

Book Report #2 - Philosophy 9C
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by Andrew Goodman

Books - Civilization and Its Discontents
The Future of an Illusion
by Sigmund Freud

Freud's Religions Orientation

Sigmund Freud's religious manifesto, The Future of an Illusion cannot rightly be considered a book on religion. Freud's main concern is the nature of man and his relation to culture. Religion is only important inasmuch as it is a part of culture and a manifestation of human thought. Hence, from the beginning, the reader is faced with the assumption that God is a function of human needs and human interests. With such an orientation Freud puts himself in an excellent position to criticize religion as an illusion and point to its errors and the dangerous consequences that result. Hence, while his logic is good and his statements are valid, he weakens his position by his unproved assumption and renders his views on religion insignificant because he emphasizes culture to the neglect of his topic.

This neglect on the part of Freud makes his book totally inadequate from the point of view of the philosopher. In the eyes of logic, Freud has really not proved that religion is an illusion; he has arrogantly allowed himself to simply assert what he considers to be an obvious fact. If he had wanted to, he could have investigated essential contradictions within religion and pointed out how religion is contradictory to fact. He might have investigated the essence of religion, as Feuerbach did, thereby demonstrating a knowledge of the subject and at the same time furnishing proof for his conclusions. Does Freud expect his reader to take him seriously? Does he believe that the reader is so naive that he could fall for such a "flimsy" argument?

I think that Freud would not attempt to answer the philosopher. In fact, Freud sets the philosophy of religion on its head. Instead of treating religion as a primary problem as such people as William James, Paul Tillich, and Henri Bergson

-2-

do, he subordinates it to an investigation of human culture. He doesn't even think it important enough to attack. That isn't to say that he doesn't appreciate the vital part religion plays in the dynamics of culture, it simply means Freud considers religion unworthy of formal rebuttal.

Thus while religion is slighted, culture emerges as the primary topic. This in itself is not a limitation, in light of Freud's objective. The only trouble is that Freud does not really spend much time on the cultural sources of religion in The Future of an Illusion. In fact, he confines his description of those sources to approximately three pages. The balance of the work, (or should I say imbalance), is devoted to the definition of illusion and an argument for "rational" culture. For this reason it is impossible to understand the implications of Freud's views unless one knows something of his views on the origin of religion and the dynamics of culture. For this reason I must include in this essay a discussion of Freud's analysis of "man in society"; Civilization and Its Discontents.

In Civilization and Its Discontents, Freud examines culture from three points of view. His first objective is to explain crudely what culture is. In The Future of an Illusion, he says:

"It (culture) includes on the one hand all the knowledge and power that men have acquired in order to master the forces of nature and win resources from her for the satisfaction of human needs, and on the other hand it includes all necessary arrangements whereby men's relations to each other, in particular the distribution of attainable riches, may be regulated."

Specifically, this would include, on the one hand, tools, houses, the control of fire and material goods. On the other hand, it would include cultural ideals, especially religion and law.

-3-

As for religion, I will deal with it later. The subject of law, on the other hand, takes us into the second aspect of culture, namely the need for its existence. Freud would say that the cultural ideal of law, as opposed to brute force, preserves man from his own self destruction. A society which rules itself by law, by definition, agrees on a conception of what is right. What is important here is that a culture agrees on a method to provide a basis for self preservation. The goal of self preservation would not entail the necessity for culture if this were an easy matter for man. The fact is, however, that the task is too big for a man to perform himself. In the first place, man is a weak and fragile animal. Alone, it would not be long before he froze to death, or was eaten by a better equipped animal. With the help of his fellow man, on the other hand, he can build shelters, make weapons and form gangs to protect himself against animal aggressors, and to find food for his stomach.

The importance of human collaboration is obvious to everyone. But Freud further points out that such collaboration is very difficult for man. In the first place, man, because he is an animal, is motivated by the sexual urge. That is to say that a man, by his very nature, will want a woman. This combination also by its very nature is exclusive and therefore anti-cultural. As a matter of fact, if the man exists alone he must preserve his sexual relation with the woman by defending it from the encroachment of other men. This jealous defensiveness makes man hostile to his kind and therefore presents an obstacle to cultural collaboration. This very hostility, however, makes it even more imperative for man to join together in a community. If he does not form such relationships, those who are not destroyed by a hurricane or a lion will be destroyed by his fellow man. The solution to this problem is law. By defining for himself what is right and wrong, man forms a concept of justice. In the future he knows that he cannot get away with killing a

-4-

competitor because he has the urge to do so. For even if he is the strongest in the community he soon finds that the community, as a whole, is stronger than he. Further he realizes that he needs their help if he is to survive the forces of destruction in nature.

This brings us to the final and most important aspect of culture as Freud sees it in Civilization and its Discontents; namely, the way in which culture functions and the psychological effects of this operation. In essence the act of culture demands a total psychological re-orientation of man's attitudes toward love. Instead of loving the sexual object exclusively, man must now value the act of loving other men as the highest of principles. This Freud calls "aim-inhibited love". The male human must concern himself more and more with the general welfare of humans while the woman remains loyal to the family and her sexual function. In this way the woman and her family, along with the man's basic sexual drives, remain antagonistic to the culture, whereas the culture in its own self defense institutes great restrictions on the sexual urge, and thus quickens the alienation process. Further, the culture must insist on the illogical idea of "love thy neighbor". This prospect is illogical because "thy neighbor" is very often undeserving of your love, and, in fact, is quite provocative of your hate. However, in order to preserve the peace, culture demands that you deal with even those neighbors who are unsavory.

The psychological effects of these rules are both far reaching and important. Once the ideal is established, the member of the community realizes that in order to cultivate love as it is now defined, he must renounce his instinctive drives. These drives, which Freud calls the Id, consist, in each person, of sexual love and natural hostility. Only dread of external authority could induce man to renounce such powerful drives when culture was still primitive. More advanced civilization

-5-

could not depend on simply controlling itself by force, nor can man stand for such absolute inharmony over an extended period of time. His solution is to establish within his own mind an authority which replaces the external authority of culture. This Freud calls the Super-ego. Thus the aggressiveness of the culture is replaced by the aggressiveness of the authoritative super-ego which is powerful enough to counteract the forces of the Id. These forces are in turn regulated appropriately by the ego which deals with the objective world. The change to the authority of the super-ego entails a radical change for the individual. For now that the authority is internal, it is constantly aware of the "evil" desires of the Id. Where before a person was guilty if he performed an evil act, now he is guilty even if he thinks an evil thought. The avoidance of guilt is thus impossible. Further, the more the individual renounces the Id, the stronger the super-ego becomes, and the more the ego is aware that it is guilty. The consequence of such renunciation, therefore, is that the ego finds it necessary to exercise still further its powers of restraint in order to propitiate the super-ego.

Hence, because man is guilty, frustrated and impotent when compared to nature, he finds himself in a rather discontented state on this earth, and this is where religion begins to play a role. Freud points out in the Future of an Illusion that:

"religious ideas have sprung from the same need as all the other achievements of culture: from the necessity for defending itself against the crushing supremacy of nature. And there was a second motive: the eager desire to correct the so painfully felt imperfections of culture."

Thus man must have a god to personalize impersonal fate and death. His god further objectifies his fate so he can deal with it tangibly. The concept of the after-life subdues the fear of death. The concept of Providence and the sacraments

-6-

serves to weaken the effects of his guilt. Finally, the strength of religion is enhanced by precedent. Each child is used to the external authority of the father. In the father, the child has already experienced fear and impotence on the one hand and protection on the other. As his super-ego developed, the external authority was replaced by an internal one. The super-ego, however, was an even more absolute authority. In fact, the super-ego led to a guilt feeling, on the one hand and an absolutism on the other. The step from here to God is an easy and logical one.

In essence God is used to overcome nature, and justify the illogicalities of culture. Once Freud established these concepts, he spends the bulk of the book justifying his charge that religion is an illusion, and answering certain arguments against his theory of the advisability of abolishing religion. That religion is an illusion is obvious, according to Freud, for two reasons. In the first place there is no evidence that God exists. Secondly there is good reason to believe that man only believes in this evasive personality because he is used to authority and because it fulfills his needs.

The latter point is very important to Freud because it is a potential weak spot in his argument for the abolition of religion. It may be asked what will happen if you take from the masses their only justification for moral action. Indeed, says Freud's adversary, you should at least act "as if" there is a God. Freud, however, recommends education as the solution. He holds that the problem of anarchy only exists because of the damage religion has already done. If we had taught morality and responsibility instead of Godliness and respect for authority, the masses would have chosen to be moral for its innate benefits instead of respecting morality because it was God-given. They would have been able to function as mature adults instead of adult babies. In fact, says Freud, if we can teach mankind to grow up

-7-

our problems will be solved.

To sum it up then, Freud attributes religion to a manifestation of civilization and its discontents. But he also feels that in the future man can, will, and must dispense with this illusion. He can dispense with it because it is already becoming evident that it is an illusion, and he must dispense with it before destruction foils all attempts to educate men in the ways of culture.

We now come to the task of evaluating Freud's ideas. If the preceding description was too detailed, I apologize. However, I think it was necessary, if only to emphasize one important point; Freud is basically interested in the psychology of man and the dynamics of culture. Further, he considers religion to be just one of many cultural needs; while he understands that religion has important implications, he denies that it has primary value in the forming and development of culture.

With this in mind, we may proceed. In the first place, it is necessary to understand from the beginning that Freud's ideas simply constitute a theory of the development of culture which is open to criticism on many grounds. What is important, however, is his orientation. If some of the particulars don't hold up in fact, he has at least effectively attempted to turn intellectual thought away from illusory religious language and an unverifiable religious view of process. If his feeling that society will solve its problems by growing up is a naive notion, he has at least established the possibility for investigation of religious illusions, in addition to which he has degraded religion to the point where, if he was in fact unjust in his condemnation, he has at least opened new channels for investigation.

To make my point clearer, I need only refer to Henri Bergson for a comparison. I think Mr. Bergson had read Freud, but even if he hadn't, he at least would agree with him in a number of grounds. They would agree that culture

-8-

entails renunciation and moral responsibility. They would also agree that progress comes from creative criticism and positive change. The difference is that where Bergson approaches culture from the point of view of religion, Freud approaches religion from the point of view of culture. Where Bergson attributes cultural stability to "minimum morality" and creative progress to "maximum morality", Freud attributes religion to a need for a stable culture and creative progress to rational thought. The implications for progress of these divergent views are very important. Bergson would say that the elan vital of the complete mystic is responsible for the creative energy needed for progress. Freud would agree with Bergson in so far as he would probably recognize the necessity for the elan vital, but he would reject Bergson's emphasis on mysticism. In the first place, Freud would not admit that there is anything mystical about elan vital. Most important, however, he would find it necessary to stress the rationality of the creative act rather than unguided energy which is opened to all kinds of illusions and falsehoods. The implications of this difference run even deeper, however. In expressing man in terms of himself, Freud widens his horizon, while Bergson is limited to a strictly moral and basically false view of culture and human progress.

To make my point still clearer, I would like to make one more short comparison; this one with William James. On the surface it seems that James is the very antithesis of Freud. I think this could not be further from the truth. In fact, I think that Freud would agree with practically all of James. However, when he was finished agreeing, he would have to admit that James' view is seriously limited. Freud would never doubt that religion has real effects, but he would denounce James' unwillingness to examine the real causes. He would further say that where the causes can be discovered, the illusory effects of religion can be eliminated.

-9-

It is precisely this wider and more scientific view that constitutes Freud's strength. Thus as he himself says:

"My illusions - apart from the fact that no penalty is imposed for not sharing them - are not, like the religious ones, incapable of correction, they have no delusional character."

Thus while his book may be riddled with errors, Freud has at least opened the door of science by refuting the limited moral view of nature and investigating the real sources of morality and religious experience.