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Metcalf - The Word of Freud - JCRT 3.2

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Religions owe their compulsive power to the return of the repressed; they are reawakened memories of very ancient, forgotten, highly emotional episodes of human history. I have already said this in Totem and Taboo; I express it now in the formula: the strength of religion lies not in its material, but in its historical truth.

'Freud to Lou Andreas-Salom', January 6, 1935¹

This is a strange book." So said T. S. Eliot of Freud's *The Future of an Illusion* when it appeared in English translation, and this assessment is as apt today as it was then.² It is, indeed, a strange and disturbing book, at once brilliant and opaque, honest yet intellectually frustrating. However, what upset Eliot about the book—namely, its alleged failure to define certain key concepts—seems minor in comparison to what troubles us about the book today: for example, its rather unnuanced and reductive approach to what Freud calls religious "ideas" [*Vorstellungen*], as well as its myopically positivistic view of science as a simple alternative to religious ideas.³ But there are good reasons to devote careful attention to Freud's polemic of 1927, not least of all because we have inherited Freud's problematic: a world riveted by clashing religious cultures, with no obvious recourse or opportunity for reconciliation.⁴ In a year that began with the American President proclaiming that "we are guided by a power larger than ourselves who created us equal in His image,"⁵ and ended with Americans at war in Afghanistan to subdue Islamic fundamentalists, we find ourselves asking Freud's question as to the future of religious culture—whether or not we interpret this as the future of an *illusion*.

To speak of "morality," as Freud does here, is to express in popular terms what psychoanalysis calls the internalization [*Verinnerlichung*], through education, of the fundamental precepts of one's culture (XXI, 12; XIV, 334). What becomes internalized in this process are the "mental assets of culture," i.e., the measures of coercion intended to reconcile men to one another and compensate their suffering (XXI, 10; XIV, 331). When, at the end of the passage quoted above, Freud speaks of the bearers or vehicles of culture [*Kulturtr'gern*] as the end-product of this process, he invokes a connection in German between making one's life "bearable" [*ertr'glich*] by identifying with one's culture, and being a "bearer" [*Tr'ger*] of culture precisely through this identification. The

¹See Sigmund Freud and Lou Andreas-Salom', *Letters*, edited by Ernst Pfeiffer, New York: Basic Books, 1960, pp. 204-5. Freud explicates this point a few years later in *Moses and Monotheism*: "We too believe that the pious solution contains the truth—but the *historical* truth and not the *material* truth... That is to say, we do not believe that there is a single great god today, but that in primeval times there was a single person who was bound to appear huge at that time and who afterwards returned in men's memory elevated to divinity" (SE XXIII, p. 129). The echo here of Nietzsche's second essay of *On the Genealogy of Morals* is unmistakable.

²See T.S. Eliot, "The Future of an Illusion, by Sigmund Freud," originally published in *Criterion*, VIII, Vol. 3, 1929, pp. 350-53, reprinted in Sigmund Freud, *Critical Assessments*, Vol. III, edited by Lawrence Spurling, London and New York: Routledge, 1989.

³There have been numerous critics to heap abuse on Freud for these defects, as Peter Gay has catalogued in *A Godless Jew: Freud, Atheism and the Making of Psychoanalysis*, New Haven and London: Yale Univ. Press, 1987. Whatever we think of these various criticisms, we can surely understand Gay's lament that Freud's views of religion lack the subtlety he lavished on analyzing neuroses, p. 12.

⁴Recently this contemporary situation has been analyzed as a "clash of civilizations" in Samuel P. Huntington's *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998.

⁵George W. Bush's inaugural address to the nation, January 20, 2001.

decisiveness of this connection will become apparent later in the text when Freud announces his hope that we reform education so that, through it, one will at the same time make one's life bearable and become a bearer of the culture that has transformed one into a "moral and social being."

3. Undoubtedly, Freud's call for a radical transformation of the existing relationship between religion and culture has claimed few admirers who were not already devout unbelievers.⁶ However, it is a curious feature of Freud's *Future of an Illusion* and one worthy of our reflection that religion, or at least the devotion that goes by that name, is not dispensed with altogether, but is preserved in Freud's appeal to "Our God, *logos*," written twice in the text. This curious locution has been passed over as metaphorical "loose talk" in scholarly discussions of the text.⁷ However, in this essay I will take Freud's word on these matters seriously, so as to learn why he preserves at least the simulacrum of devotion to God in the wake of his funerary sermon on religious culture. This does not mean, of course, that our examination will remain faithful to Freud's understanding of himself, for his text remains illuminating in a number of ways precisely *in spite of itself*. To show this I will adhere closely to the text, examining its blind-spots and argumentative pitfalls, looking for avenues of thought that Freud himself left unexplored.
4. The thrust of Freud's argument is that religious ideas are illusions that cripple the intellectual and moral capacity of individuals in a religious culture. Consequently, humankind would be better off with an irreligious—that is, scientific—education, for "science is no illusion." As we shall see, the finer points of Freud's argument are considerably more opaque, and more interesting, than this précis would suggest. Still, this should already indicate to us the *technological* perspective of Freud's polemic: throughout the text Freud will treat religious ideas as a kind of instrument or artifice valuable only for advancing the aims of culture, and thus as replaceable if we should find a more effective instrument to use in their place.⁸ What exactly culture [*Kultur*] signifies is clarified by Freud when he singles out two of its most important elements: on the one hand, the knowledge and capacity [*das Wissen und Können*] that has been acquired in order to control the forces of nature [*die Kräfte der Natur zu beherrschen*] and satisfy human needs; on the other hand, the regulations [*die Einrichtungen*] necessary for social organization (XXI, 6; XIV, 326).⁹ These two are inter-related, however, as it becomes clear in the text. This occurs when Freud doubts whether the present state of our control of nature [*unsere Naturbeherrschung*] will allow for the sort of cultural regulations [*kulturelle Einrichtungen*] that do not require coercive measures to maintain them (XXI, 8; XIV, 329). For Freud, the maintenance of culture necessitates that people renounce their instinctual drives to a certain degree, and our efforts at transforming culture so as to reduce the amount of renunciation required are compromised by the "limitations of man's educability [*Erziehbarkeit*]" (XXI, 9;

⁶To his "fellow-unbelievers [*Unglaubengenossen*]" Freud dedicates the lines from Heine's *Deutschland*:

⁷See, for example, Peter Gay's comments on this point in *A Godless Jew*. My disagreement with Gay on this point does not extend to his basic argument in the book, which is that psychoanalysis could only have been created by an atheist in the conventional sense or "godless Jew," as in Freud's own words to Oskar Pfister. For me the question is whether Freud's conventional atheism, "grounded" psychoanalytically, does not rest on a valorization of reason that is every bit as illusory as conventional theism.

⁸Though we have been alerted to the special significance of this technological perspective by Heidegger's meditations in such essays as "The Question Concerning Technology," and "The Word of Nietzsche: God is Dead" in Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt, New York: Harper & Row, 1977 the perspective itself is at least as old as that of Plato's Socrates in the *Republic*, reforming religious/mythic ideas for the sake of a *politike techne*.

⁹On the importance of Freud's refusal to distinguish between culture and civilization, see Paul Ricoeur's discussion in *Freud and Philosophy*, translated by Denis Savage, New Haven and London: Yale Univ. Press, 1970, pp. 248-49.

XIV, 330)'compromised, in other words, by the limits of knowledge and capacity that we can deploy against our own instinctual nature in the process of education.¹⁰

5. Though the educability of human beings does have its limits'limits shown by the "hostility to culture [*Kulturfeindschaft*]" that Freud observes'it does make possible an *internalization* of the coercive measures that are needed to maintain culture:

It is in keeping with the course of human development that external coercion gradually becomes internalized... Every child presents this process of transformation to us; only by that means does it become a moral and social being. Such a strengthening of the super-ego is a most precious cultural asset in the psychological field. Those in whom it has taken place are turned from being opponents of culture into being its vehicles [*werden aus Kulturgegnern zu Kulturtr'gern*]. (XXI, 11; XIV, 332)

6. However, at this point we should ask ourselves why culture is necessary to make one's life bearable. According to Freud, life is difficult for individuals to bear [*schwer zu ertragen*] because each person is made to suffer from the privations imposed by culture, from the injuries inflicted by other human beings, and from the hardships of one's fate'i.e., from "the superior power of nature" [*die 'bermacht der Natur*] (XIV, 16; XXI, 337). Of course, for Freud, the sufferings to which we are exposed by culture and community arise in response to the relentless cruelty with which nature herself threatens each one of us: "It was precisely because of these dangers with which nature threatens us that we came together and created culture, which is also, among other things, intended to make our communal life possible" (XIV, 15; XXI, 336). The cruel and inexorable power of nature brings to Freud's mind "our weakness and helplessness" [*unsere Schw'che und Hilflosigkeit*], from which we struggle to escape through the work of culture.¹¹ Thus, the ultimate reason for why life is difficult to bear is that humans are helplessly vulnerable to the dangerous power of nature.¹² Though it inflicts sufferings of its own making, culture is essentially a response to human vulnerability, providing resources to make life bearable.
7. Out of this need to guard human vulnerability, and to protect individuals against the dangers of nature and the injuries of human society, a store of ideas has been created'what Freud calls the "psychical assets" of a culture (XXI, 13; XIV, 334) or its "psychical inventory" (XXI, 14; XIV, 335). Among these are the culture's "precepts" [*Kulturvorschriften*], its artistic creations, its ideals'i.e., its valuations as to which achievements are the highest and most to be striven after (XXI, 13; XIV, 334)'and most importantly, its religious "ideas" in the widest sense. As with all the ideas in a culture's "psychical inventory," religious ideas are constructed from the material of memories of childhood helplessness (XXI, 18; XIV, 340). According to Freud, they all follow the model of infantile thinking in their memory of the small child's helplessness in relation to his parents (XXI, 17; XIV, 338)'even the personification of nature's force is nothing but a continuation of the infantile model in its attempt to psychically master a situation in order to physically master it. In the conception of God that Freud describes as "the final form

¹⁰With some reservation I am here following the lead of Strachey in translating Freud's *Trieb* as "instinct," if only because its more accurate rendering as "drive" does not allow for as felicitous an adjectival form as "instinctual."

¹¹Here, especially, Freud's argument evokes its classical precursors'for example, the view of Plato's Socrates, in *Gorgias* and *Republic*, that *polis* form because no human individual is self-sufficient [*autarkes*], but stands in want of many things [...].

¹²Freud underscores the ultimacy of human vulnerability in his account by having his imagined interlocutor take note of the emphasis he places on it theoretically, and question its compatability with the analysis of *Totem and Taboo* (XXI, 22; XIV, 344).

taken by our present-day white Christian culture" (XXI, 20, XIV, 341), we see the clearest example of how religious ideas develop from the infantile model:

The father himself constitutes a danger for the child, perhaps because of its earlier relation to its mother. Thus it fears him no less than it longs for him and admires him. The indications of this ambivalence in the attitude to the father are deeply imprinted in every religion, as was shown in *Totem and Taboo*. When the growing individual finds that he is destined to remain a child forever, that he can never do without protection against strange superior powers [*fremde 'berm'chte*], he lends those powers the features belonging to the figure of his father; he creates for himself the gods whom he dreads, whom he seeks to propitiate, and whom he nevertheless entrusts with his own protection. Thus his longing for a father is a motive identical with his need for protection against the consequences of human powerlessness [*Ohnmacht*]. The defence against childish helplessness is what lends its characteristic features to the adult's reaction to the helplessness which *he* has to acknowledge—a reaction which is precisely the formation of religion. (XXI, 24; XIV, 346)

In this way, Freud concludes that religious ideas have arisen from the need common to all cultural achievements: the necessity of providing "defence" against the crushingly superior force of nature (XXI, 21; XIV, 343). By helping the individual to achieve psychical mastery [*Bewältigung*], if not physical control, over the vulnerability of his situation, these ideas serve to rob nature of at least some of her power. Thus, the God or gods who are fashioned in this process are given a three-fold task that is identical to that of cultural achievements in general: to exorcize the terrors of nature, to reconcile men to the cruelty of fate, particularly as it is shown in death, and to compensate them for the sufferings and privations that communal life has imposed on them (XXI, 18; XIV, 339). Notice how nothing in this account necessitates the conclusion that Freud draws—namely, that the relationship between religion and culture must be fundamentally altered. Indeed, Freud acknowledges that apologists of religion could use the psychological grounding [*Begründung*] that psychoanalysis offers to "give full value to the affective significance of religious doctrines" (XXI, 37; XIV, 360).¹³ For Freud, psychoanalysis is nothing but a method of research, an "impartial [*parteiloses*] instrument, like infinitesimal calculus" (XXI, 36; XIV, 360), and thus underdetermines any effort, like Freud's in *The Future of an Illusion*, to "take sides" [*Parteinehmen*] (cf. XXI, 32; XIV, 355). As Freud will reiterate in his treatment of the "Question of a Weltanschauung" in the *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, psychoanalysis is unable to create a *Weltanschauung* of its own, but adheres to the scientific approach (XXII, 158, 181; XV, 170-171, 197).¹⁴

Given his approach, we should not be surprised to read Freud's argument that criticism has whittled away the evidential value of religious documents, that natural science has shown their errors, and thus that as the treasures [*Schätze*] of scientific knowledge become more accessible, fewer people will cling to the store [*Schatz*] of religious ideas (XXI, 38; XIV, 362).¹⁵ Nor is it surprising that Freud should explain the refractoriness of religious ideas to rational evaluation [*vernünftige*

¹³See, for example, Erich Fromm's *Psychoanalysis and Religion*, New Haven and London: Yale Univ. Press, 1950, for a psychoanalytic defense of what he calls "humanistic religion" as opposed to "authoritarian" religion.

¹⁴Freud's understanding of the term, "Weltanschauung," is itself illuminating: "In my opinion, then, a *Weltanschauung* is 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" (XXII, 158; XV, 170-171).

¹⁵More precisely, Freud signals that these arguments are ones that others before him have presented "more completely, forcibly and impressively," his own contribution being to provide some psychological grounding to these critiques (XXI, 35; XIV, 358).

Anerkennung] as a matter of wish-fulfillment' indeed, fulfillment of the oldest, strongest and most urgent wishes of mankind (XXI, 30; XIV, 352)'so that, properly speaking, they are *illusions* in Freud's sense, rather than errors.¹⁶

But Freud goes further than this. Addressing the right or justification [*Recht*] one has for believing what one believes, Freud says that "no reasonable person [*vernünftiger Mensch*] will behave so irresponsibly [*so leichtsinnig benehmen*] or rest content with such feeble grounds for his opinions and partisanship [*Parteinahme*]" (XXI, 32; XIV, 355). With respect to questions of religion, Freud asserts that people are "guilty of every possible sort of dishonesty and intellectual misdemeanor [*aller m'glichen Unaufrichtigkeiten und intellektuellen Unarten schuldig*]" (ibid). And Freud demonstrates his correspondingly low estimation of those who created religious doctrines [*Lehren*] when he writes of how remarkable it would be "if our wretched, ignorant and downtrodden ancestors had succeeded in solving all these difficult riddles of the universe" (XXI, 33; XIV, 356).

In this passage we should notice the way in which Freud endorses the particular acknowledgement of human vulnerability that marks the scientific/irreligious attitude. Freud is willing to plea for the renunciation of wish and the acquiescence in fate [*W'nschverzicht und Ergebung in das Schicksal*] that this attitude represents (XXI, 36; XIV, 359), if only because religion has failed in its cultural task of comforting the majority of human beings, of reconciling them to life, and of making them into "vehicles of culture [*Kulturtr'gern*]" (XXI, 37; XIV, 360). Quite the opposite, Freud sees a vast number of people who have gone so far in their hostility to culture [*Kulturfeindschaft*] that they want nothing to do with culture or instinctual-limitation [*Triebeinschr'nkung*] whatsoever (ibid).

Freud's interlocutor takes himself to have shown that the attempt to radically alter the relationship between religion and culture—as Freud advocates—is to replace a proven and emotionally valuable [*affektiv wertvolle*] illusion with one that is unproven and without emotional value (ibid).

Asking hypothetically whether infantilism is destined to be overcome [*der Infantilismus ist dazu bestimmt, überwunden zu werden?*], Freud indicates that the experiment he has in mind requires that we admit to ourselves the full extent of our helplessness [*Hilflosigkeit*] and insignificance in the machinery of the universe [*Geringf'gigkeit im Getriebe der Welt*] (XXI, 49; XIV, 373). Indeed, Freud says that the sole purpose of his book is to point out the necessity of this forward step into hostile life which he calls "education to reality" [*die Erziehung zur Realit't*] (ibid). Relying only on the assistance [*Hilfsmittel*] of scientific knowledge, the human beings who emerge from Freud's irreligious education are ones who withdraw their expectations from the next life, concentrate their powers on this earthly life, and thereby succeed in creating "a life that is tolerable for everyone and a culture that no longer oppresses anyone" [*das Leben f'r alles ertr'glich wird und die Kultur keinen mehr erdr'ckt*] (XXI, 50; XIV, 373-74).

Here Freud provides an important qualification of his earlier distinction between the essence of religiosity [*Wesen der Religi'sit't*] and irreligiosity "in the truest sense." Earlier he described religiosity as seeking a remedy [*Abhilfe*] for human vulnerability and the irreligious individual as "humbly acquiescing" to his limitations with respect to fate. Here, too, Freud insists that the truly irreligious person will do without the consolation [*Trostgehalt*] of religion—which he thinks even "purified" religious ideas promise—and when, shortly after this passage, he invokes "Our God, *logos*," a second time, he stresses the importance of accepting with resignation [*in Ergebung hinnehmen*] what this less-than-almighty God can offer us (XXI, 54-5; XIV, 378-79). And yet it is clear that if the irreligious person does not demand a remedy or redress [*Abhilfe*] of his human vulnerability, he nonetheless looks to the assistance [*Hilfsmittel*] of science "to gain some knowledge about the

¹⁶T.S. Eliot abuses Freud for failing to give a definition of "illusion," when in fact Freud provides a workable definition of the term as follows: "Thus we call a belief an illusion when a wish-fulfillment is a prominent factor in its motivation, and in doing so we disregard its relations to reality, just as the illusion itself sets no store by verification" (XXI, 31; XIV, 354). See T.S. Eliot's review of *The Future of an Illusion*, cited above.

reality of the world, by means of which we can increase our power [*Macht*] and in accordance with which we can arrange our life" (XXI, 55; XIV, 379).

However, at the very least, Freud's account of "the advance in spirituality/intellectuality [*der Fortschritt in der Geistigkeit*]" achieved by Moses' ethical monotheism erodes his claim, in *The Future of an Illusion*, that even refined religiosity offers consolation to individuals, and thus remains "self-seeking."¹⁷ If the "dematerialized God" of Moses signifies, in Freud's words, "a triumph of intellectuality [*Geistigkeit*] over sensuality [*Sinnlichkeit*]," and opens the door to further alterations in the idea of God (XXIII, 113-15; XVI, 220-222)'indeed, to a dynamic tradition of such changes, culminating perhaps in the God of Spinoza'then the refined and sublimated religiosity of ethical monotheism cannot be thought of as a source of consolation in any ordinary sense. For Freud to insist that it remains a source of consolation would appear to be, as Paul Ricoeur has argued, an obstinate refusal of intellectualized religious belief, born from passionate unbelief.¹⁸

To explain why this advance in intellectuality, and subordination of sensuality, should raise a people's self-regard, Freud analyzes it as a substitutive satisfaction within the libidinal economy. Although the instinctual renunciation required for such intellectuality is experienced as painful, the ego gains pleasure in recognizing that it is capable of this renunciation: "The ego feels elevated [*Das Ich f'hlt sich gehoben*]," Freud writes, "it is proud of the instinctual renunciation [*es wird stolz auf den Triebverzicht*], as though it were a valuable achievement" (XXIII, 117; XVI, 224). Here the ego is operating toward super-ego as the child once acted toward his or her parents: "Just as in childhood, the ego is apprehensive about risking the love of its supreme master [*Oberherr*]; it feels his approval as liberation and satisfaction and his reproaches as pangs of conscience [*als Gewissenbisse*]. When the ego has brought super-ego the sacrifice of an instinctual renunciation, it expects to be rewarded by receiving more love from it. The consciousness of deserving this love is felt by it as pride [*als Stolz*]" (XXIII, 117; XVI, 224-225). But though the ego operates here according to the childhood pattern, the narcissistic character of its pride means that the "supreme master" of its devotion has already been internalized, that its authority is an internal figure.¹⁹ With this account of the narcissistic motivation for intellectualized religion, Freud can maintain that his refined interlocutor is "self-seeking" on a deeper level, as uncovered by psychoanalysis.

This narcissistic aetiology of intellectual pursuits is not confined to the argument of *Moses and Monotheism*. In *Civilization and its Discontents*, for example, Freud says in passing that "the narcissistic man, who inclines to be self-sufficient [*der eher selbstgen'gsame Narzi'tische*], will seek his main satisfactions in his internal mental processes [*in seinem inneren seelischen Vorg'ngen*]" (XXI, 83-4; XIV, 442). To be sure, Freud's discovery of narcissism within intellectual pursuits is fascinating independently of his polemic against religion, but the problem here is that it has the effect of collapsing any essential distinction between religion and science'a distinction that seems "sacred" to Freud.²⁰ We cannot help but wonder how one is to make sense of Freud's concept of "illusion" if the development of intellect is itself an outgrowth, through sublimation, of religious ideas and pursues the same psychological pattern of finding more and more sublime father-substitutes.

Here we need not appeal to psychoanalysis for an account of how an individual's self-regard is affected by his culture's conception of God. For the manifest content of this passage is precisely

¹⁷Bernstein provides an excellent commentary on the way in which *Geistigkeit* for Freud signifies both "spirituality" and "intellectuality" 'see *Freud and the Legacy of Moses*, pp. 31ff.

¹⁸More precisely, Ricoeur calls this "a refusal to consider a possible epigenesis of religious feeling, that is to say, a transformation or conversion of desire and fear," which seems to Ricoeur not "to be based on analysis, but merely expresses Freud's personal unbelief" 'Freud and Philosophy, p. 534.

¹⁹For our purposes here, we need not explore the intricacies of the internal/external figures that operate in *Gewissensangst* and other moral *pathé* according to psychoanalytic theory, as Richard Wollheim does in his remarkable analysis of shame and guilt in *On the Emotions*, New Haven and London: Yale Univ. Press, 1999, pp. 148ff.

²⁰Peter Gay draws attention to his calling this distinction "sacred" for Freud, in *A Godless Jew*, p. 43.

Freud's narcissistic satisfaction with scientific-technological culture'so much so, in fact, that he admits to the consolation provided by man's "likeness to God" [*Gott'hmlichkeit*]. But if the "prosthetic God" of scientific culture can be viewed, following Freud's narcissistic aetiology, as a cultural development of ethical monotheism and other religious ideas, what does this mean for "Our God, *logos*," whom Freud expects to combine intellectual primacy and love of humankind?

Notes

Den Himmel 'berlassen wir Den Engeln und den Spatzen. (Heaven we leave to the angels and the sparrows) Citations from Freud will refer first to the *Standard Edition's* English translation by James Strachey, volume and page number, then to the German of Freud's *Gesammelte Werke*, volume and page number. Thus, here I cite Freud's *Future of an Illusion* (XXI, 50; XIV, 374). * * *

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8. The partiality of Freud's polemic is in large measure a function of his stance as to the "psychological significance" of religious ideas. After rejecting "a number of formulations" that he neglects to identify, Freud classifies religious ideas as "teachings and assertions about facts and conditions of external (or internal) reality [*Lehrs'tze, Aussagen 'ber Tatsachen und Verh'ltnisse der 'u'eren (oder inneren) Realit't*] which tell one something one has not discovered for oneself and which lay claim to one's belief" (XXI, 25; XIV, 347). If religious ideas are "teachings" [*Lehrs'tze*], like the teaching in school that the town of Constance lies on the Bodensee, then, Freud argues, they should have to produce grounds [*begr'nden*] for their claims, as with the jingle about Constance on the Bodensee: "if you don't believe it, go and see" (XXI, 25-6; XIV, 347). Of course it takes little argument on Freud's part to show that religious ideas do not produce grounds for their "claims" in this way—we have better grounds for the claim that whales bear young and do not lay eggs, Freud tells us, than we have for religious ideas, whose task it is to "solve the riddles of the universe and reconcile us to the sufferings of life" (XXI, 27; XIV, 349).
 9. Freud's unsophisticated approach to analyzing religious ideas, apparent also in his glib dismissiveness toward Tertullian's *credo quia absurdum* and the philosophy of "as if," is underscored by his approval of his young son's approach to such matters:

I am reminded of one of my children who was distinguished at an early age by a peculiarly marked matter-of-factness. When the children were being told a fairy tale and were listening to it with rapt attention, he would come up and ask: "Is

that a true story?" When he was told it was not, he would turn away with a look of disdain. We may expect that people will soon behave in the same way towards the fairy tales of religion, in spite of the advocacy of "as if." (XXI, 29, XIV, 351)

10. What is remarkable, if not surprising, is the moralistic way in which Freud critiques illusory thinking, and how closely he allies himself with the coercive measures of culture in the critique he offers. Of religious ideas he writes, "No one can be compelled [*niemand darf gezwungen werden*] to think them true, to believe in them" (XXI, 31; XIV, 354) thus granting unquestioned privilege to the coercion or compulsion [*Zwang*] by which culture necessarily operates. Comparing the illusions of religious ideas to delusions, Freud sets aside the impossible question of their "reality-value" [*Realit'tswert*] and launches into a tirade against the insolence of illusory thinking, compared with science:

Scientific work is the only road which can lead us to a knowledge of reality outside ourselves. It is once again merely an illusion to expect anything from intuition and introspection; they can give us nothing but particulars about our own mental life, which are hard to interpret, never any information about the questions which religious doctrine finds it so easy to answer. It would be insolent [*frevelhaft*] to let one's own arbitrary will [*die eigene Willk'r*] step into the breach and, according to one's personal estimate, declare this or that part of the religious system to be more or less acceptable. (XXI, 31-2; XIV, 354)

11. Clearly, Freud is willing to laud only those who renounce wish-fulfillment in their intellectual lives and thereby ally themselves with the scientific spirit:

Critics persist in describing as "deeply religious" anyone who admits to a sense of man's insignificance or powerlessness [*Ohnmacht*] in the face of the universe, although what constitutes the essence of the religious attitude is not this feeling but only the next step after it, the reaction to it which seeks a remedy for it [*eine Abhilfe sucht*]. The man who goes no further, but humbly acquiesces in the small part which human beings play in the great world such a man is, on the contrary, irreligious in the truest sense of the world. (XXI, 32-3; XIV, 355)

12. In light of this alarming situation, Freud's polemic is most sharply aimed at the ways in which religion has been given the task of grounding [*gr'nden*] the cultural demands foisted upon individuals (XXI, 38; XIV, 361). Freud sees this situation as a crisis in which we must either keep the masses from intellectually awakening to the idea that there is no God, or else the relationship between culture and religion must undergo a fundamental [*gr'ndliche*] revision (XXI, 39; XIV, 363). He opts for the latter, urging that cultural demands'like, for instance, the prohibition against murder'be grounded on a "rational basis" [*rationelle Begr'ndung*] (XXI, 40; XIV, 364): in this case, a justification in the interest of humankind's communal existence, which would not be practicable without such prohibitions. This alternative to religion as the basis for cultural demands is, for Freud, a genuinely social grounding [*soziale Begr'ndung*], which has its own, "enlightened," we might say, form of holiness [*Heiligkeit*], inviolability [*Unverletzlichkeit*] and sense of transcendence [*Jenseitigkeit*] (XXI, 41; XIV, 364).
13. For Freud, a rational grounding or rational "presentation" [*Darstellung*] of cultural demands is at the same time a social grounding because it looks to "social necessity" [*soziale Notwendigkeit*] (XXI, 41-2; XIV, 365-66). The advantage that accrues from leaving God out altogether [*Gott*

'berhaupt aus dem Spiele zu lassen] and “honestly admitting the purely human origin of all the regulations and precepts of culture” is one of seeing that culture is not to rule over individuals [*um sie zu beherrschen*], but to serve their interests [*um ihren Interessen zu dienen*] (XXI, 41; XIV, 365). In this way, Freud foresees that the demise of religion would lead to a reduction in hostility to culture. To be sure, for Freud, the religious grounds do represent in symbolic language some important historical recollections about the origins of various cultural demands. Yet, he insists that religious doctrines have so disguised and distorted the rational motivations of cultural demands that they can no longer be apprehended in their truth:

The case is similar to what happens when we tell a child that new-born babies are brought by the stork. Here, too, we are telling the truth in symbolic clothing, for we know what the large bird signifies. But the child does not know it. He hears only the distorted part of what we say, and feels that he has been deceived; and we know how often his distrust of grown-ups and contrariness [*Widersetzlichkeit*] actually take their start from this impression. We have become convinced that it is better to avoid such symbolic disguisings of the truth in what we tell children and not to withhold from them a knowledge of the true state of affairs commensurate with their intellectual level. (XXI, 44-5; XIV, 368)

14. But would we not have to admit, contra Freud, that when it comes to religious ideas in the widest sense, we really don't know what the large bird signifies? Everything in Freud's polemic hinges on his classification of religious ideas as teachings about certain states of affairs (external or internal), so that they are to be approached in the same way as school-teachings of geography or the delicate teaching of sexual matters to children. Oddly enough, Freud concedes that the particulars of our own mental lives—which sometimes constitute the “signified” of religious ideas—are always difficult to interpret (XXI, 32; XIV, 354), but he does not allow for similar hermeneutic opacity when it comes to the “reality value” of religious ideas more generally. The masses, according to Freud, obey the precepts of culture because they fear religion, considering it “a part of the reality that hems them in,” and remain obedient to religion and culture only so long as these ideas appear to have “reality-value” (XXI, 47; XIV, 370). On the other hand, those who approach religious ideas with philosophical subtlety as to their significance are lambasted for their intellectual or moral cowardice.
15. Yet it is Freud himself who makes an important phenomenological point about religious ideas: every individual “finds them already there [*er findet sie vor*]; they are presented to him ready-made [*sie werden ihm fertig entgegengebracht*]” (XXI, 21; XIV, 343). Freud makes this point in order to secure his claim that culture “gives” [*schenkt*] these ideas to the individual, who “takes them over” [*bernimmt*] in the same way that he takes over such things as the multiplication table and geometry from the heritage of many generations (ibid). Unfortunately for Freud's polemic, this phenomenological point serves to undermine the inference that he draws from it. For surely we do not “take over” the religious ideas that we find already before us and ready-made in the same way that we do other cultural artifacts. It is true of “teachings” [*Lehrs'tze*] like the multiplication table and geometry and geography that “they are put forward as [*sie geben sich als*] the epitomized result of a longer process of thought based on observation and certainly also on inferences” (XXI, 26; XIV, 347). But would we not say that religious ideas or representations [*Vorstellungen*] are “already there” [*vor*] in a different way, that it is part of the already-thereness or ready-madeness of religious ideas to be ambivalent in the way that they are presented or “give themselves” [*geben sich*], that their

value is always already something only ambiguously related to “reality-value”?²¹

16. Though Freud spares himself the trouble of questioning whether religious ideas in the widest sense might outstrip his classification of them as “teachings about reality,” he is forced to confront this possibility in the final stages of his debate with the imagined interlocutor. His interlocutor suggests, as an advantage of religious ideas over alternative doctrinal systems, that they allow for conceptual refinement and sublimation [*begriffliche L'uterung und Sublimierung*], so that they are no longer determined by the traces of primitive and infantile thinking:

These reformations [*Umbildungen*] of religious doctrine, which you have condemned as half-measures and compromises, make it possible to avoid the cleft between the uneducated masses and the philosophic thinker, and to preserve the common bond [*Gemeinsamkeit*] between them which is so important for the safeguarding of culture [*Sicherung der Kultur*]. With this, there would be no need to fear that people would discover that the upper strata of society “no longer believe in God.” (XXI, 52; XIV, 376)

17. Freud’s rebuttal must be that to safeguard culture by means of the “common bond” of religious ideas, would necessarily have an enfeebling effect on culture’and, in fact, he likens religion to the cranial deformation of children, intellectual atrophy, the retardation of sexual development, and a form of poisoning and intoxication to deaden suffering (XXI, 47-9; XIV, 370-73).²² With these rather negative metaphors for religion, Freud criticizes the weakening of thought [*Denkschw'che*] in religious culture, as compared with his psychological ideal of the primacy of intelligence [*der Primat der Intelligenz*]. Yet the passion expressed by Freud as he articulates his position suggests that it, too, may be an illusory way of thinking, as he himself acknowledges:

I will moderate my zeal and admit the possibility that I, too, am chasing an illusion. Perhaps the effect of the religious prohibition of thought may not be so bad as I suppose; perhaps it will turn out that human nature remains the same even if education is not abused in order to subject people to religion... But you must admit that here we are justified in having a hope for the future’that perhaps there is a treasure [*Schatz*] to be dug up capable of enriching culture and that it is worth making the experiment of an irreligious education. (XXI, 48; XIV, 371-2)

18. Freud never responds to the objection, voiced by his imagined interlocutor, that since his ideal of a “primacy of the intellect” requires guidance [*Leitung*] through emotional forces [*affektive M'chte*], it could only ever be effected by a system of doctrines as prohibitive of thinking [*Denkverbot*] as religion now is (XXI, 51-2; 374-75). If anything, Freud concedes the possibly illusory nature of his hopes, and couches his response in terms of an appeal to a new divinity:

The primacy of the intellect lies, it is true, in a distant, distant future, but probably not an *infinitely* distant one. It will presumably set itself the same aims as those

²¹Ricouer makes this point forcefully in *Freud and Philosophy*, arguing that ambiguity is written into the heart of religion, which is “archaic in origin and susceptible of an indefinite creation of meaning” (p. 548).

²²Freud uses the last metaphor again in a letter to Princess Marie Bonaparte, dated March 19, 1928: “You are right: one is in danger of overestimating the frequency of an irreligious attitude among intellectuals. I get convinced of that just now on observing the reactions to my [*The Future of an*] *Illusion*. That comes from the most varied drinks being offered under the name of “religion,” with a minimal percentage of alcohol’really non-alcoholic; but they still get drunk on it...” Reprinted in Appendix A of Ernest Jones’ *The Life and Work of Sigmund Freud*, vol. III, New York: Basic Books, 1957, p. 447.

whose realization you expect from your God (of course within human limits' so far as external reality [...] allows it), namely the love of man and the decrease of suffering [*die Menschenliebe und die Einschränkung des Leidens*]... We desire the same things, but you are more impatient, more exacting, and 'why should I not say it?' more self-seeking than I and those on my side. You would have the state of bliss begin directly after death; you expect the impossible of it and you will not surrender the claims of the individual [*wollen den Anspruch der Einzelpersonen nicht aufgeben*]. Our God, *logos*, will fulfil whichever of these wishes nature outside us allows, but he will do it very gradually, only in the unforeseeable future, and for a new generation of men. He promises no compensation for us, who suffer grievously from life... In the long run nothing can withstand reason and experience, and the contradiction which religion offers to both is all too palpable. Even purified religious ideas [*die gel'uterten religi'sen Ideen*] cannot escape this fate, so long as they try to preserve anything of the consolation of religion [*Trostgehalt der Religion*] (XXI, 53-4; XIV, 377-78).

19. The decisive difference between the religious and irreligious person in Freud's sense is that the former is "self-seeking" in that he or she does not surrender the claims of the individual. Our God, *logos*, offers nothing more than Freud's sober-sounding "education to reality." The absence of any consolation offered by this God, and its disregard of individuals as such, was already implicit in Freud's account of the "rational grounding" of certain cultural demands, like the prohibition against murder. What compels these cultural demands is not any salvific promise aimed at particular individuals, but the "social necessity" that looks to the good of the whole. Now, Freud argues that the primacy of intellect that society must foster through scientific enterprise is not anything that will necessarily benefit us today as individuals, though it will benefit humankind as a whole in the long run. Curiously, Freud shifts his attention from Our God, *logos*, and the primacy of intellect, to science as his object of concern in the final pages of *The Future of an Illusion*, delivering at the end an encomium of science, which is no illusion, "but an illusion it would be to suppose that what science cannot give us we can get elsewhere" (XXI, 56; XIV, 380). This shift from critiquing religion to praising science anticipates the sharp antithesis that he will draw between the religious and scientific *Weltanschauungen* in his *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*.²³
20. However, by owning up to what may in fact be an illusion, the passage quoted above lends surprising ambiguity to the title of Freud's essay. What is potentially an illusion in Freud's own thinking is not only his hope for achieving the primacy of intellect within culture, but also his unquestioned conviction that intellect, perfected by science, would set itself the goals of loving mankind and decreasing suffering' at least, it "presumably" [*voraussichtlich*] would do so, Freud says. It would be easy enough to point out, of course, that the combination of religious fundamentalism and technology of mass destruction that haunts us in the new millennium appears to undermine this presumption. But more to the point, even if in the future we should witness the demise of fundamentalist terror-campaigns, nothing ensures that science and intellect will be allied to the love of humankind. Since Freud's unquestioned trust in the conjoining of intellect and *philia* is clearly motivated by wish-fulfillment, we should wonder whether his thought is "irreligious" in the true sense of foregoing the need for consolation [*Trost*].

²³See his lecture on the "Question of a *Weltanschauung*" in *Standard Edition*, volume XXII, pp. 166ff.

21. We gain helpful perspective on this question if we consider the debate between Freud and his imagined interlocutor in light of the controversial text of a dozen years later: *Moses and Monotheism*.²⁴ Here Freud supports, in effect, his interlocutor's point in *The Future of an Illusion* that religious ideas allow for conceptual refinement, when he writes that the Mosaic prohibition against making an image of God "elevated God to a higher degree of intellectuality, and the way was opened to further alterations in the idea of God" (XXIII, 114-15; XVI, 222). Freud could respond—and, in fact, does say in his *New Introductory Lectures* that religion (or, at least, Jewish religion) once fostered intellectual development, but no longer does so in the face of the independently existing *Weltanschauung* of science:

It is well known that at an earlier date [religion] comprised everything that played an intellectual part in men's lives, that it took the place of science when there was scarcely yet such a thing as science, and that it constructed a *Weltanschauung*, consistent and self-contained to an unparalleled degree which, although it has been profoundly shaken, persists to this day. (XXII, 161; XV, 173)

22. This is where Freud's account in *Moses and Monotheism* is most interesting, but also most troubling for his argument in *The Future of an Illusion*.²⁵ According to Freud, even the sublimated monotheism of the Jews is "self-seeking" because it is a source of narcissistic pride, and precisely because of its intellectual refinement:

That religion also brought the Jews a far grander conception of God, or, as we might put it more modestly, the conception of a grander God. Anyone who believed in this God had some kind of share in his greatness, might feel exalted himself... All such advances in intellectuality have as their consequence that the individual's self-esteem [*Selbstgef'hl*] is increased, that he is made proud [*stolz zu machen*] so that he feels superior to other people who have remained under the spell of sensuality. Moses, as we know, conveyed to the Jews an exalted sense [*Hochgef'hl*] of being a chosen people. The dematerialization of God brought a fresh and valuable contribution to their secret treasure [*geheimen Schatz*]. (XXIII, 112-15; XVI, 219-222)²⁶

23. Yet this blade cuts both ways. What is true of intellectualized religious belief is true of the intellectual endeavor in general—including, presumably, Freud's hoped-for intellectual primacy, perfected through science. Consider Freud's remarks from the same section of *Moses and Monotheism*:

Thus we are faced by the phenomenon that in the course of the development of humanity sensuality is gradually overpowered by intellectuality and that men feel

²⁴Richard J. Bernstein rightfully points out in his book, *Freud and the Legacy of Moses*, Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1998, that the German title '*Der Mann Moses und monotheistische Religion*' conveys much better than the English translation what is of foremost concern in the text: namely, the man-made character of religion, and Moses' status as a "great man." Nonetheless, for the sake of familiarity, I will refer to its customary English rendering.

²⁵Admittedly, I am leaving aside the interesting and equally troubling account of a "phylogenetic" inheritance, including memories of a primordial killing that is the founding of culture. The most interesting discussion of this matter is Jonathan Lear's in chapter three of *Happiness, Death and the Remainder of Life*, Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard Univ. Press, 2000, where he criticizes the metaphysics involved in this theory, as well as its regrettable adoption of what Lear calls "the seduction hypothesis."

²⁶That Freud should stress the narcissistic satisfaction of a refined spirituality in his account of Judaism should not seem strange to us if *Moses and Monotheism* is, as Ricoeur suggests, a matter of Freud overcoming his own narcissistic pride in being a Jew *Freud and Philosophy*, p. 244.

proud and exalted by every such advance [*die Menschen sich durch jeden solchen Fortschritt stolz und gehoben f'hlen*]. But we are unable to say why this should be so... Perhaps men simply pronounce that what is more difficult is higher, and their pride [*Stolz*] is merely their narcissism augmented by the consciousness of a difficulty overcome. (XXIII, 118; XVI, 226)

24. At the prompting of correspondence between himself and Romain Rolland, Freud returns to account for the illusory character of religious ideas in *Civilization and its Discontents*, written a few years after *The Future of an Illusion*. There Freud accounts for the "oceanic feeling" described by Rolland as a form of narcissism deriving from the infant's helplessness [*Hilflosigkeit*] and longing for the father which he regards as the "origin of the religious attitude" (XXI, 72; XIV, 430). And yet Freud's own narcissistic pride is evident when he contrasts modern science and technology with religion, which he now does not hesitate to call a "mass-delusion," an intimidation of intelligence [*Einsch'chterung der Intelligenz*] and a case of being forcibly fixed in a state of psychical infantilism (XXI, 84-5; XIV, 443-444):

Long ago [man] formed an ideal conception of omnipotence and omniscience which he embodied in his gods. To these gods he attributed everything that seemed unattainable to his wishes, or that was forbidden to him. One may say, therefore, that these gods were cultural ideals. Today he has come very close to the attainment of this ideal, he has almost become a god himself [*beinahe selbst ein Gott geworden*]... Man has, as it were, become a kind of prosthetic God. When he puts on all his auxiliary organs he is truly magnificent; but those organs have not grown on to him and they still give him much trouble at times. Nevertheless, he is entitled to console himself [*sich zu tr'sten*] with the thought that this development will not come to an end precisely with the year 1930 A.D. Future ages will bring with them new and probably unimaginably great advances in this field of civilization and will increase man's likeness to God still more [*die Gott'hnlichkeit noch weiter steigern*]. (XXI, 91-2; XIV, 450-451)

25. It is no accident, no metaphorical loose-talk, that the God invoked by Freud in *The Future of an Illusion* is *logos* in the Greek script. For, in the great philosophical texts of antiquity, *logos* weaves together the operation of intellect [*nous*], perfected through science [*episteme*], and the love of others in human community [*philia anthropous*].²⁷ At the same time, however, it may very well be the case that *logos* is able to combine intellectual primacy and love of human community only by being conceived paternalistically, as a father-substitute whose power offers narcissistic satisfaction to those who heed *logos*. Famously, Aristotle conceives of *logos* this way in the *Nicomachean Ethics* when he writes that the nonrational parts of the soul can "have *logos*" in the sense of "listening to *logos* as to a father" (1103a4). More dramatically, Plato's Socrates demonstrates this paternalistic conception of *logos* in the *Crito* when, after insisting that he is such a person as will obey only the *logos* that appears best to him upon reasoning [*logizomeno*] (46b), it becomes evident that the *logos* he will obey is the voice of the laws of Athens. The laws, speaking through Socrates, remind him that he is their "offspring

²⁷There are numerous ancient texts that could be cited to evidence this claim, but one that is especially appropriate to the issues raised by Freud in *The Future of an Illusion* is Plato's *Gorgias*, where the *logos* operating within Socrates' philosophical practice is shown to contribute to "community and friendship" [...] within the *logos*. For this reason Socrates calls himself the true practioner of the "political art." For an illuminating interpretation of Plato's *Gorgias* with an eye to these issues, see Hannah Arendt, "Thinking and Moral Considerations: A Lecture," *Social Research* 38 (1971), pp. 417-46.

and slave," who must revere them and give way to them "more than a father when he is angry with you," since they are in fact "something more honorable than mother and father and all the other forebears" (50e-51b). To disregard such passages in the ancient texts as rhetorical excesses or "metaphorical loose-talk" would be, undeniably, a matter of abandoning exegesis for the sake of wish-fulfillment.

26. Still another problem emerges for Freud's appeal to "Our God, *logos*." The narcissistic aetiology of intellectual endeavors, as found both in Freud's writings and in Greek philosophical texts, appears to undermine Freud's use of "illusion" as a way to distinguish religious and scientific ideas. But this raises a decisive hermeneutic question: if religious ideas can no longer be distinguished from the *logos* that operates within scientific-technological culture, how can Freud's deified *logos* not also contain the mythic images and "religious ideas" that were transmitted to it by Greek tradition and were integral to its operation in the texts of Greek philosophy?²⁸ The *logos* operating in the poems of Xenophanes, the dialogues of Plato and the treatises of Aristotle, is something that invokes the deities of cultic belief, but refines them and purifies them into objects of intellectual devotion. Surely the *logos* of Greek thought culminates, not in the *Vernunft* or *Intellekt* of Freud's text, but in the *logos* of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*' noetic intellection taking itself as object. Should we not say, then, that this promiscuity of *logos* in its appropriations means that Freud's appeal to "Our God, *logos*" has the unintended effect of destabilizing the entire polemic?
27. It is a virtue of Freud's polemic in *The Future of an Illusion*, but something unthought in the text itself, that as we look for the limits of its thinking, we are able to catch sight of a genuinely philosophical encounter with religious ideas. In the end this philosophical encounter is a matter of facing a dilemma that haunts Freud's text: *either* we give up the appeal to *logos* as "Unser Gott," and thus renounce the sanctification of cultural ideals such as the primacy of intellect, scientific-technological advances, etc.' *or* we embrace *logos* for what it is, a medium capable of appropriating mythic images and religious ideas while, at the same time, subjecting them to the demythologizing work of refinement and sublimation. The latter alternative is not the one that Freud chose to pursue, for in doing so he would have had to question his technological orientation to religious culture, and perhaps even question the extent to which he could identify narcissistically with the scientific-technological power of Western civilization. But the choice is not his alone to make, and we, inheritors of his problematic and his inexhaustibly rich texts, are in a position to choose otherwise.

²⁸Paul Ricouer's argument that a psychoanalysis of belief cannot be constructed apart from an interpretation of the texts or cultural productions in which the object of belief announces itself, is one that I take to apply also to Freud's God, *logos*' which means, then, that the hermeneutic effort wanting in Freud's polemic is not only Biblical exegesis, but the interpretation of Greek philosophical texts in which *logos* announces itself. See Ricouer's *Freud and Philosophy*, pp. 544ff.