FREUD TEACHES PSYCHOTHERAPY

TRANSCENDENCE

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In Freud's first paper on religion (1907B; 9:116ff) a weakness appears in his thinking that in later works led him to some very serious errors culminating in his book (with Bullitt) on Woodrow Wilson. This latter work can only be described as a disaster and is not even contained in the *Standard Edition.* The weakness, it seems to me, stems from a certain dogmatic arrogance in Freud's personality; others might call it narcissism, stubbornness or a tendency to disregard opposing views (since so many of them were and are so stupid or ill-informed). This character trait was extremely useful and important to Freud in the establishment of psychoanalysis; but in subjects such as religion, anthropology, and sociology —subjects removed from the clinical consulting room—he made the mistake of clinging to his convictions with the same tenacity he had shown in his experience-based convictions about the mental life of individuals. He apparently did not consider the fact that although in his daily psychiatric practice he received continual confirmations of his formulations from his patients, no such confirmations are possible to support his sweeping generalizations about religion, God, the devil, Moses, and numerous other nonclinical subjects. I believe that Freud's attack on religion was both unfair and unfortunate, and was not characterized by a meticulous and dispassionate study of the values as well as the defects in religion. Such carelessness cannot be attributed simply to anti-Semitic experiences on

Freud's part, since his views on the Jewish religion were the same as his views on religion in general.

The central issue is whether or not Freud's statements about religion represent a total explanation of religion as he eventually insisted that they did. In the important early paper "Obsessive Acts and Religious Practices" (1907B; 9:116-128), Freud discusses the obvious resemblance between obsessively pietistic practices, and obsessive rituals and ceremonies in the obsessive compulsive neurotic. Although all religions recognize that excessive piety can be a spurious form of religion, this fact is obviously irrelevant to a general discussion of religion. It is even possible to accept Freud's statement that all believers are not aware of the motives which impel them to religious practices, but it does not follow from this that all the motives which impel believers to religious practices stem from unconscious infantile wishes! It is possible to argue that a religious motive, or, more generally, a motive toward transcendence or some kind of actualization exists in humans. St. Augustine insisted, in an even more extreme view (Nash 1969), that a force of Divine illumination may lead some people toward religious belief. All three of these viewpoints on the motivations behind religious belief are hypotheses which cannot be proven right or wrong at the present time, nor in any individual case is it possible to reduce religion positively and exclusively to any one of these motivations.

Freud states that the formation of a religion "seems to be based on the suppression, the renunciation, of certain instinctual impulses. These impulses, however, are not, as in the neuroses, exclusively components of the sexual instinct; they are self-seeking, socially harmful instincts, though, even so, they are usually not without a sexual component" (p. 125). It is reasonable to conclude from this that "one might venture to regard obsessional neurosis as a pathological counterpart of the formation of a religion" (p. 126), but it is unclear how Freud evolves the second half of this sentence, wherein he calls religion "a universal obsessional neurosis," a statement which begins the tradition of pejorative, simplistic generalizations and name-calling that has marred psychoanalysis since the beginning.

Freud (1907C; 9:130ff) argues that enlightenment about the specific facts of human sexuality should be given to each child before he is ten, and he couples this advice with an attack on the clergy. He correctly implies that clergy have in the past been a reactionary and suppressive force on the subject of sexuality, but he makes the strange argument that a priest will never admit that men and animals have the same nature. It is difficult to see how Freud himself could maintain that men and animals have the same nature, unless he is speaking strictly of biological functions, in which case he would be joined by Aristotle and Aquinas. His paper, "The Sexual Enlightenment of Children" (1907C; 9:130ff), is a call for revolution; indeed it may be thought of as the manifesto of the sexual revolution of our times. A

similar manifestation of Freud's increasing conviction that he can explain all there is to know about religion is in the statement "The devil is certainly nothing else than the personification of the repressed unconscious instinctual life" (1908B; 9:174). It is the phrase "certainly nothing else than" to which I object and which becomes increasingly common in Freud's writing on nonclinical matters.

Totem and Taboo (Freud 1912X; 13:1-163) was one of Freud's favorites among his work, ranking in his mind with *The Interpretation of Dreams,* but it is primarily a controversial contribution to social anthropology and I will discuss only those aspects of interest to the clinician. Written when Freud was 57, in one of his great creative spurts, it begins by establishing the universal taboo on incest, with emphasis on the extraordinary precautions taken by primitive tribes to avoid any possibility of incest or even a relationship that might distantly resemble it. Freud explains that primitive tribes are much more sensitive to the issue of incest than civilized people, and any violation of this taboo is usually punished with death. The inference, of course, is that the temptation to incest is greater in primitive tribes.

A clinical digression is offered on the subject of the mother-in-law, as far as I know the only place that Freud discusses the subject, and reading it points to the value of asking patients about their relationships with their mothers- in-law. In Freud's opinion the mother-in-law is a common

displacement object for the love of the patient's own mother and sisters, and the well-known "streak of irritability and malevolence" that is apt to be present in a man's feeling about his mother-in-law "leads us to suspect that she does in fact offer him a temptation to incest" (p. 16). The temptation, of course, is to sexual congress with one's mother, not mother in law. The latter is just a stand-in, as in a dream.

In this first section we are reminded that the totem, usually an animal, stands for the ancestor and protector of the clan. Members of a totem group are under a sacred obligation (a) not to destroy the totem, and (b) not to enter into sexual relations with each other. In the long second section, Freud reminds us that these two basic laws of totemism are the oldest and most important taboo prohibitions. He ranges over the enormous variety of taboos known and attempts to point out the similarity between the compulsions of neurotics and the compulsions underlying taboos in (1) the lack of obvious motivation for the commandments or compulsions; (2) their enforcement through an inner need; (3) their capacity for displacement and the danger of contagion from what is prohibited; and (4) ceremonial acts and commandments, like the compulsions of neurotics, emanate from the forbidden in an attempt to undo the dreaded harm. He stresses the emotional ambivalence underlying both neurotic compulsions and taboos.

In a much quoted sweeping generalization he compares the neuroses to

distortions of art, religion, and philosophy: "It might be maintained that a case of hysteria is a caricature of a work of art, that an obsessional neurosis is a caricature of a religion and that a paranoic delusion is a caricature of a philosophical system" (p. 73), but he adds the less often quoted but very important differentiation that neuroses are primarily asocial and represent a taking flight from an unsatisfying reality into a more pleasurable world of fantasy. When he writes, "To turn away from reality is at the same time to withdraw from the community of man" (p. 74), here again Freud stresses the clinical point that neuroses are essentially precipitated by an unbearable reality.

Each section of *Totem and Taboo* may be read as an independent essay. The third section deals with the subject, "Animism, Magic and the Omnipotence of Thought." Freud's extremely important description of the development of our sense of reality testing is expanded in detail by Ferenczi (1950) in one of the most important classical clinical papers in psychoanalysis. I will describe this paper briefly here. Originally published in 1913, Ferenczi's paper was clearly under the influence of *Totem and Taboo* which was published in the same year. At the basis of magic is the belief in the great power of wishes, an attitude toward the world where thought is overestimated compared to reality, and given an omnipotence. In man's conception of the universe, an early animistic phase in which the world is infested by spirits is followed by a religious phase in which these magical

powers are invested in God, who, although omnipotent, can be influenced. The development ends in a scientific phase which retains at least the omnipotent hope that knowledge can lead to power. This corresponds to stages in the childhood development of the individual of primary narcissism, object finding with dependency on the parents, and maturity.

Ferenczi's elaboration begins with (1) a period of unconditional omnipotence: the situation in the womb and shortly after birth which soon leads, because of inevitable disappointments in such unconditional omnipotence, to (2) a period of magical-hallucinatory omnipotence characterized by imagination and positive and negative hallucinations. This is followed by (3) a period of omnipotence by the help of magic gestures, such as evidenced in the residual adult phenomena of cursing, blessing, and praying. These three phases correspond to what Ferenczi calls the "introjection phase" of the psyche, by which he means there is no clear differentiation between the self and the outside world and all experiences are incorporated into the ego.

The next period, similar to Freud's description, endows every object with life, and is called (4) the animistic period. This is followed by (5), the period of magic thoughts and magic words, to which obsessive-compulsive neurotics regress. These five phases in the development of the sense of reality are characterized by the domination of the pleasure principle. The final phase,

or stage of objectification, is marked by the ascendency of the reality principle. As Ferenczi explains, the essence of the development of the ego is the replacement, to which we are compelled by experience, of childhood narcissism or megalomania by the recognition of the power of natural forces and reality.

Here, most important clinically is the sometimes-ignored phenomenon that regression in psychosexual development is accompanied by regression in the sense of reality and so the regressed patient experiences reality differently than the mature psychotherapist. No amount of exhortation, demands, or punishment can change this situation, and if the therapist is not aware of how the patient is experiencing reality then he or she cannot understand some of the patient's behavior and consequently tends to become judgmental and often annoyed and retaliatory.

The final essay in *Totem and Taboo* presents Freud's famous speculation about the beginning of totemism. To summarize, he begins with men in the state of primal hordes ruled by a father, as postulated by Darwin. The fear of and love of the father produce ambivalence; he adds that in infantile phobias this fear is also frequently displaced to animals (see Chapter 6 above). Freud postulates the killing and eating of the father by the brothers—the so-called totem feast. This procedure is displaced to a totem animal that then becomes a father to the group but is periodically killed and eaten in the holy mystery of

identification on the "holiday," when the inhibition is suspended. Thus the two fundamental taboos arise out of the son's guilt over the wish to kill the father and possess the mother—the Oedipus complex, where Freud sees the beginnings of religion, ethics, society, and art. It is not hard to see why this book, with its sweeping generalizations, was badly received outside psychoanalytic circles as just "one more personal fantasy of Freud's" (Jones 1955).

The final section, however, contains an important warning to clinicians, since the two kinds of the most powerful longings to which human beings are subject are described. The wish to destroy the parent of the same sex and have sexual intercourse with the parent of the opposite sex is one of these; the other is the pregenital organization, which centers around ambivalence, the presence of two enormously powerful and opposite emotions toward the same individual at the same time. These days, in dealing with many pregenital disorders, we are constantly aware of the intensity of the ambivalence for the early parental objects, as the various aspects of these passions are projected onto the therapist in the vicissitudes of the transference. We tend to lose sight of the equally powerful emotions of the Oedipus complex, which revolve around primitive lust and the craving for power. Inexperienced therapists sometimes do not recognize that all the clinical *sturm und drang* of pre-Oedipal material in the therapy really is for the purpose of hiding the Oedipus complex.

Near the end of *Totem and Taboo* Freud recognized that it is not so important whether primitive men actually carried out the murder of the father or simply were trying to deal with a wishful fantasy of killing and devouring him—either would have been enough to produce the moral reaction that created totemism and taboo.

Freud repeatedly stressed that the acceptance or rejection of psychoanalysis rests on the understanding of the overwhelmingly powerful influence of this fantasy of destroying the parent of the same sex and sexually possessing the parent of the opposite sex. Innumerable opponents and deviants from psychoanalysis have attempted to ignore or water down this fundamental premise. I contend from over fifty years of extensive clinical experience with practicing intensive psychotherapy that in the instance of many neurotics and some borderline patients *Freud was correct*. Any psychotherapist who attempts to sidestep or does not notice the important issues of the Oedipus complex in any of his or her patients does so to the great detriment of the patient. Despite the so-called sexual revolution of today I find this issue to be just as invested with taboos, prohibitions, and multiple and tricky defenses as Freud described them in his day. I also find student psychotherapists just as resistant to recognizing this material as were Freud's early contemporaries, even though they may pay intellectual lip service to it.

Totem and Taboo also reveals Freud's basic philosophy and contains a

number of premises which, to say the least, are highly controversial. For example, he compares the old notion of the soul and the body as reminiscent of the unconscious and the conscious, especially in the way in which the soul remains concealed behind the manifest personality. But he relegates the notion of the soul to the early phase of animistic thought as described above.

On the other hand, at the beginning of the fourth essay, Freud presents a very modest statement about religion, explaining that psychoanalysis does not trace the origin of anything so complicated as religion to a single source but only emphasizes one particular source. This does not mean, writes Freud, "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 findings in the different fields of research will it become possible to arrive at a relative importance of the part played in the genesis of religion by the mechanism discussed in these pages. Such a task lies beyond the means as well as beyond the purposes of a psychoanalyst" (p. 100). It is well known that Freud's subsequent writings do not bear out his modesty in the area of religion, even his own.

There is a remarkable parallel between the philosophy of Freud and that of Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679), another long-lived genius. Just as Freud attempted to model his new science on classical physics, so Hobbes attempted to develop a new science of philosophy on the same model. Although Hobbes,

like Freud, was accused of atheism, he actually conceived of God as "incomprehensible" and therefore outside the realm of philosophy; Freud went further and conceived of God as only a human creation born out of psychological needs, as described in *The Future of an Illusion* (Freud 1927; 21:3ff), to be discussed shortly.

Hobbes and Freud had a very similar view of the development of religion, beginning with Hobbes' premise that material competition, diffidence (fear), and seeking glory are basic human drives or, as Freud would say, derivatives of them. From this premise Hobbes concludes in his classic *Leviathan,* that religion arises from animistic superstition, ignorance of causes, devotion toward what men fear and hate, and taking of things that are casual happenings for prognostics of the future, out of the wish to know the future. Religion for Hobbes is a completely human phenomenon that has nothing to do with God and is simply an inevitable and natural consequence of human nature. Therefore, for Hobbes, as for Freud, there is no such thing as a true or false religion—all are equally spurious creations of the human psyche.

Also like Freud, Hobbes was middle-aged when he turned his attention to philosophy, which he attempted to make a useful science by concerning it primarily with a mechanistic and materialistic account of the generative processes by which sensation and mental states come into being. He made the

same basic generalization that Freud made regarding the individual man and a group of men; thus both Hobbes and Freud would agree that the natural principles of individual human psychology can be applied to mankind as a body, which Hobbes named the leviathan. As Freud spoke of individual psychology and group psychology, Hobbes spoke of natural philosophy and civic philosophy. Like Freud, he believed that given certain premises about structures and energies in the human psyche, all human individual and group behavior could be naturally explained according to observable laws. Just as Freud's work represented a revolution in psychological thinking, Hobbes' philosophy was a revolutionary change from the medieval conceptions of man and universe.

Hobbes' famous theory of causes that generate the artificial body known as the Leviathan or commonwealth is very similar to Freud's approach in *Totem and Taboo.* Hobbes explains that each man seeks self- preservation and security but is unable to attain these ends because his natural condition is war of all against all. In order to put an end to continuous civil war and the misery it brings for everybody, a transfer of some rights and liberties must take place by the covenant of every man to a sovereign body with absolute power, the commonwealth or Leviathan. This social contract or covenant is described in terms very similar to those in the final section of *Totem and Taboo* and is no more consistent with historical research than are the speculations of Freud in that section. Like Freud, Hobbes did not find it

necessary to insist that a specific historical process took place through an explicit covenant any more than Freud insisted that the murder of the father had to be a historical happening. Like Freud, Hobbes attempts to explain from basic premises about primitive man how certain processes inevitably led to the formation of the social contract which constitutes the basis of the commonwealth. As Freud explains various totems and taboos, Hobbes deduces the variety of states and commonwealths as occurring in a natural fashion from the passions of man, without reference to metaphysical and transcendental considerations—a thoroughly naturalistic theory. Freud's deduction of the development of totems and taboos from the Oedipus complex is an identical revolutionary theory.

The same pessimism about the basic nature of man pervades both Hobbes' and Freud's writings; the same tension between rational and irrational man or, more generally, man as imminent and man as transcendent, remains unresolved. In the beginning of this book I described Freud's dualistic conception of man as outlined by Holt. Hobbes found himself in similar difficulty, for he requires this basically voracious and irrational creature to have the capacity to develop communal living as the result of an elaborate rational calculation of long-range interests. The same struggle between the domination of the pleasure principle and the domination of the reality principle at the dawn of the body politic is described in *Leviathan.* Professional philosophers attacked this description of the struggle as an

inconsistency in Hobbes' philosophy; Freud would describe it as the very essence of the development of the individual and the collective human psyche. Notice again the common assumption that the phenomena of groups or the body politic may be studied in the same manner as the phenomena of individual men.

From his "First Philosophy" Hobbes hoped to make generalizations that would lead to naturalistic explanations of the wide variety of known phenomena, and Freud expressed a similar desire. In a brief essay entitled "The Claims of Psychoanalysis to Scientific Interest" (Freud 1913J; 13:164-192), he points out that psychoanalysis cannot be accused of having applied to normal cases findings derived from exclusively pathological material, for the evidence for psychoanalytic hypotheses to be found in normal phenomena such as parapraxes and dreams, he claims, was reached independently from the study of the neuroses. He continues by describing applications of psychoanalytic hypotheses to philology, philosophy, biology, child development, the history of civilization, esthetics, sociology, and education. This tendency toward the increasing generalization of the hypotheses of psychoanalysis to wider and wider fields involved Freud in numerous controversies and exposed him to a variety of counterarguments and conflicting evidence, much as happened in Hobbes' unsuccessful attempt to deduce all varieties of human and social phenomena from his "First Philosophy."

Such psychoanalytic generalizations have been carried on by a variety of authors to the present day and must be regarded by the clinician as peripheral to the major issues of psychotherapy. The validity or invalidity of generalizations made from psychoanalytic propositions to a variety of normal social phenomena is irrelevant to the validity of psychoanalytic propositions in our clinical work with patients. For example, Freud's (1914B; 13:210ff) analysis of Michelangelo's statue of Moses, the proof or disproof of which remains so controversial, has no bearing on the use of his hypotheses in our day-to-day clinical work and merely illustrates the dangers of generalizations from insufficient evidence, and of greater and greater abstractions. It is far better to follow Freud's own dictum as he expressed it in "On the History of the Psychoanalytic Movement'': "I learned to restrain speculative tendencies and to follow the unforgotten advice of my master, Charcot: to look at the same things again and again until they themselves begin to speak" (Freud 1914D ;14:22). This dictum arose out of what Freud called his "splendid isolation" in which "I did not have to read any publications, nor listen to any ill-informed opponents; I was not subject to influence from any quarter; there was nothing to hustle me" (ibid).

In this same frankly polemical essay, Freud again illustrates to what extent psychologists will go to avoid facing the central role of sexual desire in childhood development, a role equaled in importance only by the vicissitudes of narcissism and narcissistic rage. At the time of his writing this essay Freud

was 58 and the psychoanalytic movement was in a shambles, due to the secession of Adler and Jung. Although both these latter pioneers made historically important contributions, both retreated from the clinical experience that manifests itself again and again in the transference—that the vicissitudes of the Oedipus complex and the child's experiences of hatred and lust involving the parents are at the root of many neurotic disorders. Jones (1955) believes that the essay on the statue of Moses, "The Moses of Michelangelo'' (1914B; 13:210ff) represents Freud's identification with Moses confronting his backsliding supporters and struggling inwards to control his passion and bitterness. Jones insists, "Every analysis conducted in a proper manner, and in particular every analysis of a child, strengthens the conviction upon which the theory of psychoanalysis is founded, and rebuts the reinterpretations made by both Jung's and Adler's systems" (1955, p. 65).

The subject of religion increasingly interested Freud in his later years. It seems to me that his hostility to organized religion was not far from that of Voltaire. As a simple example, he discussed a reported case of demoniacal possession in "A Seventeenth Century Demonological Neurosis'' (1923D; 19:69ff). For Freud, the demonological possessions correspond to the neuroses in that demons represent bad and unacceptable derivatives of infantile wishes that have been repudiated and repressed. "We merely eliminate the projection of these mental entities into the external world which the middle ages carried out; instead, we regard them as having arisen

in the patient's internal life, where they have their abode" (p. 72).

Although the concept of Satan evolved gradually in the Old Testament, the personification of Satan came only after the conquest and dispersion of the Jews by the Babylonians in the sixth century B.C. For the Jews, Satan is not an independent power of evil, but rather an avenging angel who produces destruction at the command of God. Only later, after the writing of the Torah (450 B.C.) and before the writing of the New Testament, the domination of the Persians over the Jews with the influence of Zoroastrianism led to the development of Satan as falling from God and becoming His adversary. By the time of the second and first centuries B.C., Jewish writing clearly borrows the Syrian and Babylonian notion that demons can invade the body.

For Freud it is obvious that God and the Devil were originally identical, a single figure split into two figures with opposite attributes. He regards these figures as projections of the fundamentally ambivalent attitude of the child toward the father. The implication of this notion is quite clear: Freud considered both the concept of God and that of the Devil as illusory projections from the human unconscious and as having no basis for existence in fact.

It is indeed remarkable that Kant also speaks of transcendental ideas as being the parents of "irresistible illusion." One of these transcendental ideas, which for Kant represents absolute perfection and the single basic condition

of all objects of thought in general, is called God. So to think of God as a substance existing in experience is for both Kant and Freud an illusion. For Freud that settles the matter; for Kant it is only the beginning, for in his philosophy the notion of God becomes necessary as a basis for what he considers to be universal moral laws within us.

In 1927 at the age of seventy-one Freud wrote *The Future of an Illusion* (1927C;21;3ff), beginning a series of studies that became his major concern for the remainder of his life. In 1907 he had discussed the matter of religion in a paper on obsessive acts and religious practices (discussed above). In that early paper, he drew the obvious parallel between obsessional rituals and religious rituals. He reminds us that the worshipper, like the obsessive patient, usually does not know the meaning of religious rituals and that the ceremonial in both cases is a protective measure. The ritualistic ceremonial defends against the temptations of sexuality and aggression, and magically protects against breakdown of the whole repressive process; the ceremonial represents a compromise formation in which displacement is crucial. Thus even at an early date, Freud states that the obsessional neurosis is a private religious system and that religion is a universal obsessional neurosis. He distinguishes between the temptations of the obsessional neuroses which are mainly sexual, and the repressed wishes defended against by religion—wishes which at that point he calls ego-instincts, and which are more concerned with aggression than sexuality: "Vengeance is mine, sayeth the

Lord."

Although in this early work Freud is extremely scornful of philosophy, the work itself contains a philosophical viewpoint, a materialistic, atheistic ideology. He considers religion dangerous and all metaphysics superfluous and irrelevant. He defines religion as an illusion inspired by the infantile belief in the omnipotence of thought, as essentially a neurosis and a narcotic that hampers intelligence. For Freud, religion is something man will have to grow out of and give up like an infantile neurosis. It is this parallel of religion to neurosis that convinced Freud that psychoanalysis can unmask and explain the so-called universal neuroses of mankind.

His psychoanalytic explanation of God appeared in 1910 in his study of Leonardo da Vinci (1910C; 11:59ff). Here he maintains that the personal God is psychologically none other than a magnified father, and thus the root of religious need lies in the child's ambivalent attitude toward the father. In the *The Future of an Illusion* (1927C; 21:3ff) he adds a second major factor in the genesis of religion: the helplessness of mankind in the face of the many dangers with which humans must cope—from the outer world, from within, and from one's relationships to one's fellow men.

It is interesting that the *The Future of an Illusion* discusses the future of *two* illusions. The first illusion is that of religion (as already explained); the

second is Freud's own hope that mankind can some day find it possible to endure the hardships of life without having recourse to the consolations of religion. Freud himself admits that he is indulging in an illusion:

> The voice of the intellect is a soft one, but it does not rest till it has gained a hearing. Finally, after a countless succession of rebuffs, it succeeds. This is one of the few points on which one may be optimistic about the future of mankind, but it is in itself a point of no small importance. And from it one can derive yet other hopes. The primacy of the intellect lies, it is true, in a distant, distant future, but probably not in an *infinitely* distant one. It will presumably set itself the same aims as those whose realization you expect from your God (of course within human limits—so far as external reality, Ἀνάγκη, allows it), namely the love of man and the decrease of suffering (1927C; 21:53).

Freud continues by saying that the major first step in man's defense against the overwhelming power of nature is the humanization of nature, for impersonal forces and destinies cannot be approached; they remain eternally remote. This humanization relates man to the infantile prototype of the helplessness of a small child in relation to its parents. This helplessness, along with the longing for the father, is transferred to religion. "The gods retain their threefold task: they must exorcize the terrors of nature, they must reconcile men to the cruelty of Fate, particularly as it is shown in death, and they must compensate them for the sufferings and privations which a civilized life in common has imposed on them" (p. 18). Clearly these ideas protect man against the dangers of nature (Fate) and against injuries that threaten him from human society itself.

According to Freud, the function of the finished body of religious ideas as it is transmitted by civilization to the individual now becomes clear. He maintains that in taming the instincts, religion has performed great services for human civilization, but that this is not enough; although religion has ruled human society for many thousands of years, it has not succeeded in reconciling the majority of people to life and making them into vehicles of civilization.

Freud does not maintain that religious ideas are false, he maintains that they are illusions, beliefs derived from human wishes. Illusions need not necessarily be false, defining "false" as unrealizable or in contradiction to reality. It is more accurate, he says, to explain that religious ideas represent beliefs which are highly unlikely in their realization, but are maintained fiercely because of the power of the wishes that underlie them. In this essay Freud disregards the philosopher's idea of God as reached through various philosophical systems or arguments, and addresses himself essentially to the God of organized western religion, an anthropomorphized Divine Providence, benevolent and interested in managing the affairs of men. He regards the philosopher's concept of God, reached through various metaphysical systems such as those of Aristotle or Kant, as essentially dishonest because these systems are so remote from the God of organized religion, and as representing a stretching of the meaning of words.

Freud addresses himself to the same issue as Kant, asking whether a transcendental idea can be discussed and dissected by the method of science. Using different terminology, he agrees with Kant that synthetic *a priori* judgments in metaphysics are impossible. This is why Freud considers metaphysics and transcendental ideas as essentially useless illusions, a stance that places him in exact opposition to the moral philosophy of Kant. Freud would maintain that the concept of transcendence, as I have discussed it in previous works (Chessick 1977, 1977a, 1992a, 1999, 2007, 2010), is an illusion, and that men must learn to endure the hardness of life with resignation and without the help of such mirages.

In *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930A; 21:59ff) Freud again reminds us that suffering comes from the superior power of nature, the feebleness of our own bodies, and the inadequacy of the regulations which adjust the mutual relationships of human beings in the family, the state, and society. Man attempts to cope with this unhappiness through chemical intoxication, permissible displacements of libido, the satisfaction obtained from such illusions as religion, withdrawal from reality and human relationships, and the enjoyment of beauty. The man who is predominantly erotic will give first preference to his emotional relationships to other people, the narcissistic man, who inclines to be self-sufficient, will seek his main satisfactions in his internal mental processes, the man of action will never give up the external world on which he can try out his strength. I (1977a) have discussed this at

length elsewhere.

The deflections that Freud discusses help us make light of our misery, substitutive satisfactions diminish it, and intoxicating substances make us insensitive to it. Thus the substitute satisfactions, as, for example, those offered by art, are effective thanks to the role of fantasy. Freud sees no place for religion in this series, and indeed for Freud the purpose of life "is simply the program of the pleasure principle." Thus happiness, according to Freud, comes from the—preferably sudden—satisfaction of needs which have been dammed up to a high degree, an episodic phenomenon obviously modeled on the sexual orgasm.

The beautifully written *Civilization and Its Discontents* begins with the famous quotation, "It is impossible to escape the impression that people commonly use false standards of measurement—that they seek power, success and wealth for themselves and admire them in others, and that they underestimate what is of true value in life" (p. 64).

Clearly, Freud does assume a hierarchy of activities and values. For example, he considers "working with all for the good of all" to be a better path than withdrawal from humanity. From his own philosophy, however, no reason is given to choose one escape from misery over the other. On his grounds, even chemical intoxication is no more or less justifiable than

creative work or scientific endeavor. Yet:

> One gains the most if one can sufficiently heighten the yield of pleasure from the sources of psychical and intellectual work. When that is so, fate can do little against one. A satisfaction of this kind, such as an artist's joy in creating, in giving his phantasies body, or a scientist's in solving problems or discovering truths, has a special quality which we shall certainly one day be able to characterize in metapsychological terms. At present we can only say figuratively that such satisfactions seem 'finer and higher' (p. 79).

It is curious that Freud nowhere considers the source of his obviously humanistic hierarchy of human endeavor, which collides head-on with his objectifying man as a physical-chemical entity with a mental "apparatus." This is an excellent example of the unresolved tension that runs throughout Freud's work, as discussed in the introduction to the present book, between the language of the scientific understanding and the language of the humanistic imagination (see also Chessick 1971). For Freud, happiness in the extreme is clearly the satiation of a crude and primary impulsive instinct in a wild periodic orgy that convulses one's whole physical being. This is not an exaggeration—I am using Freud's literal words from *Civilization and Its Discontents*. In spite of its distasteful impact on our finer cultural and esthetic sentiments, Freud's contention about extreme happiness is supported by considerable evidence.

Civilization and Its Discontents enumerates some of the ways in which civilized men find happiness and advises us not to look for the whole of our

satisfaction in a single aspiration. Religion is viewed negatively, as restricting the sway of choices, making adaptation much more difficult, and depressing the value of life.

From this basic view of happiness it is clear why Freud sees civilization in fundamental opposition to gratification of man's instinctual needs and therefore as a basic obstacle to the achievement of sublime satisfaction and happiness. Clearly, civilization is built upon a renunciation of the discharge of powerful instincts, parallel to the training and development of a child into a civilized adult. Not only is the sexual drive restricted by civilization, but the fundamental aggressive drive is also sharply curbed. Thus if civilization imposes great sacrifices on man's sexuality and on his aggressiveness, it is clear why it is so hard for him to be happy in civilization.

Man's basic aggression, he explains, becomes internalized into a harsh superego which produces a chronic sense of guilt. Freud feels that the sense of guilt produced by civilization remains to a large extent unconscious "or appears as a sort of *malaise*, a dissatisfaction, for which people seek other motivations" (pp. 135- 6). He notes that religions claim to redeem mankind from this sense of guilt, and considers those who believe in this claim to be under the influence of a delusion.

One aspect of transcendence is the well known oceanic feeling of some-

thing limitless, of being one with the external world as a whole. Freud explains this feeling as a residue of the time before the infant was able to differentiate between the self and the external world. Therefore, although this oceanic feeling exists for some people, Freud rejects the notion that it has to do with the religious attitude. His entire attitude toward religious experience is summed up in a brief paper (1928A; 21:168ff) which should not be missed, in which he analyzes the conversion experience on the basis of the convert's Oedipus complex.

Freud seems to reach a final decision on religion in Lecture 35 of the *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis* (1933A; 22:158-182). He insists that religion is a serious enemy of science. Interestingly, philosophy in Freud's view is rather like a foolish cousin, for it clings "to the illusion of being able to present a picture of the universe which is without gaps and is coherent, though one which is bound to collapse with every fresh advance in our knowledge. It goes astray in its method by over-estimating the epistemological value of our logical operations and by accepting other sources of knowledge such as intuition" (p. 161). Freud goes on to declare that philosophy has essentially a trivial influence on mankind (a statement proved false by 20th Century Russian and Chinese history), whereas religion is an immense power and is all the more dangerous because it is so grandiose. It informs people of the origin of the universe, assures them of protection and happiness, and lays down laws to direct their actions.

Freud recommends that science and finally psychoanalysis simply set religion aside as an obsolete phenomenon of the infantile life of man. "Its consolations deserve no trust. Experience teaches us that the world is no nursery" (p. 168). Similarly, although Marxism has cleared away religious illusions, Freud believes it has also developed its own illusions by assuming that a change in the social structure will alter human nature.

Even in the last work he lived to see published, *Moses and Monotheism* (1939A; 23:3ff), Freud is such an effective writer that it is difficult to avoid discussing at great length such a provocative and interesting work. As an example of the kind of arguments and discussions that Freud's views on Moses can provoke, the reader is referred to the highly controversial and lengthy arguments in books such as those of Robert (1976) and Bakan (1965). These works, along with innumerable other references on the subject of Freud, Moses, and Judaism, present endless controversies which would take another volume to discuss at length. Ellenberger (1970) describes *Moses and Monotheism* (which appeared serially in *Imago* in 1937 and as a book in 1938) as "Neither a pathography, nor a scholarly work, nor a novel." He reports that it bewildered many of Freud's disciples and provoked indignant protest from Jewish circles. Historians of religion pointed out its errors and impossibilities. Jones (1957) makes the crushing criticism that its major thesis rests on a belief in the inheritance of acquired characteristics, an erroneous doctrine which Jones reports that Freud stubbornly and

dogmatically held all his life.

This work was written when Freud was over eighty and under the intense pressure of the Nazi movement threatening to overwhelm Catholic Austria. It discusses what Freud purports to be the origin of the Jewish religion as well as to some extent the origin and development of Christian religion, with a few asides about Moslem religion. In this sense it is a continuation of *Totem and Taboo* and *The Future of an Illusion.* Perhaps Freud again identified himself with Moses and viewed his departure from Vienna as the flight of Moses from Egypt, with the hope that psychoanalysis would arise again in the world after the demise of the Nazi movement; surely he saw psychoanalysis as being diluted and distorted by various defectors from the movement such as Adler and Jung. Above all, he was influenced by the unparalleled persecution of the Jews in Nazi Germany, a phenomenon which Freud regarded correctly as a regression to prehistoric barbarism.

The book begins by insisting that Moses was not a Hebrew, but an Egyptian of high rank and status. Freud reminds us that although the Egyptian king Akhenaton tried to force a monotheistic religion on his people, after his death the old religions were restored. He speculates that Moses refused to lay aside Monotheism and, having been rejected by the Egyptians, he chose the Hebrews as his people and with the help of his followers he imparted monotheism to the Jews and led them out of Egypt. Afterwards,

Freud says a rebellion arose against Moses, who was killed by his people. About sixty years later a new chief, also named Moses, formed a compromise of monotheism and the Yahweh worship of the people in the Sinai Peninsula. (The first Moses had led the Jews to the Sinai and united them with the Midianite tribe which worshipped a petty local god, Yahweh.) According to Freud, the tradition of the murder of the first Moses led to a lasting, unconscious sense of guilt among the Jewish people, and the memory of the first Moses was revived in the teachings of the Prophets. The wish for the return of the murdered Moses resulted in the belief forecasting the coming of the Messiah. Thus the story of Jesus Christ was a re-enactment of the story of the first Moses. Paul, who created Christian theology by accepting Jesus as the Messiah, called the prevailing sense of guilt "original sin." Thus the unmentionable crime was replaced by a shadowy conception of "original sin" and expiation was welcomed in the form of the Gospel of Salvation contending that Christ sacrificed Himself and thereby took over the guilt of the world.

Such a brief summary does not do justice to the brilliance of Freud's literary style and his vast erudition. Even though he at first considered this work a kind of speculative historical novel, the more he reflected about it the more he became convinced that it was correct, that is, historically true. Clearly Freud's theory of the inherited unconscious transmission of historical events is the weakest link in his theory. Another controversial link is Freud's

basic assumption that developmental steps in the life of individuals can be generalized to developmental steps in the various subgroups of the human species or in the human species in *toto*. This basic philosophical generalization pervades *Totem and Taboo, The Future of an Illusion,* and *Moses and Monotheism.*

For example, certain developmental steps are outlined as constituting the evolution of religion, which according to Freud began with totemism "with its worship of a father-substitute, with its ambivalence as shown by the totem meal, with its institution of memorial festivals and of prohibitions whose infringement was punished by death" (1939A; 23:83). The next step was the humanizing of the being who was worshipped, so that in place of animals human gods appeared, whose derivation from the Totem was not concealed. This was followed by the return of the single father-god of unlimited dominion. The content of the old totem meal, claims Freud, is repeated in the rite of the Christian communion, in which the believer incorporates the body and blood of his god in symbolic form.

All religions are regarded essentially as illusions based on infantile wishes, according to Freud, and are subject to analytic scrutiny. At the same time there is a remarkable discussion of transcendence which finds Freud quite puzzled. He feels certain that the modern step that represents a decision against sensuousness and direct sense perception, and in favor of the higher

intellectual processes, is a step forward deserving of pride. He notes that later in history intellectuality itself is "overpowered by the very puzzling emotional phenomenon of faith. Here we have the celebrated *credo quia absurdum,* and, once more, anyone who has succeeded in this regards it as a supreme achievement" (ibid, p. 118). His only explanation for regarding faith as a supreme achievement by those who have it is that perhaps men pronounced that which is more difficult to achieve to be higher. He never gives serious consideration to the possibility that the achievement of some form of transcendence might actually *be* higher, since for Freud reason and science are as far as man can go. And that, for Freud, is an article of faith!

The dangers and weaknesses in Freud's scientific world-view were quickly pointed out by his contemporaries, friend and foe alike. An eloquent summary of the problem is found in Zweig's (1962) portrait of Freud and his work. Zweig points out that the power of psychoanalysis ends "where the realm of inward faith, of creative confidence, begins." To be happy and creative "man must always be strengthened by faith in the meaning of his own existence," and "the human mind will continue to devote its plastic energy to the endeavour to find a meaning in life"—a statement which Freud regarded as absurd, infantile, and unhealthy. Recent work on the psychology of the self (Kohut 1971, 1977) has suggested a revision in this psychoanalytic attitude, emphasizing that a firm sense of self is manifested by such mental attributes as creative confidence and a sense of personal purpose and

meaning. However, such a viewpoint cannot refute Zweig's contention that "truth unalloyed has always a sub-flavour of bitterness and scepticism ... a purely intellectual analysis, cannot but be shadowed to some extent with gloom" (pp. 357-8). There *is* a kind of gloomy ambiance in Freud's later writings, reaching an apogee perhaps in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle,* introducing his notion of the death instinct as a primordial force, a view he later modified.

A remarkable correspondence on this subject took place between Freud and his friend, the Swiss Protestant clergyman Oskar Pfister, the first "pastoral counsellor" to make use of Freud's findings. This most interesting correspondence (Meng and Freud 1963) is unfortunately out of print. We find Freud writing that most humans are trash and insisting that his pessimism and gloom are rational conclusions, not preconvictions, whereas the optimism of Pfister and others he regards as *a priori* assumptions. It is perhaps worthwhile to put this unsettled debate into outline form:

1. Freud claims most humans are trash, whereas Pfister insists that we must love mankind or we get an ugly distorted picture of what he labels "the calculating machine man."

2. Freud categorically rejects the notion of "psychosynthesis" in the psychoanalytic process, whereas both Pfister and Zweig ask for it, and Pfister claims that successful analysis leads to the will to be moral.

3. Freud claims to stand on pure empirical science only; Pfister writes, "on philosophy, music and religion, we differ."

4. For Freud science must be called upon to solve everything, whereas for Pfister human happiness and aspiration cannot be adequately approached through science. He reminds us of Nietzsche's observation that the belief in science is itself a metaphysical belief.

5. Freud stresses the icy isolation of man in the universe, whereas Pfister claims that man needs inner spirituality and philosophy.

6. Freud sees morals as due to the exigencies of communal living, whereas Pfister postulates a moral world order that exists outside man.

7. Freud relegates God and religion to infantilism whereas Pfister does not entirely do so. Similarly, Freud sees the ego ideal as simply an internalization of the parents, whereas Pfister adds something more to human aspiration than "a mere aping of the parents."

8. Freud is by his own admission a pessimistic, less pleasant person than Pfister, who is more pleasant, tolerant, and better able to put up with life, especially with its unfairness.

9. For Freud the mind is an insignificant step in nature, whereas for Pfister the appearance of mind is a most significant step.

10. Freud sees civilization going nowhere and finds no innate human

> aspiration, whereas Pfister sees a higher and better evolution of civilization (this is before World War II) and postulates that humans—in contrast to animals—aspire to climb higher and higher "over the dead and the images of our parents."

The crucial query is raised by Freud: "The question is not what belief is more pleasing or more comfortable or more advantageous to life, but of what may approximate more closely to the puzzling reality that lies outside us" (p. 133). The important and unresolved debates in psychology, philosophy, and religion begin here, even to the present day.

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