

The Delusion Of An Illusion

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“A powerful-minded opponent of religion is certainly of more service to it than a thousand useless supporters.”

-Oskar Pfister (1939, p. 110).

Introduction

Any personal reading of the works of Sigmund Freud will inevitably reveal the respectable, perhaps enviable, nature of the founder of Psychoanalysis. His lifelong friend, Oskar Pfister, whom Freud referred to as a “clerical gentleman” (1939, p. 142), called Freud a “humanitarian character” (p. 90), considered Freud “full of kindness and benevolence” (p. 130), and ultimately concluded of Freud, “a better Christian there never was” (p. 63). In fact, Pfister’s letters to Freud were so full of praise (and likewise were Freud’s letters to Pfister), that one cannot help but doubt whether it could even be possible to esteem someone more. Freud’s close friend was not the only one who thought highly of him, as Freud was “generally regarded as a figure of unquestionable integrity” (Honderich, 1995, p. 301).

Clearly, Freud deserves respect, if not for his ideas themselves, then for the human being he was and the character he displayed. Therefore, I too venerate Freud for the kind of person he undoubtedly was. With that said, I cannot help—because of the same love for truth Freud himself exhibited throughout his life (1939, p. 9)—but wonder what degree of respect Freud’s ideas and theories merit in and of themselves.

Specifically, Freud’s philosophical position in regard to both religion and science intrigues me. Consequently, the following paper seeks to evaluate the said position by first establishing what his position is in regard to each, then assessing the plausibility of these positions. Ultimately, given his own arguments regarding both science and

religion, I hope to raise doubts regarding the justification of his concurrent high regard for science and denigration of religion.

Part One: Freud's Position

Religion

Though Freud dealt with the topic of religion even in some of his earlier works (for instance, *Totem And Taboo*), it dominated his work toward the latter stages of his life. Incidentally, the works he produced during this closing period of his life, most notably, *The Future Of An Illusion* and *Civilization And Its Discontents*, often tend to be those he is most known for. Both *The Future Of An Illusion* and *Civilization And Its Discontents* are a “culmination of a lifelong pattern of thinking” (1927, p. xiii), and probably reflect basic beliefs and ideas Freud maintained throughout most of his life. Accordingly, I will draw primarily on these two works in my delineation of Freud’s treatment of religion.

It is well known that “Freud was no friend to the religious impulse in human beings” (Thurschwell, 2000, p. 103), and that “Freud was a convinced, consistent, aggressive atheist” (1927, p. xxiii). In *The Future Of An Illusion*, Freud lays the foundation for his most famed and often controversial claim—that religion is merely an *illusion*, nothing more than a wish fulfillment.

But, before moving on to any further explication of Freud’s religious arguments, it is necessary to address the language he uses throughout these arguments. What exactly does he mean by “illusion”? In chapter six of *The Future Of An Illusion*, Freud attempts to distinguish what he means by his idiom by introducing two other terms, *delusion* and *error*, and juxtaposing all three expressions. As alluded to earlier, an illusion is an idea

or belief that fulfils a wish, and “the secret of their strength lies in the strength of those wishes” (1927, p. 38)—the stronger the wish, the stronger the belief. The essence of an illusion is that it is “derived from human wishes” (p. 39), and, for this reason, illusions resemble delusions. However, illusions and delusions are demarcated by their approximation to reality. In the case of the latter, “we emphasize as essential their being in contradiction with reality,” while illusions “need not necessarily be false” (p. 39). Similar to a delusion, an error also indicates a contradiction with reality, but, unlike a delusion, an error has nothing to do with a wish. Ultimately, two criteria arise in the definition of all three terms: 1) whether the source of the idea or belief pertains to a wish, and 2) whether the idea or belief expressly contradicts reality. Finally, “reality,” whatever that may turn out to be for Freud, seems to complete the set of distinctions, reflecting an idea or belief (more likely an “observation” of “facts” in this case) that does not derive from a wishful impulse and obviously does not contradict reality. The following table illustrates what has just been said:

	Illusion	Delusion	Error	“Reality”
Stems from a wish	Yes	Yes	No	No
Unquestionably contradicts reality	No	Yes	Yes	No

With this said, there are two avenues by which Freud approaches religion, and each elicits an underlying wish inherent in man’s universal illusion, religion. Freud himself reflects this in *The Future Of An Illusion* when he delineates the two advantages of religious ideas (and, incidentally, civilization itself (1927, p. 6; 1930, p. 42))—protection against: 1) the dangers of nature and fate, and 2) injuries from man’s social relations (1927, p. 23). The first advantage pertains to man’s existential crisis in the

wake of his exposure to the cruel and chaotic world around him, while the second advantage signals a social dilemma that is the by-product of man's essential psychological structure.

In *The Future Of An Illusion*, Freud primarily illustrates the manner in which religion satisfies man's desire to free himself from his inevitable existential helplessness. Freud captures man's problem as follows: "How does he defend himself against the superior powers of nature, of Fate, which threaten him as they threaten all the rest?...Man's self-regard, seriously menaced, calls for consolation; life and the universe must be robbed of their terrors" (1927, p. 20). Freud likens this sense of helplessness and powerlessness to "the similar state of helplessness" in a child's relationship to his parents, as the child "had reason to fear them" (p. 21) just as man fears the power of nature and fate. Naturally, man is compelled to react to his existential terror in one way or another—"a reaction which is precisely the formation of religion" (p. 30).

The result of this reaction is the "humanization of nature" (1927, p. 20); nature is given a Will and anthropomorphized. Man turns the previously chaotic forces of nature "into gods," and, not surprising, "gives them the character of a father" (p. 21). What was formerly deemed horrific and meaningless is now rendered tolerable (a step toward something better—a redeeming heaven) and meaningful. Thus, a "store of [religious] ideas is created, born from man's need to make his helplessness tolerable" (p. 23).

To properly understand the second impetus for Freud's fundamental claim (that religion is merely an illusion), it is helpful to acquaint oneself with Freud's understanding of man's psychological nature. Freud believed that human beings, and, for that matter, all living organisms, manifested two primary instincts—a life instinct and a death

instinct. According to Freud, both instincts are always present in every living organism, though the death instinct is often repressed into the unconscious in the case of human beings. The life instinct, or the love instinct as it is commonly referred to (Eros), indicates a tendency for unification, while the death instinct corresponds to the propensity for destruction Freud believes to be inherent in any living organism. Clearly, the two tendencies indicate a conflict of interests, which, in turn, reflect an underlying *ambivalence* of feelings and thoughts Freud attributes to the psychical structure of human beings (1930, p. 95) throughout his works, including those that predate *Beyond The Pleasure Principle*—the first work in which the life and death instincts are actually worked out. While Freud maintains that “we know nothing about the origin of this ambivalence” (1913, p. 273), it is nevertheless said to play a vital role in much of human life, and lies at the heart of various human phenomena, including the establishment of civilization (Thurschwell, 200, p. 102), neurosis (1913, p. 63), taboo (1913, p. 109; p. 119), conscience and guilt (1913, p. 120) and, ultimately, religion (1913, p. 252). For our purposes, the validity of Freud’s psychological theory of ambivalence is not of concern, but, instead, its bearing on his philosophy of religion is.

According to Freud, every man possesses two innate desires: 1) to kill and 2) to commit incest (1913, p. 122). Plainly, this does not paint a pretty picture, and, consequently, for the sake of everyone, something has to be done to curb man’s inborn cravings. In *Totem And Taboo*, Freud delineates the course of actions he believes were taken in the beginning of man’s evolution to stunt these two desires. Originally, man is said to have lived together in a *primal horde*, a horde that was dominated by a male father figure. In essence, this male father figure possessed the most physical prowess, and,

accordingly, did as he pleased with all the female members of the group. Naturally, all the other male members eventually grew upset with this father figure (whom they both loved and despised), causing them to band together and kill the father figure by utilizing their collective power as a group. Initially, they were quite pleased, but, eventually, their ambivalence of feeling prevailed and man's first sense of guilt arose within each. As a result, a totem (usually an animal or natural object), representing the father (p. 230), was created and revered, and taboos regarding this totem were established, serving to restrict the inclinations to kill and commit incest. Among other things, these creations produced man's first system of punishment (p. 35), insofar as violations of taboos invoked serious penalties, and manifested the first indications of man's *conscience*, what Freud deemed, "taboo conscience" (p. 120). Freud believed that, in effect, this taboo conscience originates from an ambivalence of feelings toward the father figure that reflect equally the individual's love, and consequent guilt for having slain him, and the actual impulse to kill that prompted the slaughter to begin with.

While "Freud maintains that this primal slaughter of the father was an actual event that really occurred in prehistoric times, the psychic consequences of which haunts us still" (Thurschwell, 2000, p. 102) and "he saw himself as an unraveller of myths rather than a creator of them" (p. 103), when one considers the light further anthropological evidence has shed on the prehistoric activities of man to which Freud's theories address (p. 102), one can only concur with Pamela Thurschwell's assertion that one is best suited to view Freud's analysis of primal man's totems and taboos "as a work of literature or creative mythology" (p. 97).

Nevertheless, his conception of primitive totem and taboo reflects his overarching view of religion from henceforth. Like the establishment of civilization itself, all subsequent religions are a continuation of the same efforts to curtail man's inherent ambivalence of feelings (his desire to love and his simultaneous urge to destroy), and, therefore, manifest these unspoken wishes that would otherwise lead to severe complications in man's social relations. As Freud himself says, "the moral and customary prohibitions which we ourselves obey may have some essential relation to this primitive taboo the explanation of which may...throw light upon the dark origin of our own 'categorical imperative'" (1913, p. 39) and "the totem may have been the first form of the father substitute and the god a later one in which the father regained his human form" (p. 258). For Freud, religion is the manifestation of man's *wish* to both expunge his existential predicament and repress his most rudimentary impulses for the sake of better social relations.

Freud does not content himself with merely unveiling the truth about religion—that it is an illusion—but also mounts an attack against it, arguing vehemently against the utility of it given man's purpose and intention (striving for happiness (1930, p. 25)). While Freud makes it no secret that restrictions are necessary considering man's need for security (Audi, 1995, p. 333; Edwards, 1967, p. 251), he still argues that, when it comes to modern religious restrictions, "primitive man was better off in knowing no restrictions of instinct" (1930, p. 73). Aside from his pragmatic argument against religion, Freud also argues against religion on theoretical grounds. Belief in the contents of various teachings cannot be justified "without producing grounds for their claim" (1927, p. 32), and, unfortunately, the three grounds upon which religious teachings are founded (1) the fact

that our ancestors believed in them, 2) the fact that they have been handed down to us from previous centuries, and 3) the fact that we are forbidden to question them to begin with (p. 33)) are “full of contradictions, revisions and falsifications” (p. 33). In short, Freud asserts that there simply is no reason to believe religious claims, and “where questions of religion are concerned, people are guilty of every possible sort of dishonesty and intellectual misdemeanor” (p. 41).

Science

While Freud devotes a great deal of time to his assessment of religion, especially in his later writings, and though his attitude toward science is made implicitly clear in the majority of his writings, he devotes much less time to his general conception of science and the foundation upon which he bases it. After an extensive reading of Freud’s works, one gains the impression that Freud took most of his views toward science for granted, assuming others would tacitly regard science in the same fashion as he did, and took little time to give science itself the same careful analysis he gave all his other subjects of inquiry. However, he does give a few palpable indications regarding his view of science in some of his works.

In *Totem And Taboo*, Freud says, “science sets in only after we have realized that we do not know the world and must...seek means of getting to know it” (p. 159). Similarly, in *The Future Of An Illusion*, Freud declares that, “scientific work is the only road which can lead us to a knowledge of reality outside ourselves” (p. 40). Also, in this work Freud refers to scientists as “vehicles of civilization,” and asserts that, thanks in large part to these vehicles, “people find them [religious ideas] less credible” because “science has shown up the errors in them” (p. 49) and “scientific knowledge has taught

them much” (p. 63). Actually, the entire tenth and final chapter of this same text might best be viewed as Freud’s ardent defense of his own conviction in science. In an effort to substantiate his scientific mindset amidst his interlocutor’s flurry of condemnations, Freud indicates that his scientific orientation is distinct from religious orientations because his is capable of correction and, therefore, does not have the character of a delusion (p. 67) and that it has “given us evidence by its numerous and important successes that it is no illusion” (p. 70). He concludes his book on illusion with a final defense of science: “No, our science is no illusion. But an illusion it would be to suppose that what science cannot give us we can get elsewhere” (p. 71).

In *Civilization And Its Discontents*, Freud also makes a few passing remarks of praise regarding science. Confronted with inevitable restrictions on his pleasure, civilized man must succumb to what Freud identifies as the reality principle, and is forced to moderate his claim to happiness (1930, p. 26). In Freud’s estimation, man’s most profitable response to this reality principle is to become “a member of the human community” and, “with the help of a technique guided by science” (p. 27), collectively attempt to subjugate nature for the benefit of each individual, thereby aspiring to attain the optimal amount of pleasure possible given the reality of the situation. In fact, in this process of subjugation (of nature), he will “almost become a God himself” (p. 44). Anticipating his reader’s objection that, despite the advances of science, man still is not happy, Freud cites specific scientific accomplishments—railway, telephone, longer life, etc. (p. 40)—and urges the reader to reflect on the enhancements to his life that these accomplishments have made possible.

Clearly, Freud displays nothing short of complete admiration (with the exception of his brilliant—and, in my opinion, compelling—objections that he puts in the mouth of his own interlocutor) for science. Recurrent in all of Freud's comments is the notion that science in some way reflects "reality." Hence, science is the means by which we can attain that most ideal set of ideas (at least for Freud)—those that do not stem from wishes and do not blatantly contradict reality. Moreover, not only does science merely reflect how things "really are" (or the "truth"), it also yields numerous benefits to man because it allows him to manipulate nature in pleasurable ways. According to the Freudian position, then, science is not only more honest than religion, it also elicits more happiness, and, because by his behavior man reveals that his purpose and intention is to "strive after happiness" (1930, p. 25), it is in man's best interest to rid himself of religion and acclimate himself with the scientific spirit.

Part Two: Freud's Problems

At this point, I hope to have sufficiently established Freud's position, and, consequently, I now turn a critical eye toward this very position. Admittedly, I find much of what Freud says regarding both religion and science well articulated and, in some cases, convincing, though, as he is quick to point out, much of what he says is self-evident and had already been said before (1927, p. 45; 1930, p. 75). For instance, the contention that religious claims cannot be confirmed by physical observation or any similar scientific means is made particularly poignantly by Freud, though it is certainly "old news" and nothing novel in its own right. Unfortunately, in my exposure to Freud, I am confronted with an equal number of troublesome and inarticulate arguments, a few of which I will now address.

I begin my analysis of Freud's position right where I began my explication of his position—by discussing the jargon he uses throughout his arguments. Despite the fact that Freud's most controversial book is entitled "The Future Of An *Illusion*," it could have just as easily been titled "The Future Of A Delusion" or "The Future Of An Error." In fact, Freud admits that whether one renders religious belief "an illusion or as something analogous to a delusion will depend on one's personal attitude" (1927, p. 39). This illustrates the extremely equivocal nature of Freud's own language. The ambiguous character of Freud's terminology coupled with the fact that he uses all three terms—illusion (pp. 38; 42), delusion (p. 67), and error (p. 49)—to refer to religion (in the very same book no less!) can only raise questions regarding the functional value of the terms and distinctions to begin with. The fact that, in *The Future Of An Illusion*, Freud insists, "to assess the truth-value of religious doctrines does not lie within the present enquiry" (p. 42), and nevertheless describes religion as a delusion and an error (implicitly assessing the truth-value of religious doctrines), only confounds the problem.

More importantly, if we assume Freud's terms may in fact mean something, by what standard does he distinguish his science from man's universal religion? Freud maintains that "it is enough for us that we have recognized them [religious doctrines] as being...illusions" (1927, p. 42), and it is clear throughout his works that he despises them for being just that—illusions (wish fulfillments). Yet, at the same time, scientific and technological advancements "are an actual fulfillment of every—or almost every—fairy-tale wish," and, through these advancements, "he [man] has almost become a god himself" (1930, p. 44)! Clearly, insofar as scientific endeavors can yield pleasure, they too are wish fulfillments.

Thus, at this point, if Freud's criticisms of religion and praise for science are to be rendered meaningful in any sense, it must, in fact, *not* be enough to recognize religion as an illusion. For the sake of argument, let us imagine that Freud is still alive and, having just finished reading our enquiry up to this point, lowers his cigar and says the following: "Perhaps you have caught me a little off-guard. *Civilization And Its Discontents* could have used a little more refinement than I gave it; it was admittedly, on average, less meticulous than my other works. If I were presented with the chance to revise it once more, I should certainly address the point you have just made, and would certainly take the time to spell out the difference between the wish-fulfilling function of science as opposed to that of its counter-part, religion. At any rate, for the sake of argument, let us imagine that I had entitled my other book *The Future Of A Delusion*. After all, my main qualm about religion is that one can never confirm nor deny its claims. Can you deny this?"

Interestingly, in *The Future Of An Illusion*, Freud confesses, "perhaps the hopes I have confessed to are of an illusory nature, too" (p. 67) but immediately offers a disclaimer—"my illusions are not, like religious ones, incapable of correction. They have not the character of a *delusion* [my italics]" (p. 67). Hence, the emphasis shifts from an ideas illusory nature (whether or not it satisfies his desires) to its falsifiability (whether or not it can be proven false by means of experience).

Ironically, this was precisely the source of much frustration in my reading of Freud's scientific works—that it did not seem falsifiable! In fact, this is a common complaint in scholarship regarding Freud, and there is even the "suggestion that psychoanalytic theory is in principle unfalsifiable, untestable, and therefore empirically

vacuous” (Edwards, 1967, p. 252). Freud was fully aware of these contentions during his lifetime, and actually wrote to Pfister, “if only we could get the better people to realise that all our theories are based on experience and not just fabricated out of thin air or thought up over the writing desk” (1939, p. 27). Without dwelling too much on Freud’s scientific investigations, I would only like to advise that, given the subject matter of psychoanalysis (the unconscious), the allegation that psychoanalysis and its results are not falsifiable (or, for that matter, verifiable) does warrant some consideration.

Let us return to Freud’s notion that religious illusions are unsatisfactory because they cannot be confirmed and, for this reason, should be deemed delusions. Regarding delusions, it might be worth mentioning that in Freud’s first explication of the term, “we emphasize as essential their being in contradiction with reality” (1927, p. 39), whereas in this later demarcation of illusion, delusion merely indicates the inability to be verified as real or true. Now the question becomes: By what instrument does Freud consider reality to be verified?

Here, we are faced with another problem of Freud—his lopsided conception of reality. Freud’s philosophy is plagued by his limited notion of reality and his unwillingness to recognize any feature of reality other than the scientific. Throughout their lifelong discourse, Pfister remained a critic of this line of reasoning that permeated Freud’s philosophy. In a letter to Freud he wrote, “it is impossible that what you reject as the end of an illusion and value as the sole truth [science] can be all” (1939, p. 116). Pfister’s letters were incessantly filled with powerful counterarguments to Freud’s blinkered model of reality.

In effect, anything that cannot be measured or scientifically observed is delusional because they cannot be verified in the sense Freud requires. Any statement that is not a scientific “mater-of-fact” must be considered delusional. It should be plain why Freud, the critic of religion, would have to be Freud, the scientist’s, biggest critic. To my knowledge, no one has ever smelt, felt, tasted, heard, or seen the unconscious and its processes. It seems that if anyone should be willing to admit that there is more to reality “than meets the eye,” it should be Freud, the psychoanalyst and purported scientist.

In a scientific context, religion will never be verified or rendered meaningful. However, in the light of other aspects of reality—for instance, the religious—science is itself inconsequential. What Freud fails to realize is that “the truths contained in religious doctrines are...so distorted and systematically disguised” (1927, p. 57) only when viewed through the religiously distorted and systematically disguised lens of science. In his religious philosophy, Freud forgets to take off his scientific glasses. Erich Fromm’s book, *Psychoanalysis And Religion*, proves insightful for the problem at hand. Fromm begins by saying what we have already established, namely that, “for Freud, religion has its origin in man’s helplessness in confronting the forces of nature outside and the instinctive forces within himself” (Fromm, 1950, pp. 10-11). In the latter stages of his book, Fromm elaborates the notion of religious experience further, saying, “religious experience is the wondering, the marveling, the becoming aware of life and of one’s own existence, and of the puzzling problem of one’s relatedness to the world” (p. 94). Fromm also maintains that a feeling of oneness, much akin to the ‘oceanic feeling’ Freud addresses in *Civilization And Its Discontents*, is an element of the religious experience. What is essential for our purposes is that we recognize this religious experience as an

actual *experience*. Just because one cannot physically observe existential wonder does not mean that it does not exist, that it is not real. Like Freud, I “cannot discover this ‘oceanic’ feeling in myself” (1930, p. 11), this feeling of “oneness.” As Freud also indicates, “this gives me no right to deny that it does in fact occur in other people” (p. 12).

Unfortunately, it seems that Freud does precisely this in much of his work—he denies that it “really” can happen in other people simply because he cannot confirm it. Interestingly, in his consideration the validity and reality of religious ideas, Freud would have done well to heed the advice he gives in *Totem And Taboo*, where he says, “we must beware of introducing contempt for what is merely thought or wished which characterizes our sober world where there are only material values” (p. 279). One could not offer Freud, the critic of religion, any better advice. As one of his interlocutors points out, human needs and thoughts are, in fact, a “piece of reality” (1927, p. 67). Neither Freud nor I could reasonably denounce man’s existential crisis as delusional, for we have felt it—every man has felt it—and know full well that it is very much *real*.

In conclusion, we must conclude a lot of things. Ultimately, I concur with Anthony O’Hear’s perceptive assessment of the relationship between science and religion: “Scientific investigation can...have nothing to say either for or against a fundamental religious attitude or insight. What we have in science and in religion are at bottom two separate and non-conflicting modes of discourse” (O’Hear, 1993, p. 512). Further, “man has imperative needs of another sort, which can never be satisfied by cold science” (1927, p. 44). As Freud’s interlocutor alludes to, a religious attitude (or as Pfister refers to it in his letters to Freud, “a philosophy of life”) is needed; religion fulfills

man's needs that simply cannot be addressed by science and may even be intensified *because* of science—as Freud knows all too well, even the man of science is none too happy and need we remind ourselves that, thanks to science, we “would have no difficulty in exterminating one another to the last man” (1930, p. 112)? Indeed, “to push too hard in the direction of empiricism will reduce all our science to some sterile version of instrumentalism” (O’Hear, 1993, p. 515), and we get Pfister’s “ugly picture of the calculating-machine man” (1939, p. 137). Ultimately, “one might argue that Freud, too, fell victim to that intractable human desire for faith in something higher—a substitute god or father figure. In a sense, he set up himself and psychoanalysis as that father” (Thurschwell, 2000, p. 110).

Lest we blind ourselves with the inconsistencies Freud exhibits in his effort to grapple with Truth, let us close by reminding ourselves of what *really* matters—that he grappled at all.

“A powerful-minded opponent of religion is certainly of more service to it than a thousand useless supporters.”

-Oskar Pfister (1939, p. 110).

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