practices,” he writes to Oskar Pfister: “In itself psychoanalysis is neither religious nor non-religious, but an impartial tool which both priest and layman can use in the service of the sufferer.”\(^\text{81}\) We could wave aside this last utterance as an insincere diplomatic manoeuvre by Freud, at a very early stage — his second letter — of the correspondence with Pfister. Yet, even in “The Future of an Illusion” he repeats this idea: “…defenders of religion will by the same right [as its attackers] make use of psychoanalysis in order to give full value to the affective significance of religious doctrines.”\(^\text{82}\)

\(^\text{77}\) E.g., Philip Rieff, Freud: The Mind of the Moralist, p.292.
\(^\text{78}\) SE 13, p.179.
\(^\text{79}\) SE 21, p.33.
\(^\text{80}\) Ibid., p.31.
\(^\text{81}\) A letter from 9/2/1909, Psychoanalysis and Faith, p.17.
\(^\text{82}\) SE 21, p.37.
Taken at their face value, these sayings are sure to vindicate Freud from the genetic fallacy. Yet, as we have seen, this alleged neutrality for psychoanalysis is not always kept in his writings. Freud does, in fact, believe that exposing the illusory nature of religious doctrines has implications regarding their truth value. Still, these implications are not logically direct, and in that sense Freud is exempted: recognising that religious doctrines are illusions may make them susceptible to doubt and suspicion, it “strongly influences our attitude to the question” — of their truth value, yet it does not answer it. In the same way, the genetic explanation of religion which finds the origin of religion in the prehistoric setting of the oedipal drama does not pertain to either its truth value or its moral value.

5.

A similar way to form an objection regarding Freud’s genetic explanation of religion would be the allegation of reductionism. In a reduction of the sort that this allegation talks about, the object of the reduction is believed to be, first, entirely dispensable in favour of another, and, secondly, reduced in value and meaning. Reductive explanations are often blamed as faulty for trying to account for a wealth of the explanandum by use of a meager explanans.

Does Freud believe that religion is entirely and fully explained, let alone explained away, ‘psycho-analyzed’ away, by the mechanism of the Oedipus complex? At the beginning of chapter 4 in Totem and Taboo he proceeds with humility:

There are no grounds for fearing that psycho-analysis…will be tempted to trace the origin of anything so complicated as religion to a single source. If psychoanalysis is compelled…to lay all the emphasis upon one particular source, that does not mean it is claiming either that that source is the only one or that it occupies first place among the numerous contributory factors. Only when we can synthesize the findings in the different fields of research will it become possible to arrive at the relative importance of the part played in the genesis of religion by the mechanism discussed in these pages.

If we suspect Freud’s frankness in those words, our suspicion will be confirmed by reading further how he claims, with growing confidence, a larger status for his explanation:

If psychoanalysis deserves any attention, then – without prejudice to any other sources or meanings or the concept of God, upon which psycho-analysis can

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83 Ibid., p.33.
84 E.g., Philip Rieff: “These genetic disparagements of the religious spirit are, I should say, the least viable part of Freud’s psychology of religion. Resembling all too closely the ‘nothing but’ argument by which animus is sanctified as science.” Freud: The Mind of the Moralist, p.268.
85 Totem and Taboo, p.100.
throw no light – the paternal element in that concept must be *a most important one*.

And in a later footnote he emphasizes:

> Since I am used to being misunderstood, I think it is worth while to insist explicitly that the derivations which I have proposed in these pages do not in the least overlook the complexity of the phenomena under review. All that they claim is to have added a new factor to the sources, known or still unknown, of religion, morality and society – a factor based on a consideration of the implications of psycho-analysis. I must leave to others the task of synthesizing the explanation into a unity. It does, however, follow from the nature of the new contribution that it *could not play any other than a central part* in such a synthesis, even though powerful emotional resistances might have to be overcome before its great importance was recognized.

Despite his caution, it is clear that Freud would not content himself with suggesting a small contribution to the understanding of religion, nor would he tolerate heterogeneity of explanations. His explanation aspires to be sufficient and exclusive; it seeks to overthrow all other “sources and meanings of God,” especially those which grant it any kind of validity.

In the early days of the “Project,” Freud’s aspirations were exactly towards producing the kind of reduction he is blamed for. He then hoped, as he wrote to Fliess, to “furnish a psychology which shall be called a natural science…to represent psychical processes as quantitatively determined states of specifiable particles.”

Even after abandoning the project and the hopes for such a neuro-physiological reduction, his later work can still be considered a form of biological reductionism — an evolutionary-historical reductionism, for example, as Sulloway presents it. In this first sense, then, we would be justified to view Freud as a reductionist. Incidentally, it is interesting to note that some of Freud’s boldest reductionisms appear in two works which he eventually chose to suppress — the “Project” and “An Overview of Transference Neuroses” (with which we will deal later) — both represent the two different sorts of biological reductionism.

We mentioned the allegation against ‘reductionism,’ that by trying to reduce a rich, intricate *explanandum* to the meager *explanans* of drives and instincts, Freud misses out on its full meaning, fails to understand it, and therefore does not really

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86 Ibid., p.147.
87 Ibid., p.157 (my italics).
88 *Project for a Scientific Psychology*, SE 1, pp.283-397.
explain it at all. The major point of this criticism is to claim that in the realm of cultural and human phenomena, such as religion, a different kind of explanation is needed; one that does not attempt to transfer the *explanandum* into a different realm or translate it into concepts which are foreign to its essence. The alternative explanation which is required for things such as religion should clarify it in the frame of its own realm of discussion.

Such criticism of Freud is abundant in twentieth century philosophy, regarding not only his view of religion but sometimes his whole portrayal of the human psyche. It is directed at him from such different directions as religious apologetics; the Hermeneutic school; the philosophy of language; Wittgenstein, Dennet, Nozick and others. This hermeneutic line of arguments actually served different sides of the polemic about Freud. Besides the attackers of Freud, we also find those arguments in thinkers who engage in apologetics for Freud, as well as in those who are trying to defend Psychoanalysis from psychoanalysts (such as Freud), who allegedly misunderstand themselves. The latter critics conceive a dichotomy of two forms of discussion: the kind of explanation prevalent in natural sciences, and, another activity, more appropriate to the human subject matter; these critics claim that what Psychoanalysis actually does is indeed different than explaining: they understand it as an exegesis, interpretation, a ‘hermeneutic of suspicion,’ they depict it as narrative, read a positive moral message in it or emphasize the fact that it deals with motives rather than causes.

Clearly, what Freud does is no pure, direct, and simple reduction to physics, neurology or even evolutionary biology. A significant component of interpretation is recognizable even in his attempts to present these scientific accounts; whether the two — the scientific explanation and the hermeneutic activity — should be conceived as

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91 Alternative ways of explanation are suggested by the names of ‘elucidation’ (Wittgenstein) or Verstehen (the hermeneutic tradition, and see also Robert Nozick, *Philosophical explanations*, pp.636-638). Arguments in the form of Daniel Dennet’s against Skinner’s behaviourist reductions may also be relevant, if one claims that faith is a realm of intentional concepts which cannot be explained by unintentional ones.

92 Jürgen Habermas, *Knowledge and Human interests*, p.214.

93 Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy*, p.30. The problem Ricoeur faces in the book is how to understand the relations, in Freud’s thought, between the mechanistic model and economic explanation and hermeneutics (pp.65-66).

94 Steven Goldberg, *Two Patterns of Rationality in Freud’s Writings*. The two patterns the name of the book refers to are the ‘galilean’ deductive explanation in empirical sciences and the narrative.

95 Philip Rieff, *Freud: The Mind of the Moralist*, see preface, p.X.

96 Stephen Toulmin, “The Logical Status of Psycho-analysis”, p.28. Toulmin brings the distinction in order to vindicate psychoanalysis against the accusation of eliminating free will as well as against the Popperian allegation of unfalsifiability.
an ambiguous hybridization, a harmonious cooperation or as a mistaken dichotomy is another question altogether. In any case, it is not the hermeneutic understanding of the psychoanalytic activity that would help us determine whether Freud’s genetic explanation (or interpretation) of religion is reductive in the second sense we mentioned (that of reducing the value and meaning of the *explanandum*). This is because an interpretation or a narrative, after all, can be as reductive as any scientific explanation.

One cannot say that Freud’s story — explanation or interpretation — of the origins of religion reduces religion to drives and instincts, because it is not by explaining — or interpreting — religion as a historical play of drives and instincts that he purports to criticize it. The force of Freud’s critique of religion is not in its being reductionist, and for the same reason that it is not to be blamed for including genetic fallacies. Both these flaws have to do with degrading the *explanandum* by a valueless *explanans*, and this is not what Freud does.

A reductionist of love, for example, may say that love is ‘merely a hormonal business,’ assuming that we do not find hormones as romantic and sublime as we do love. It would be wrong to understand Freud as someone who likewise says ‘mental phenomena are merely physiology’ in the sense of rendering mental life less true or less valuable than they are. Freud’s arguments are no ‘nothing but’ arguments. His intention is not to insult religion by saying that ‘this whole metaphysical edifice is built on nothing but lowly, wretched drives.’ For, Freud does not despise drives or the psychical mechanisms in which he finds the origin of religion. Moreover, unlike reductionists, Freud strives to expose the deep meaning of religion, rather than deprive it of meaning altogether. He interprets it so as to enrich our understanding of it. This is especially notable in *Moses and Monotheism*.

The critical edge of Freud’s genetic explanation is not, therefore, in its being reductive. I would like to suggest it should be found elsewhere, but in order to find it we shall have to make quite a long detour.

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97 Ricoeur, as well as Grünbaum, undermine the Dichotomy. Ricoeur’s understanding of the combination of the mechanistic, the economic explanation and hermeneutics in Freud’s thought (pp.65-66) is supported by his rejection of natural science’s self image as an activity different than interpretation. In *The Foundations of Psychoanalysis* (introduction), Grünbaum undermines the dichotomy from the opposite direction: he claims that the practice of interpretation requires the mechanistic, causal descriptions and explanations as premises and is therefore not an alternative method to them, but rather their derivative.
Freud’s genetic explanation is a naturalistic one, that is to say, it points to human nature as the origin of the explained phenomenon and thus renders it ‘natural.’ By rendering something natural Freud does not degrade it, since he clearly does not despise our natural drives and instincts. Naturalistic explanation does not at all deal with the phenomenon’s value — ethic, aesthetic or other; it rather locates it in a realm of truth and necessity.

What is natural in us is what is true about us: our instincts, our drives are in our nature in the sense that they are the truth at the heart of our mental and spiritual life — not necessarily an ugly, shameful truth. Moreover, such explanations ground religion in our nature, so that we should understand it as a necessary consequence of our constitution and our needs. At this stage we may find ourselves bewildered, for it may appear as if Freud, instead of criticizing religion, offers to argue in its favour by giving a causal explanation which not only tells us whence religion came, but also why it had to, why we needed it. What can that be other than an argument in its favour?

To go back to the terms we used earlier, once a former explanans is being replaced by an alternative one, even when the former served as justification of the explanadum, there still remains the question of the new explanans’ relation to the validity and value of the explanadum. It is also possible that the new explanans would provide an alternative justification.

Indeed, a person could come — some open-minded priest, for example, and say: “But I am willing to give up the religious explanation of religion, and accept, instead, your explanation, Freud. Let this be, then, that religion is a historical, cultural phenomenon, rooted in man’s psychology, in his feeling of childish helplessness and fears, in his emotional needs and his distress, facing a hostile nature and estranged from society. Very well, then: this only proves religion’s value and validity!”

Such an accepting, liberal opponent is the toughest challenge to the critic of religion, much more than the naïve believer or the fanatical. For, as we very well know, Freud had no intention whatsoever to argue in favour of religion. In “The Future of an Illusion” he could not have made it clearer. He firmly calls upon society to grow up, leave religion behind, and reestablish itself on the basis of reason and science alone. But our liberal priest can make things difficult for Freud by saying “your explanations of religion do not at all justify your call to abandon it. If religious
belief is an illusion — which according to your dictionary means it is derived from our wishes, from our emotional need — why should we abandon it?” Freud himself, in “The Future of an Illusion” conceives an opponent, half-imaginary, who would represent such a stance and would argue in favour of religious faith on a pragmatic basis. The dialogue with him recalls Schopenhauer’s “Dialogue on Religion” from 1851, which also deals with the pragmatic value of religion. In its conclusion Demopheles, who argues in favour of religion, has the upper hand.

Freud’s opponent need not even rely on the hard epistemological version of pragmatism, according to which we can legitimately believe in what is beneficial to believe in. For the question is not ‘what should we believe in’; the discussion between Freud and his opponent runs as a dialogue in the court of Plato’s philosopher-king; the question is, rather: ‘what should we tell the people?’ At the bottom of this question lies a clear, elitist distinction between the intellectual and the people, and a patronizing attitude towards the masses.

“Would it be fair,” would ask the pragmatic priest, “or wise, in a world as tough as ours, to deprive the masses of the comfort of religion? Moreover, would it not be dangerous to expose them to the falsity of religious doctrines, which are what justifies for them morality and society? If we do that, will not total anarchy break out?”

In the first chapter of this paper we mentioned how separating the legitimacy of civilization and religion is a challenge that pervades Freud’s thought, so that if the one, civilization, is considered an unavoidable, necessary evil, the second, religion, is to be deemed redundant. Since Freud himself wrote that the first steps of civilization “were sanctioned by religion,” he now has to convince us that it is possible to take religion out from under this structure of society, as if it was now superfluous scaffolding, without causing civilization to collapse.

The pragmatist’s challenge to Freud’s critique of religion is a serious one, and it bothers him accordingly. Already in “Group Psychology and the Analysis of the

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98 Although the dialogue with this imaginary opponent is fiercer and far less cordial than the one he conducted with his friend and colleague, the pastor Oskar Pfister. It is to a considerable degree in the frame of that dialogue that Freud writes “The Future of an Illusion.” As he writes in a letter to Pfister from 16/10/1927: “In the next few weeks a pamphlet of mine will be appearing which has a great deal to do with you”. Psychoanalysis and Faith, p.109.
100 S 9, p.187.
Ego” we see him trying to cope with a similar problem: there, he refers to the novel “when it was dark,”\textsuperscript{101} whose plot illustrates the outcome of a discovery which refutes the Christian dogma. Freud himself sees the anarchy which ensues as “a convincing picture of such a possibility and its consequences.” The novel is openly used as a Catholic polemic, and is actually a pragmatic argument in favour of religion of the sort Freud would later reject. Interestingly enough, in this early paper he relies on it to support his own view of a religious group and what occurs when it dissolves. He could even be understood, in this referral to it, to be justifying not only religion, but religion’s intolerance in view of the violent nature of man.

It is hard not to notice that the literary opponent in “The Future of an Illusion” expresses Freud’s own deep doubts. He sums up the pragmatic argument in a metaphor he puts in the mouth of his literary opponent: one should not undertake an archeological excavation “if by doing so he is going to undermine the habitations of the living.”\textsuperscript{102}

Freud’s answer, his optimistic bottom line, seems to be written hesitantly. By rejecting the ‘als ob’ philosophy in the conclusion of the paper, he waves aside the option of holding on to an epistemological stance that would allow us to take pragmatic considerations into account. He expresses hopes that the human species is ripe enough to constitute its society on the basis of reason and science, but considering his own theories of group psychology and his personal view of the masses, it sounds more like wishful thinking rather than a confident forecast. Furthermore, Freud wrote this paper in 1927. Would he have written such an optimistic manifest in his last years, as he was watching the rise of Nazism?

When, in the conclusion of “The Future of an Illusion,” Freud expresses himself in terms of religious-like adherence to the ‘God Λογος,’ it should only make us question his confidence. In his pathos of brave coming to terms with the painful truth, we can discern an ethic of honesty or of truth,\textsuperscript{103} but it is an ethic we are not obligated to adopt. Pathos is no argument, and religious-like adherence, Freud himself would admit, only points to a possible lack of better arguments.

\textsuperscript{101}SE 18, p.98.
\textsuperscript{102}SE 21., p.34.
A more serious counter-attack to the pragmatic argument would be that religion simply does not work, or at least, not well enough. It could not be justified by the mission it has to fulfil, if it does not, on balance, fulfil it. Indeed, Freud does make use of the discontent and unhappiness of most of mankind as a partial antidote to the pragmatic justification of religion. Yet eventually, he himself believes that religion has “performed great services for human civilization,” and that even considered as a collective neurosis, it relieves the burden from the shoulders of the individual and spares him his private neuroses. Freud speaks so often on Religion’s benefits, on how it fulfils our wishes, on the comfort it brings, on the way it functions as a social cohesive — because that is an essential part of his own theories of it. At the end of the day, Freud is caught in a sort of Catch 22 situation regarding the pragmatic challenge, since those very advantages of religion that the pragmatist supports his arguments with are inherent in Freud’s own portrayal of religion!

For that reason, facing the pragmatist’s arguments in “The Future of an Illusion” we could have concluded that Freud lost his case against religion. However, he does have another move left, which can be considered the more efficacious critical blow.

**The Evolutionary Explanation**

1.

We have only a meagre trace of this manoeuvre; a draft of a paper, attached to one of Freud’s letters to Sándor Ferenczi which was sent on 28/7/1915 and found by Ilse Grubrich-Simitis in 1987. The paper itself, which was never published, was to be named “An Overview of the Transference Neuroses.” It would have been the last of the twelve meta-psychological papers. The first five of them are well known; the last seven were not published and it is presumed that Freud destroyed them. It is in this last paper that a hint can be found of a different critical strategy which seems to render Freudian critique of religion, in its whole, more effective philosophically.

104 Ibid., p.37.
105 Ibid., ibid.
In the first part of the paper Freud surveys six types of neuroses and six factors which are active in them. The last factor is that of disposition, to which the second part of the paper is dedicated. There he develops an ambitious theory, which he himself refers to as his ‘philogenetic fantasy,’ as to the way our psychic structure and neuroses are tied to phases in human evolution. This is a comprehensive theory, not less pretentious than that of Totem and Taboo. If, there, Freud tied religion as neurosis to one event in prehistory, he finds, here, in each neurosis of an individual person a dispositional element which is a remnant of the human condition at a certain age of prehistory.

At the basis of this thesis lies the idea that the way a neurotic person behaves today is the way all men behaved at a certain prehistoric phase of man’s development. The idea is analogical, and is built upon the biological principle of recapitulation advanced primarily by Ernst Häckel. The principle, also known as the ‘biogenetic law,’ evolved from observations of the similarity between embryos of different animals and determined that the order of the individual’s development, the ontogenesis, reflects the order of the development of the species, the philogenesis.

2.

It is necessary for this thesis, as well, to include the Lamarckian assumption, along with its scientific cost for the acceptability of the theory. One has to presuppose, again, that events which our ancestors experienced in the prehistoric past, experiences such as the Ice Age, the living together in patriarchal hordes, the father’s murder — contents of acquired memory — organically impressed themselves in the human mind and became hereditary content, stored in an unconscious collective memory through generations.

Indeed, as Frank Sulloway explains: “In Freud’s scientific generation…virtually all biologists, including his university professors in this field, were Lamarckians to an extent – in addition to whatever other theories of evolutionary change they may have espoused.”108 This is especially true for the time before the rediscovered work of Gregor Mendel was incorporated with the Darwinian theory into the modern evolutionary synthesis in the 1920s. In the later Moses and Monotheism, Freud already has to acknowledge a deviation of his Lamarckianism

from the then “present attitude of biological science, which refuses to hear of the
inheritance of acquired characters by succeeding generations.”

Mendel’s work, and later statistics, made the Lamarckian assumption of
inherited acquired characteristics superfluous and supplied an answer to the question
of the agent of evolutionary change. The answer to this question was what
differentiated Lamarck’s and the Lamarckians’ theories from that of Darwin. While
Darwin mostly held that natural selection should suffice to explain evolution, the
Lamarckians believed there should also be some inner tendency or a sort of ‘will to
progress’ which directs it. Freud felt he found this agent in his discovery of the
unconscious. In 1917, the peak time of his interest in Lamarck, he writes to Karl
Abrahams of his hopes:

The idea is to put Lamarck entirely on our ground and to show that the
“necessity” that according to him creates and transforms organisms is nothing
but the power of unconscious ideas over one's own body…This would
actually supply a psycho-analytic explanation of [biological] adaptation; it
would put the coping stone on psycho-analysis.

The place of the biogenetic law in Freud’s thought, then, is not limited to the one
forgotten draft. In fact, it accompanies Freud for decades; already in 1912 he writes:

Every internal barrier of repression is the historical result of an external
obstruction. Thus: the opposition is incorporated within; the history of
mankind is deposited in the present-day inborn tendencies to repression.

And twenty five years later, he writes in a note which was published posthumously:

With neurotics it is as though we were in a prehistoric landscape – for
instance, in the Jurassic. The great saurians are still running about; the
horsetails grow as high as palms.

Freud’s version of this principle, however, interprets the recapitulation so as to give a
special place in it to the pathological; for according to his theory, recapitulation comes
to light when neuroses reflect arrests in the philogenetic development. This
pathological twist, the strange connection between distortion and the context of
discovery puts the philogenetic fantasy on par with two other retrospective sciences,
archaeology and the geological theory of continental drift, which have the same
peculiar status.

109 Moses and Monotheism III, SE 23, p.100.
110 A letter of November 11, 1917, Quoted from Sulloway, p.275.
111 Letter to Ernst Jones from August 1. quoted from Sulloway, p.370.
In Experimental sciences, like physics or chemistry, one manipulates initial empirical data (such as the weight or composition of minerals in a mixture), so that in view of the experiment’s results the scientist can refute or confirm a hypothesis, which has the form of a universal law. Thus, the initial empirical conditions, as well as the empirical result, are given to the scientist and only the law is an unknown variable. In the geological theory of continental drift, in archaeology, and in psychoanalysis the initial conditions too, shrouded in history, are absent and unknown. What is more, they are fundamentally so; for, the gist of the theory’s hypothesis is a constitutive, distorting change between past and present.

Thus, in the geological theory of continental drift both the past existence of a primordial continent, Pangea, and the existence of a mechanism, plate-tectonics, which broke the latter into several continents, are argued for. In psychoanalysis, too, the same mechanism of ‘cunning distortion,’ the existence of which one tries to establish, disfigures the data from which one tries to argue.

The analogy comes even closer. As we see in archaeology, it is through earthquakes, fires, violent invasions and downfall, or gross desertion that we are able to learn anything about ancient cities; Normal, continuous development of a city, where ruins are continuously used as building material for new houses, where the past is processed into present, leaves very little for historians. Indeed, archaeology was often used as metaphor for psychoanalysis; it is an even better metaphor for Freud’s philogenetic fantasy, because the traumas of major prehistoric catastrophes surfacing in the individual’s neuroses, is psychoanalysis’ key to the past.

3.

Let us now focus on the way religion appears within Freud’s philogenetic thesis: Religion, as a collective neurosis, is tied through a dispositional element to a chapter in the development of the human species. This chapter started with the Ice Age when men had to group in hordes to survive and accept the tyranny of a patriarch. It ends with life in the horde after the murder of this patriarch. Religion is causally explained, so that we can see how it emerged from our natural instincts and was an answer to our needs when it emerged. However, what enables this explanation

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113 The account that is expounded here, C.G. Hempel’s deductive-nomological model of scientific explanation, is used.
114 Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy*, p.17.
to be critical, is the fact that history progresses; just as once the Ice Age was over and
the horde no longer needed the patriarch, so now the conditions that made religion
mandatory have changed: there is no longer the need to stabilize the horde and
maintain the equilibrium in it on the symbolic basis of the cult of the father.

Religion, thus, becomes redundant; it could be compared to the common
backaches which man has as a reminder of the time when he began to walk upright.
But, we may ask ourselves: what is the factor that changed? What are the new
conditions which characterize the present human condition and make religion
redundant? Freud does not discuss this in the “Overview,” for the simple reason that
its subject is not the present human condition, but rather the dispositional element in
neuroses, which is always a trace of prehistoric adaptations. We should, therefore,
complete the picture ourselves, which we can do by turning to “The Future of an
Illusion”: Science is the missing factor; Science, and with it the growing ability of
man to acknowledge the social necessity of the rational precepts of civilization.115 The
progress of science and rationality, then, is what changed the world, and made
religion redundant in it.

The idea of growing up and maturing out of religion that we have met in a
previous chapter of this paper can now be understood not merely as an obsolete theory
of cultural development, nor as an enlightenment slogan, but rather as a metaphor for
a biological, philogenetic process that we are due to complete. Despite its tone of a
manifesto, it is actually a forecast, an evolutionary prognosis. Just as man lost his tail,
so will he lose religion, which is not more than a “historical residue.”116 There are no
self-imposed vital cuts required in the name of some noble ideal of coming to terms
with painful truth; religion will just wither away and fall, due to a simple biological
mechanism. What is unique in such an evolutionary explanation as a critique is that
instead of finding flaws in religion itself, in its internal qualities, Freud turns to the
external conditions — the historical, changing conditions — to disqualify it as
irrelevant. The keyword, here, is mal-adaptivity.117

115 “The Future of an Illusion”, SE 21, pp.41-44.
116 “The Future of an Illusion”, SE 21, p.44.
117 In ‘maladaptive’ we refer to the biological term, “characterizing aspects of an organism that limit
its chances of developing the behavioural repertoire needed for survival [and] by extension, in
evolutionary biology, of such characteristics when displayed by a species.” We do not use the word in
the “usage which is growing in popularity” and which came to replace ‘mentally ill,’ ‘insane’ or ‘not
normal,’ and pertains to the lack of accord and adjustment of an individual with his social and cultural
An evolutionistic explanation which renders religion mal-adaptive is critical not in any of the former ways we examined. It is not a chauvinist theory of cultural development with naïve historical premises of progress; it is not an analogy, limited in force; nor does it fail as genetic fallacy or as reductionism, since it shuns any discussion of religion’s internal value. Above all, it is the solution and the answer to the pragmatic argument in favour of religion, and it settles the apparent contradiction between seeing religion as a necessary basis of civilization, of living together, and seeing it as a primitive, culturally inhibiting, unnecessary evil. It does so by setting these two opposing pictures in two different points of time, then and now.

Rendering religion mal-adaptive is a solution which in a way parallels the pragmatic argument: the pragmatist wished to replace the old, religious *explanans* to the existence of faith of religion (the existence of God and his revelation) with an alternative *explanans* which draws validation for religion not from the inner, metaphysical truth of the doctrines but from its external, pragmatic value. The evolutionist points to the same direction of pragmatic logic to delegitimize religion.

One could say: so be it, but eventually Freud’s philogenteic fantasy was, as he himself called it, a fantasy, and he abandoned it soon enough. How can we take a playful draft as a serious lead to Freud’s thought when he himself did not take it seriously enough to publish it?

To this objection we can answer that, even though the paper itself was not published, the assumptions which pervade its playful theory were never abandoned. Freud held on to the major premises of the archaic heritage, Lamarckism and the principle of recapitulation till his very last years. The anthropological theories he relied on were also found to be incorrect. That, indeed, forces us to reject his theories on religion. Still, if we abstract his theories from their contents, we find that we are left with a critical tool which is methodologically impressive, efficacious and innocent of the flaws of which other critical instruments, far more common in use and abuse in various critical discourses, are guilty. And with some use of the charity principle in favour of Freud, we can also assume that the same critical thought is prevalent throughout the whole of his critique of religion.
A Deeper Look into the Evolutionist Critique and the Idea of Archaic Heritage

Let us ponder the ingeniousness of the evolutionary critical tool a little while longer. As mentioned, it avoids flaws that have to do with deducing value from facts, such as the naturalistic and the genetic fallacy and reductionism. Generally, critiques aspire to evaluate and judge through rational and objective examination. Often, the evaluation should be a moral or aesthetic one (rather than of a truth value); that is to say, critiques should almost, by definition, deduce value from neutral, impartial data. Avoiding the fallacies mentioned is, therefore, the greatest challenge that critiques face, and where many of them fail.

As previously stated, Psychoanalytic theory, while understanding itself as science, claims a neutral stance regarding questions of values and does not aspire to prescribe our behaviour, to guide us ethically, emotionally or aesthetically. As a therapeutic project, Psychoanalysis indeed has prescriptive aspects, but it still claims to be normatively neutral, and to assume only the patient’s wish to be healthy. In that sense, an evolutionary critique of cultural phenomena works along the lines of therapy.

While many social and cultural critiques thought of themselves as therapeutic, they often inserted their own, unfounded, ideas of what it means to be healthy. Critiques which function using evolutionary logic, on the other hand, manage to circumvent this pitfall by replacing the notion of health with that of survival and assuming only the aim of civilization and the human species to continue to exist. Thus, the concepts of adaptivity and maladaptivity enable psychoanalysts to ground prescriptive discourse and account favourably for any sort of normative, ethical judgement.

Yet with all its merits, the evolutionary critical tool has some grave problems, which we could, again, put in the mouth of an imaginary opponent:

First, he would say, we should remember again the scientific price of Freud’s critical solution. Being based on Lamarckian assumptions, his theories are untenable. But, even if we bracket present-day biology and check his evolutionary theory from within, it seems that Freud’s conclusion was misguided. For, even if his evolutionary speculations are correct, then their

118 “The question of a Weltanschauung”, the 33rd new introductory lecture on psychoanalysis, SE 22.
119 Philip Rieff argues that although Freud “has no message, in the old sense of something positive and constructive to offer, nevertheless his doctrine contains intellectual and moral implications that, when drawn, constitute a message”; Freud: The Mind of the Moralist, p.X.
status is no more than conjecture about our future; if religion is indeed maladaptive, then it is due to disappear by itself. Why should we not just wait and see? If you count on evolutionary logic, should you not count on it all the way, and let it do its work at its own pace?

But to this objection we can answer in Freud’s name: Religion is maladaptive. It is not only residual and superfluous; it is even damaging and inhibiting. This means that according to our evolutionist belief we can predict that it will become extinct soon enough. But natural selection should not be understood as trusty providence. Mal-adaptive traits may also become extinct together with their carriers, namely, us. That, of course, is something we do not wish to happen. This is why we should disengage ourselves from religion and opt for science and rationality, in order to have a better chance of survival as civilization and species. Moreover, we should be active in disconnecting ourselves from it.

2.

But here our opponent can raise a more difficult objection: can we do that at all?

This time, again, it may be Freud’s own doubts that are being raised by our opponent. For there seems to be an incessant tension, even a contradiction, between two positions he takes regarding religion: In “The Future of an Illusion” he took the position of the writer of a manifesto, who calls for action. In the rest of his writings on religion he seems to be holding to a theory with deterministic aspects. This is a common paradox in thinkers who have one leg in theory, the other in praxis; one in scientific contemplation, one in taking a stand towards social or political issues. This paradox, we could call it ‘the Prophet's paradox,’ rises when one prophesies about the future, on one hand, and then admonishes the people, on the other. Admonishing entails an assumption of choice, of freedom to act this way or the other. Divination, prediction from the set of laws of a deterministic theory, does away with such choice.

“But surely infantilism is destined to be surmounted. Men cannot remain children forever,”120 writes Freud in “The Future of an Illusion.” But, is it not then senseless, asks our opponent, to command a child to stop being one, just as it would be to command him to stay a child?

Indeed, there are strong elements of determinism in Freud’s thought, and it seems that the concept of archaic heritage embodies precisely such an element: the

necessity in it, its being an essence which is innate, inborn, a-priori, constitutive — and therefore inescapable. The idea of the archaic heritage hovers above the deep abyss of the dichotomy between what is ‘natural’ to us, in the sense of biological, inherent and inevitable and what is not — what we can still change.

3.

“No part of Freud’s theory has been more strongly rejected than the idea of the survival of the archaic heritage,” writes Marcuse. Among other problems, what invoked this rejection is the apparent determinism which the idea entails. Anti-determinist comments come from Freud’s critics as well as from his adherent interpreters, and they vary to such an extent that they actually come from opposite directions.

Philip Rieff comments that “Freud’s scorn of our repetitions seems strangely contradictory, for at the same time that he saw religious belief as the inevitable result of childhood dependence and fear of paternal authority, he also thought that we could outgrow our origins.” In ‘repetitions,’ Rieff refers to the idea of the return of the repressed that occurs in Freud both in his explanations of religion as emanating from the Oedipal experience in one’s childhood and in the philogenetic idea that repressed archaic heritage is what makes civilization replay patricide in history, time after time, in a way that draws from and replenishes the power sources of religion. Likewise, when Paul Ricoeur blames Freud for being a determinist, he also points to the concept of return:

For Freud, religion is the monotonous repetition of its own origins. It is a semipeternal treading on the grounds of its own archaism. The theme of "the return of the repressed" means nothing else…Freud’s exclusive attention to repetition becomes a refusal to consider a possible epigenesis of religious feeling.

This depiction of Freud enables Ricoeur to suggest his own hermeneutic correction of Freud’s picture which is open-ended and favourable to religion. Indeterminacy of symbol allows for indeterminacy of value. It gives an option to accept progress in the meaning of religion, so that new, significant and valuable contents are inserted into religion in the course of the recurrent cycles of return, so that each cycle does more than merely repeat the one before it.

121 Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, p.60.
123 Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy*, p.534.
But the Freudian theme of “the return of the repressed” can mean something other than monotonous repetition. Return may be recurrent, but it does not have to be eternal. One should not confuse Freud’s return of the repressed with Nietzsche’s idea of eternal return. It does not have to mean we are forever doomed. Blaming Freud for determinism in this point fails, therefore, the ‘straw man’ fallacy.

4.

Determinism does not have to assume a historical picture of eternal return. One can also be a determinist while adopting a linear picture of history. In the closing pages of *Civilization and its Discontents*, we find Freud mentioning such a view of necessity in linear evolution:

> I should find it very understandable if someone were to point out the obligatory nature of the course of human civilization and were to say, for instance, that [tendencies in the institution of civilization] were developmental trends which cannot be averted or turned aside and to which it is best for us to yield as though they were necessities of nature.\(^{124}\)

While Riceour’s rejection of determinism results in embracing an idea of a changing, progressive religion, Herbert Marcuse’s rejection of Freud’s determinism comes from a position of radical critique, with a view to deconstructing existing social structures. Even though his criticism of Freud does not deal specifically with his view on religion, but with his theories on civilization in general, it is still relevant to us.

Marcuse treats Freud with ambivalence. He sees danger in the emphasis Freud places, especially in his later years, on the generic, constitutive components in the individual’s psyche. The archaic heritage, according to Marcuse, is embodied and preserved in the social law and order. It is out of this philogenetic source that the superego draws its force to subdue the ego. Yet, besides Freud’s ‘Ananke’ principle which justifies repression, he also finds in Freud’s historic and therapeutic attitudes grounds to question categories of subjugation, domination and repression.\(^{125}\)

Indeed, the continuation of Freud’s words, which were quoted above, from the closing pages of *Civilization and its Discontents* runs as follows:

> I know, too, the objection that can be made against this [the linear, deterministic picture of civilization’s development], to the effect that in the history of mankind, trends such as these, which were considered

\(^{124}\) *Civilization and its Discontents*, SE 21, p.145.

\(^{125}\) Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, pp.4-5.
unsurmountable[sic], have often been thrown aside and replaced by other trends.\textsuperscript{126}

Our cultural future, then, is not determined, according to Freud; it is only underdetermined by our philogenetic past. It can itself be subdued. Already in 1919 he wrote:

\textit{…the overcoming of the Oedipus complex coincides with the most efficient way of mastering the archaic, animal heritage of humanity. It is true that that heritage comprises all the forces that are required for the subsequent cultural development of the individual, but they must first be sorted out and worked over. This archaic heirloom is not fit to be used for the purposes of civilized social life in the form in which it is inherited by the individual.}\textsuperscript{127}

We said before that the return of the repressed may be recurrent, but does not have to be eternal. We can likewise suggest that according to Freud, the archaic heritage, the return of the repressed and the power of Religion as well as other facets of civilization, may be compulsive, but compulsive does not have to mean necessary and inevitable. Even if they are inherent as archaic heritage and internalized in the individual’s super-ego, they can still be overcome.

This is what differentiates Freud’s idea of archaic heritage from Jung’s idea of the collective unconscious. Actually, Freud does not deny the existence of a collective unconscious (he simply rejects the use of the notion as technical term, since he believes the content of the unconscious is collective anyhow).\textsuperscript{128} Nevertheless, Jung’s idea of a collective unconscious plays a very different part in his notion of therapy than the role of archaic heritage in Freud’s. As Rieff clarifies, it was on their attitudes to the past that Jung and Freud parted; according to Jung, “In the unconscious…there is a reservoir of strength from which man ought to draw to meet the demands of the day. He must learn to see that what once was true may be true again, that what was once needful may be needful in the here and now again, that nothing old in the world of ideas is incapable of becoming novel. Jung favours therapeutic renascences…Freud is for therapeutic reformations, which will abolish the tyranny of nostalgia.”\textsuperscript{129}

Freud’s model, then, makes room for social critique and therapy, in a way Jung’s model does not.

\textsuperscript{126}Civilization and its Discontents, SE 21, p.145.
\textsuperscript{127}Preface to Reik’s Ritual, Psycho-Analytic Studies, SE 17 p.262 (my italics).
\textsuperscript{128}Moses and Monotheism, SE 23, p.132.
\textsuperscript{129}Philip Rieff, Freud: The Mind of the Moralist, p.200n.
What enables in Freud’s thought the idea of an open future, of choice, freedom, and of therapy is, surprisingly, his economic approach. Or rather, it is a combination of the energetic model with the place of consciousness in psychoanalysis. While thinking of ourselves as intentional creatures — with will and motives, rather than as machines — we can nevertheless picture therapy as a sort of installation or traffic works: regained consciousness in therapy provides a sort of drainage to repressed cathexis. After working through enough detritus on the conscious outlets we can expect the cathexis to stop leaking through dreams, slips and symbols. It could be the same with the philogenetic neurosis of religion — a coming to terms with the prehistoric truth which is encoded in our collective unconscious — would be like building a highway. It may relieve the pressure of the repressed cathexis which flows into the warped paths of religious faith and rituals.

Freud’s theory of religion can be read as “a historical investigation into the events that have led us to constitute ourselves,” to use the words of Michel Foucault. But being a critique, it is not done in order to hold on to what we are. A critique, as Foucault explains, “will not deduce from the form of what we are what it is impossible for us to do and to know; it will rather separate out, from the contingency that has made us what we are, the possibility of no longer being, doing, or thinking what we are, do, or think.”

Hence, Freud’s philogenetic theories about an archaic heritage and the recurrent return of the repressed need not be read as deterministic. Nor do they contradict his positive, prescriptive message. We can make room, among his descriptive theories, for the normative manifesto of “The Future of an Illusion.” The ‘prophet’s paradox’ can be solved by the notion of liberating consciousness in therapy. It is in the idea of mal-adaptivity that Freud finds the final critical solution to the question why we should rid ourselves of religion, and it is in the idea of therapy that such a step is rendered possible, and that the choice is given to us to take it, or not.

130 Michel Foucault, “What is Enlightenment?”, p.46.
131 Ibid., ibid.
Afterword

It is a philosopher’s game to look for a consistent doctrine in the wide variety of one’s thoughts, writings and arguments. I have tried to form a comprehensive view of Freud’s critique of religion and to look for his better lines of argument, which I believe to be the evolutionary critique. I then tried to defend it against possible objections and to settle inner contradictions which may hinder reading Freud’s entire work on religion in this line.

We have been inviting imaginary opponents to our game, and waved them aside each time along with their arguments, sometimes perhaps undeservedly. It is only fitting that we should now compensate by letting an imaginary opponent have the last word. The last opponent to be conjured here would be a biographer of Freud. He would look with disdain upon our philosophizing game, and say we were wrong to try and settle contradictions; by eliminating differences in the search for the marrow of Freud’s critique of religion, he would say we flattened and diluted what should actually have been a rich, dynamic narrative.

This biographer may be a psychoanalyst by profession. If so, he would tell a story, according to which there existed in Freud’s soul deep ambivalence towards religion, not independent of his ambivalence towards his father, of course. It is as if there were in him different ‘Freuds,’ he would explain, with different attitudes towards religion. In the same vein, Rieff finds in Freud two personalities and to each of them he accords a different sense of health. For the one, which he names the ‘rationalist’ Freud, ‘healthy’ would be “one which is freed of its history”; for the other, the ‘romantic Freud,’ ‘healthy’ would mean “one which can reclaim its history.”132 Freud’s theories of religion, would add our biographer-opponent, circle around the question of our relation to our past, to our archaic heritage, and he himself oscillates between attraction and aversion, acceptance and defiance of it.

If again our biographer-opponent were a historian, or a novelist, his story would be one of diachronic change, rather than of synchronic difference. He would tell how Freud conducted in his lifetime a lively dialogue with religion, in the course of which he may have changed his mind a few times. Starting with a humbler attitude, which can be recognized in the beginning of his correspondence with Pfister, and even in his first paper on the analogy, Freud turned to a vehement rejection of religion.

in the 1920s, but then mellowed, ending on a more placatory note. Freud himself professed changes of attitude. These changes may have been due to a theoretical shift, one in Freud’s epistemological stance, for example, or due to the changing historical conditions in Europe of the 1930s. Quite a few interpreters understood Moses and Monotheism to represent a rapprochement between Freud and religion, or Judaism in particular. A vigorous discussion on this question has taken place since Yerushalmi, Bernstein and others welcomed Freud back to Judaism as a prodigal son, coming home to his people.

But if our opponent biographer prefers sad endings, he can end the biography differently. He may say that what happened to Freud soon after the publication of “The Future of an Illusion,” his optimistic manifesto, was that he began to lose hope for civilization.

In “Analysis Terminable and Interminable,” Freud raises doubts about the therapeutic power of psychoanalysis on the individual. Moses and Monotheism may be read, then, as its counterpart in social psychology. Freud’s confidence as a therapist, both of the individual as well as of civilization, was shaken. The themes of Moses and Monotheism were religion’s hold on the people and of the power of the past on them; Freud’s ‘acceptance’ of them, according to this last biographical version, would not be understood as a repentant embrace of Judaism or religion, no homecoming, but rather a shrug, expressing despair.

And then it could be that eventually Freud did become a determinist, but not of the optimistic kind; not one who prognosticates a future man with no religion...

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133 “In “The Future of an Illusion” I expressed an essentially negative valuation of religion; later I found a formula which does better justice to it” in Postscript to “An Autobiographical Study” SE 20, p.72.
134 Such an account is given by Rachel Blass, who argues that in Moses and Monotheism Freud accepts tradition as a legitimate source of truth, and the new kind of truth, ‘historical truth,’ besides ‘material’ one. However, in “The Role of Tradition in Concealing and Grounding Truth” Blass finds this epistemological stance already in Totem and Taboo.
135 In “Beyond Illusion,” Rachel Blass argues against a reading of Moses and Monotheism as an anti-religious book. According to Blass, Freud’s main concern in the book is to explain the power that some ideas have on us even when they have no external evidence (p.627): “His focus is now on the truth and justification of these ideas, not on their distortive nature” (p.629). In this, she finds a new opening for dialogue between psychoanalysis and religion.
whose rational society is better adapted to the brave new world; not one who promises salvation, when we have all overcome our archaic heritage, but rather a pessimistic one: a disappointed leader of an abortive revolution who watches history with a sense of failure and doom:

Thus I have not the courage to rise up before my fellow men as a prophet, and I bow to their reproach that I can offer them no consolation: for at bottom that is what they are all demanding – the wildest revolutionaries no less passionately than the most virtuous believers.137

137 Civilization and its Discontents, SE 21, p.145.
Bibliography


