

Kant, Freud, and the ethical critique of religion

James DiCenso

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Abstract This paper engages Freud's relation to Kant, with specific reference to each theorist's articulation of the interconnections between ethics and religion. I argue that there is in fact a constructive approach to ethics and religion in Freud's thought, and that this approach can be better understood by examining it in relation to Kant's formulations on these topics. Freud's thinking about religion and ethics participates in the Enlightenment heritage, with its emphasis on autonomy and rationality, of which Kant's model of practical reason is in many ways exemplary. At the same time, Freud advances Kantian thinking in certain important respects; his work offers a more somatically, socially, and historically grounded approach to the formation of rational and ethical capacities, and hence makes it more compatible with contemporary concerns and orientations that eschew the pitfalls of ahistorical idealist orientations.

Keywords Religion · Reason · Ethics · Psychoanalysis · History · Culture · Universalism · Critique

In an illuminating passage from his lecture series, *Problems of Moral Philosophy*, Theodor Adorno notes that Freud's mature works contain ideas that counteract stereotypical views of psychoanalysis. Adorno is particularly concerned with the ability of psychoanalytic theory to clarify the formation of our ethical capacities, and to do so in a way that does not understand ethics simply as a by-product of conflicts between parental authorities and libidinal drives. In his words, "It is worthy of note that Freud, who started out as a critic of the so-called process of repression, that is, as the critic of the renunciation of instinct, subsequently became its advocate." Adorno explains this seeming contradiction by noting of Freud that "the distinction that he made was between two kinds of renunciation of instinct. On the one hand there is repression ... [and] alternatively, there is the *conscious renunciation of instinct*, so that even man's [sic] instinctual behavior is placed under the supervision of reason." Most

J. DiCenso
Department for the Study of Religion, The University of Toronto, 123 St. George Street, Toronto, ON,
Canada M5S2E8
e-mail: james.dicenso@utoronto.ca

significantly for the purposes of my present argument, Adorno further observes that “*this is similar to what happens in Kant’s ethics...*”¹

I want to extrapolate upon Adorno’s brief but provocative comments, and engage Freud’s relation to Kant, with specific reference to each theorist’s articulation of the interconnections between ethics and religion. I will argue that there is a constructive approach to ethics and religion in Freud’s thought, and that this approach can be better understood by examining it in relation to Kant’s formulations. In essence, I will illustrate that Freud’s thinking about religion and ethics participates in the Enlightenment heritage, with its emphasis on autonomy and rationality, of which Kant’s model of practical reason is in many ways exemplary. At the same time, Freud advances Kantian and Enlightenment thinking in certain important respects; his work offers a more somatically, socially, and historically grounded approach to the formation of rational and ethical capacities, and hence makes it more compatible with contemporary orientations that eschew the pitfalls of idealist orientations. Freud’s empiricist approach to reason necessarily includes elements of continual testing, hence, incompleteness and corrigibility, that counteract idealism’s focus on the *a priori* status of reason and ethics. These views are most fully articulated in Freud’s essay, “The Question of a *Weltanschauung*” in the *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*. Freud is adamant in seeking to differentiate psychoanalysis from any form of *Weltanschauung*, because he understands this as “an intellectual construction which solves all problems of our existence uniformly on the basis of an overriding hypothesis, which, accordingly, leaves no question unanswered and in which everything that interests us finds its fixed place.”² Clearly, Freud is eschewing any claim to completeness or finality, or what theorists such as Levinas call *totality*. Thus, although Kant and Freud share an emphasis on reason, as opposed to non-rational beliefs, as the vehicle of human betterment, their respective models as to the origins and nature of reason differ considerably. Here, my arguments will focus on this disjunction particularly with respect to practical reason. I build primarily upon their respective approaches to moral conscience, and address their shared focus on *religion as interpreted and evaluated according to ethical criteria*. The notion of *renunciation*, as highlighted by Adorno, is a crucial aspect of the shared ethical concerns underpinning these projects. Because both Kant and Freud engage in an ethically based critique of religion, their analyses can in some ways be seen as *internal* to religious thought, broadly construed. Of course, both Kant and Freud also deploy epistemological critiques of religion, and categories such as illusion and delusion are important to their respective analyses. However, the heart of the matter is in each case ethical and humanistic: assessing religion against the criterion of furthering the well being of others.

The two thinkers are not obvious allies, and Freud often seeks to differentiate psychoanalysis sharply from what he understands to be the disembodied rationalism of Kantian ethics. Therefore, in response to the possible ambiguities arising from this juxtaposition, I want to situate Freud’s contributions within certain essential *tensions* evident in Kant’s treatment of religion and ethics. These are tensions between a universally conceived practical reason, on the one hand, and attention to historical, cultural, and individual specificity on the other. I approach Kant’s analysis of religion in a way that preserves its critical focus on reason and ethics, still so crucial when approaching questions of the meaning and significance of religious traditions today. At the same time, I want to draw from Freud to avoid Kant’s problematic model of the transcendental subject, seemingly able to access universally valid ethical principles in a self-contained manner. The issue here, as many commentators have noted, is that Kant’s approach to establishing norms and principles is generally too static, too

¹ Adorno (2000, p. 137) (emphasis added).

² Strachey et al. (1964a (Vol. SE XXII), p. 158).

disconnected from experience, and insufficiently capable of accommodating historical diversity and transformation.³ In this way, his work exhibits some of the problems and limitations of Enlightenment thought generally. Jonathan Glover expresses the point well in stating: “Now we tend to see the Enlightenment view of human psychology as thin and mechanical, and Enlightenment hopes of social progress through the spread of humanitarianism and the scientific outlook as naïve.”⁴ Unfortunately, these limitations are often used as an excuse for marginalizing the discourses of reason and ethical universality, particularly in relation to matters of religion, so that the task of bringing religious doctrines and practices into dialogical interaction with publicly shareable ethical criteria is seriously undermined. In my view, the crucial issue concerns retaining respect for rationality, especially with regard to questions of ethics, while avoiding the tendency to portray reason as uniform, one-dimensional, and abstracted from the richness and diversity of human personal and cultural existence. Naturally, Freud cannot fully resolve these matters for us, but his work provides resources for a more differentiated contemporary analysis of the status of religion in relation to issues of inter-human ethical co-existence. I am seeking to extricate from Freud elements of a critical model for reflecting on the capacity of religious doctrines, teachings and practices to further a more ethically-oriented human co-existence, without relying on the assumption of fixed transcendental principles to do so.

Freud’s Critique of Kantian Idealism

References to Kant appear at strategic points in Freud’s work, beginning with *The Interpretation of Dreams*. There, Freud discusses the view that “Kant’s categorical imperative” is operative even while we sleep. Freud is no doubt referring to what Kant scholars would call the “first formula” of the categorical imperative given in the *Groundwork*: “act only in accordance with the maxim through which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.”⁵ This is the most abstract of Kant’s formulations, emphasizing rational capacity to engage in a process of universalization as the touchstone for all moral dilemmas. Kant himself modifies his ethical position by developing two supplementary formulae, which I will discuss later. However, for the moment it suffices to note that it is the psychologically naïve approach to ethics of the first formula to which Freud appears to object, and he does so by expanding the scope of subjectivity to include non-conscious phenomena such as dreams. Most astutely, Freud argues that “those who believe that the ‘categorical imperative’ extends to dreams, should logically accept unqualified responsibility for immoral dreams.”⁶ A Kantian approach assuming a transparent, fully autonomous practical reason, cannot account for a sphere of involuntary (or unconscious) immoral willing or acting that is not subject to conscious intentionality. Freud does not directly refute the Kantian view, but he qualifies it by wryly commenting of these Kantian idealists that “we could only hope for their sake that they would have no such reprehensible dreams of their own to upset their firm belief in their

³ For a useful account of some of the relevant issues, see Stout (2004, pp. 77–85). Stout attempts to articulate a more differentiated and open-ended approach to shared ethical norms by juxtaposing the Kantian “social contract theory” with a Hegelian dialectical model without, however, also inquiring into the ahistorical features of Hegelianism.

⁴ Glover (2001, p. 7).

⁵ Kant (1996a, p. 73) (AK 4: 421). German references are to: Kant (1968) Cited as AK. My discussion of the “three formulae” of the categorical imperative is indebted to Wood (1999).

⁶ Freud (1953, p. 68).

own moral character.”⁷ This is a reference to the view that emerges through the course of Freud’s dream book: at unconscious levels of human personalities, ethical constraints and norms are *not* always operative, and that these very real elements of our personalities will emerge directly or indirectly, despite our conscious intentions. Subsequently, in the course of a sample dream interpretation Freud discusses the effects of wish-fulfillment and the ensuing “misunderstanding” of dreams on the part of “the conscious thought activity of a second psychological system,”⁸ i.e., the ego, and this is indicative of precisely the tendency to camouflage our motivations and desires from ourselves. Freud argues that a “moralizing purpose of the dream reveals an obscure knowledge of the fact that the latent dream content is concerned with forbidden wishes that have fallen victim to repression.”⁹ It is not only overtly *immoral* dreams that question the Kantian model of the ethical subject, but also dreams that might secondarily disguise and distort immoral impulses with a *moralizing* manifest content (or surface meaning). Freud understands Kantian ethics as based on a model of the personality that ignores the dynamic repressed, and in so doing simply furthers such morally dubious repression. In other words, if we assume that a conscious decision to subject our motivations and maxims to the test of the categorical imperative suffices to ensure morality, we not only deceive ourselves, but conceal the need for the interpretive analytic procedures that might unravel more complex and disagreeable latent motivations.

Taken in themselves, these comments reinforce the impression that Freud simply reacts against rationalism’s one-dimensional model of the subject by highlighting unconscious, somatically based forces that qualify conscious will and intentionality. However, in the overview there is a more nuanced psychoanalytic position on ethics, even with regard to dreams. For example, in *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, Freud discusses the ego ideal, precursor to the concept of the super ego. He notes that its functions include “self observation [and] the moral conscience,” and that these appear in the form of “the censorship of dreams...”¹⁰ Hence, ethical considerations are not *eliminated* by Freud, but are rather included in a more encompassing dynamic model of the personality. Ethical norms (basically derived from cultural resources) are in conflict with repressed desires and other non-moral factors of the personality. These conflicts will be more intense and more problematic the greater the degree of repression, and hence the less the degree of self-knowledge (in Freud’s more encompassing sense of the term). Becoming a more self-consciously ethical person is seen as a *task* by Freud, and it is within the often painful inter-play of cultural norms, repression, and desires, that Freud will locate the possibility of individual ethical maturation and self-awareness.

The Interpretation of Dreams, in which the interplay of the psychical systems yields tensions and compromise formations, offers a basically *synchronic* model of psychical dynamics. However, this model also presupposes a *diachronic* model depicting the formation and development of human personalities. Freud’s discussions of developmental issues related to ethics add a new critical component to his assessment of the value of inherited *culturally-formed norms*. This appears most clearly in his terse critique of Kantian ethics in the *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*. In the chapter “The Dissection of the Psychical Personality,” Freud turns to the formation of the super-ego, which he equates with “the origins of conscience.” He then refers to the “well-known pronouncement of Kant’s which couples

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid, p. 243.

⁹ Ibid, p. 244.

¹⁰ Freud (1955a, p. 110).

conscience within us with the starry heavens ... as the masterpieces of creation.”¹¹ Freud is quick to deflate the apparent metaphysical assumptions governing Kant’s proclamation. In Freud’s words:

The stars are indeed magnificent, but as regards conscience God has done an uneven and careless piece of work, for a large majority of men have brought along with them only a modest amount of it or scarcely enough to be worth mentioning. We are far from overlooking the portion of psychological truth that is contained in the assertion that conscience is of divine origin; but the thesis needs interpretation. Even if conscience is something “within us,” yet it is not so from the first.¹²

Freud also contrasts the *secondary or derivative nature of conscience* with “sexual life,” which he asserts is “not only a later addition.”¹³ This is significant beyond granting a constitutional priority to the sexual drives. More specifically, it necessitates including need and desire in a dynamic inter-personal account of the *development and workings of higher-order faculties such as conscience*. The key distinction is that Kant understands conscience to be *given* with pure practical reason¹⁴ (enabling us to undertake the universalization procedure according to the categorical imperative). Freud, however, understands conscience as the *product* of a series of dynamic human inter-relations occurring over time and on several levels, and hence as subject to variability based on the specific circumstances of an individual’s life. For psychoanalysis, ethical norms cannot be fully universalized, because they are necessarily connected to cultural and personal particulars. Neither are they uncritically embraced, because when they become rigid and repressive, they can give rise to dysfunctional psychodynamics (repression, obsessions, and ensuing symptomatology). Using this reference to Kant as a foil, Freud proceeds to explicate the temporally and dynamically formed nature of conscience by discussing the configuration of the super-ego. The agency of conscience is initially based on an *external* (usually parental) authority which, through processes of identification and introjection, gradually becomes part of the personality. Freud describes a secondary situation in which “the external restraint is internalized and the super-ego takes the place of the parental agency and observes, directs and threatens the ego in exactly the same way as earlier the parents did with the child.”¹⁵ Here, Freud introduces his interpretation of Kant’s pronouncement about the *divine* origin of conscience: this simply means that the

¹¹ Freud is paraphrasing Kant’s comments from the conclusion to the *Critique of Practical Reason*. In Kant’s words: “Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and reverence the more often and more steadily one reflects on them: the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me.” Kant (1996a, p. 269) (AK 5: 161).

¹² Freud (1964a, p. 61)

¹³ Ibid, 62.

¹⁴ Even in the late *Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant insists that “conscience is not something that can be acquired, and we have no duty to provide ourselves with one; rather, every human being, as a moral being, *has* a conscience within him originally.” Kant (1996a, p. 529) (AK 6: 400). On the other hand, Kant also indicates that consciences cannot be assumed to be infallible. As Peter Fennes has argued, in Kant’s analysis conscience is also understood to be falsifiable. For example, in “On the Miscarriage of all Philosophical Trials in Theodicy,” Kant refers to “the impurity that lies deep in what is hidden, where the human being knows how to distort even inner declarations before his own conscience.” See Kant (1996b) (AK 8: 270). This passage is also quoted in Fennes (2003). I am indebted to Fennes’ analysis of conscience and self-deception. Similarly, in *Religion*, Kant refers to “a certain perfidy on the part of the human heart (*dolus malus*) in deceiving itself as regards its own good or evil disposition [*Gesinnungen*].” From this self-deception, one derives “peace of conscience [*Gewissenruhe*].” Kant (1998, p. 60) (AK 6: 38). *Gewissenruhe* is translated in the Cambridge edition as “peace of mind.” I am following Fennes in translating more literally, and more tellingly, as “peace of conscience.” See Fennes (2003, p. 86).

¹⁵ Freud (1964a).

“almighty” father (or father-figure, or parents)¹⁶ is the origin of, and model for the internalized moral agency of the super-ego. Similarly, in “The Economic Problem of Masochism,” Freud concludes that “Kant’s Categorical Imperative is thus the direct heir of the Oedipus complex.”¹⁷ It is easy to see these comments as tracing higher-order faculties back to familiar inter-personal dynamics, thereby undermining the normative quality of ethical principles by making them subject to highly variable familial and cultural influences. However, what is more fruitful about Freud’s position is that it *locates ethical capacity within a series of temporally conceived interactions between inner and outer*. Just as in *The Interpretation of Dreams* conscience is located within the context of individual desires, repressions, and compromise formations, similarly it is here located within the temporal contexts of variable inter-personal relations. Freud sketches a dynamic model of ethical development in which specific concrete human inter-relations play a pivotal role. This falls within the general view of psychological and social inter-dependency Freud articulates in *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*. In Freud’s words, “only rarely and under certain exceptional conditions is individual psychology in a position to disregard the relations of this individual to others.” He then concludes that individual psychology “is at the same time social psychology as well.”¹⁸ Freud’s model of ethical development is a key aspect of this broader, dynamic social-psychological model.

In rejecting the a priori universalism represented by Kant’s ethical model, Freud embraces the daunting task of inquiring into the social-psychological processes by which higher order capacities come into being. The reference to parental authority inevitably begs the question of the anterior source of the norms and values conveyed by those authorities. This connection is established in a passage from the *Outline of Psychoanalysis*, where Freud again discusses the formation of the super-ego ensuing from the resolution of the Oedipus complex. As Freud states: “The parental influence of course includes in its operation not only the personalities of actual parents but also the family, racial and national traditions handed on through them, as well as the demands of the immediate social *milieu* they represent.”¹⁹ These comments deepen the question of the origins of conscience. They also indicate one of the sources of the critical dimension of Freud’s approach to ethics. Because conscience and the norms it represents is always the product of a series of familial and social influences, including religious ones, it is subject to distortions and pathologies. It is usually based on repression and fear of authority, and therefore induces an infantile and unreliable ethical orientation. Hence, Freud will ultimately undertake a *therapeutic* response to this regressive condition, and the theme of drive renunciation will take on a significant role in this regard. The Freudian project is badly misunderstood if it is portrayed merely negatively as a deflation of ethical norms. It rather calls upon us to reflect critically and rationally upon individual and cultural formative influences, and it thus assumes that all human beings have the potential for independent, autonomous reflection. Freud’s critical work thus operates in the name of furthering the cultivation of potentially more conscious and autonomous ethical personalities.

¹⁶ For an elaboration of the argument that Freud’s oedipal model ranges from the father *per se* to an expanded notion of parents, parental figures, and other bearers of cultural norms, see DiCenso (1999, pp. 23–29).

¹⁷ Freud, “The Economic Problem of Masochism,” SE XIX: 167. The Oedipus complex is, of course, the central psychoanalytic trope for articulating the conflicts occasioning the formation of the super-ego.

¹⁸ Freud (1955a p. 69).

¹⁹ Freud (1964c p. 146).

Tensions in Kantian Theory

Freud's comments on Kantian ethics indicate some of the major points that clearly differentiate the two thinkers. However, my overall aim is to show that the relationship between the two bodies of work also exhibits some degree of continuity and complementarity, and I want to make this case from both sides of the relationship. That is, while Kant attempts to formulate a model of ethics, with a correlative model of "rational religion," that tends to be universalized and abstracted from the vagaries of time and circumstance, his work also opens into an exploration of a more situated approach to ethics and religion. To be sure, this opening occurs sporadically and unevenly, and remains in tension with other aspects of his thought; but this is not necessarily problematic. Perhaps critical tensions within a theorist's work can yield productive insight, and not merely contradiction. This section will attempt to sketch some of these critical tensions, indicating how they form points of intersection between Kant's ethics and his theories of history and culture, with the interpretation of religion being situated at this intersection. Following this, I will show how Freud's critique maintains the Kantian respect for reason and for ethical principles (as well as Kant's disdain for delusion and superstition), while emphasizing that ethical capacity arises dynamically and imperfectly within specific historical, cultural, and inter-personal frameworks.

As we know, Kant establishes an intrinsic connection between *ethics* and *autonomy*, understood as freely following the categorical imperative without consideration of external circumstances. In the *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant asserts that "autonomy of the will is the sole principle of all moral laws and of duties in keeping with them..."²⁰ Likewise, Kant affirms that autonomy consists in a "lawgiving of its own on the part of pure... practical reason..."²¹ Kant is seeking to ground ethical choice in the powers of reason itself, without reliance on such heteronomous forces as authority and custom, and without allowing ethics to be informed by consideration of the fruits of one's actions (such as rewards and punishments). Kant emphasizes: "It is here a question only of the determination of the will and of the determining ground of its maxims as a free will, not of its *result*..."²² However, perhaps the most questionable outcome of this tendency to isolate practical reason from embodied interactions is its inattention to the actual consequences, especially those impacting on other human beings, which might ensue from the actions generated by one's adherence to the formula of universalization.²³

A strictly idealist ethics, and a corresponding view of "rational religion," is problematic in its disconnection from the multifarious engagements of lived human experience. Conceived as the bearer of a universal rational moral law, the autonomous subject is also abstracted from the special qualities that make every human being unique. Subjectivity, understood as the rational essence of the human person and defined by Kant as *personality*, becomes detached from the specific characteristics of individuals that are classified, in Kant's terms, as "psychology" or "anthropology."²⁴ However, awareness of this problem *does* in fact appear in

²⁰ Kant (1996c, p. 166) (AK 5: 33). Compare the following passage which elaborates upon this twofold quality of human beings: "The sensible nature of rational beings in general is their existence under empirically conditioned laws and is thus, for reason, *heteronomy*. The supersensible nature of the same beings, on the other hand, is their existence in accordance with laws that are independent of any empirical condition and thus belong to the *autonomy* of pure reason." Ibid, 174 (AK 5: 43), emphasis original.

²¹ Kant (1996c, p. 166) (AK 5: 33).

²² Ibid, p.176 (AK 5: 45).

²³ This point is also made by Adorno (2000, p. 75).

²⁴ For example, Kant explicitly states that he is not very much concerned with the particular empirical aspects of morality. He thus defines his project by posing the following question: "is it not thought to be of the utmost

Kant's work. It emerges, for example, in his attempt to supplement the categorical imperative, as quoted above, with two additional formulae. It is most significant that Kant introduces a second imperative known as the formula of *humans as ends in themselves*. In Kant's words: "the human being and in general every rational being exists as an end in itself, not merely as a means to be used by this or that will at its discretion...."²⁵ The third principle, extrapolating upon the second, is that of the Realm of Ends. Of this, Kant states: "By a realm [*Reich*] I understand a systematic union of various rational beings through common laws."²⁶ As Allen Wood has emphasized, these supplements to the categorical imperative serve to form bridges between the formal principle of universality, and the ethical relations that occur among actually existing human beings within the context of variable social and political structures.²⁷ This effort at bridging the universally conceived rational norms of practical reason, and multifarious historical situations also occurs in *Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*. At the beginning of this book, Kant seems to follow the formalizing orientation predominant in his earlier ethical writings. He emphasizes that ethics is *not* dependent on religion, stating: "on its own behalf morality in no way needs religion ...but is rather self-sufficient by virtue of pure practical reason."²⁸ In this way, Kant delineates an opposition between rational moral religion and historically-formed religious faiths, and this opposition sustains the primacy of a universal ethics. However, a tension begins to emerge with Kant's famous discussion of the inter-connectedness of freedom and evil. As Kant emphasizes, "a propensity to evil can only attach itself to the moral faculty of choice [*Willkür*]."²⁹ In light of this, we can agree with Paul Ricoeur's statement that "the propensity for evil *affects* the use of freedom, the capacity for acting out of duty—in short, the capacity for actually being autonomous."³⁰ Radical evil undermines the assumption of a morality based strictly on individual reason, and thus points toward a degree of dependency on others. Hence, Kant ultimately formulates an ambivalent view of the moral influence of others.³¹ These can be corrupting influences, but they are also part of the solution to radical evil, insofar as it is through the pedagogical effects of others, *and of institutions constructed by and with others*, that individual fallibility might be partially mitigated. Although I am in principle free, my own freedom is, in itself, insufficient protection against the perversions and corruptions of free will (*Willkür*) that characterize radical evil.³² Therefore, shared legal, ethical, and religious institutions of some form become necessary factors informing individual capacity for grasping and choosing the moral law. In acknowledging this need for guidance, Kant at least implicitly embraces a pedagogical, and indeed a psychological dimension to ethical development. In the *Lectures on Ethics*, for example, Kant speaks of religion as cultivating "edification," which "means the fashioning

Footnote 24 continued

necessity to work out for once a pure moral philosophy, *completely cleansed of everything that may be only empirical and that belongs to anthropology?*" *Practical Philosophy*, p. 44 (AK 4: 389), emphasis added.

²⁵ Kant (1996a, p. 79) (AK 4: 428).

²⁶ Ibid, 83 (AK 4: 432).

²⁷ Wood (2000, p. 63).

²⁸ Kant (1998, p. 33) (AK 6: 3).

²⁹ Ibid, p.54 (AK 6: 31).

³⁰ Ricoeur (1992) (emphasis original).

³¹ Kant articulates the corrupting influence of others in powerful terms: "Envy, addiction to power, avarice, and the malignant inclinations associated with these, assail his [i.e., the hypothetical autonomous individual] nature, which on its own is undemanding, *as soon as he is among human beings*." Kant (1998, p. 105) (AK 6: 93–4).

³² See Kant (1998, p. 105) (AK 6: 30–31).

of an active disposition.”³³ Comments such as this indicate that Kant sees religious traditions as playing an active pedagogical role (but *not* a deterministic role) in the formation of ethical dispositions. This cultural and historical focus would seem to indicate a project of *becoming* ethical, of undertaking something like a psychological transformation in which conscience is cultivated and furthered.

One major response to the dilemma of mediating existing traditions with the ideas of practical reason occurs in Kant’s *ethical hermeneutic of religions*. Speaking of religious concepts and doctrines, Kant states that “we require an interpretation of the revelation we happen to have, i.e. a thoroughgoing understanding of it in a sense that harmonizes with the universal practical rules of a pure religion of reason.”³⁴ For Kant, religious representations provide no *knowledge*, but rather give concrete symbolic expression to regulative principles (ideas) informing the practical (moral) use of reason. He states that if “we restricted our judgment to the *regulative* principles, which content themselves with only their practical use, human wisdom would be better off in a great many respects, and there would be no breeding of would-be knowledge of something of which we fundamentally know nothing.”³⁵ In other words, Kant maintains the limitations on knowledge of the supersensible established by *The Critique of Pure Reason*, while expanding upon the notion of regulative ideas also contained therein. These are now connected with a hermeneutics of historical religions that contribute an ethical interpretation of the world, and so can guide and inform ethical practice.

However, Kant’s approach to the historical religions is necessarily ambivalent. That is, religious traditions are understood as important shared symbolic vehicles assisting in the cultivation of our autonomous moral capacity, yet as finite cultural products they must be subjected to a rigorous ethical interpretation.³⁶ There is another tension evident here: while Kant qualifies the strict autonomy he associates with the moral law by linking ethical capacity to the symbolic systems of religious traditions, he must at the same time avoid lapsing into an *uncritical* reliance on the heteronomous influences of specific social and religious institutions. Therefore, he interprets religious representations as pointing beyond themselves to the unrepresentable moral law. In the *Critique of Judgment* Kant states that “perhaps there is no more sublime passage in the Jewish Book of the Law than the commandment: Thou shalt not make unto thyself any graven image, nor any likeness either of that which is in heaven, or on the earth, or yet under the earth, etc.”³⁷ In a striking follow-up to this passage, Kant speaks of the “idols” of religion as “images and childish devices,” and further argues that “even governments have gladly allowed religion to be richly equipped with such supplements and thus sought to relieve the subject [*Unterthan*] of the bother but at the same time also the capacity [*Vermögen*] to extend the powers of his soul beyond the limits that are arbitrarily set for him and by means of which, as merely passive, he can more easily be dealt with.”³⁸ This powerful comment indicates the profound inter-connections among modes of religious belief, possibilities of subjective ethical development, and forms of social-political

³³ Kant (1997b) (AK 27: 318).

³⁴ Kant (1998, p. 118) (AK 6: 110).

³⁵ Kant (1998, p. 88) (AK 6: 71).

³⁶ Kant’s hermeneutical principles may be somewhat suspect in this regard, despite the value of their intended ethical aim. In Kant’s words: “This [ethical] interpretation may often appear to us as forced, in view of the text (of the revelation), and be often forced in fact; yet, if the text can at all bear it, it must be preferred to a literal interpretation that either contains absolutely nothing for morality, or even works counter to its incentives.” Kant (1998, p. 118) (AK 6: 110).

³⁷ Kant (2000c, p. 156) (AK 5: 274). This reference bears fruit in Kant’s *Religion*, p.189, where the same biblical citation occurs.

³⁸ Kant (2000c, p. 156) (AK 5: 274–275).

control. In *Religion*, these issues are condensed into the critical analysis of religious idolatry as inhibiting the cultivation of “moral religion,” because the idolatrous fixation on literally understood doctrines inhibits the autonomous application of practical reason. It is in this context that Kant will refer to assumptions of having directly and literally represented the “thing itself,” the moral law, in strikingly Freudian terms, as *fetish faith* (*Fetischglaube*) and *delusory faith* (*Wahnglaube*).³⁹ Kant therefore wants to maintain an *otherness* of the moral law that functions to counteract heteronomous controls over reason, imagination, and political existence. Without moral principles as “touchstone,” he states “there can be no religion, and all reverence for God would be *idolatry*.”⁴⁰ Far from advocating compulsive religious adherence, Kant argues that “if reverence to God [understood anthropomorphically] comes first, and the human being therefore subordinates virtue to it, then this object [of reverence] is an idol....”⁴¹ Any approach to religion that prioritizes dogmatic belief and practice based on pleasing an anthropomorphically conceived deity, over ethical conduct based on reciprocity and incorporating self-critical principles, is itself idolatrous. As Paul Ricoeur articulates the point, “an idol is the reification of the horizon into a thing, the fall of the sign into a supernatural and supercultural object.”⁴² It is not irrelevant that this point was made in the context of Ricoeur’s analysis of Freud, in which the latter is portrayed not as mere debunker, but as an iconoclast who can open broader alternative vistas of religious understanding.

In *Religion*, Kant criticizes *all* historical religious forms that incorporate superstition, fanaticism (or enthusiasm [*Schwärmerei*]), and delusion, and his criticisms again anticipate Freud’s denunciations of delusion and illusion over a century later. It is also important to note that Kant’s critique is in this regard even-handed: it certainly applies to all forms of Christianity as well as to all other religious traditions. Therefore, in speaking of existing historical religions, Kant insists: “They *all* deserve equal respect, so far as their forms are attempts by poor mortals to give sensible representation to the Realm of God [*das Reich Gottes*] on earth, but *equal blame as well*, when (in a visible church) they mistake the form of the representation [*die Form der Darstellung*] of this idea for the thing itself.”⁴³ Here, Kant articulates a critical distinction that is internal to all traditions: each can foster ethical awareness and development through its symbolic, pedagogical resources, and each can lapse into “idolatry.” Kant highlights the need to maintain a critical distance from specific representations serving as guides to ethical transformation, so that this goal does not become closed within the exclusive confines of a specific narrowly defined religious community. Throughout *Religion*, Kant will similarly attack all forms of heteronomy, whereby some particular historically and culturally shaped representational form is taken as good in itself, and is elevated above ethics as respect and concern for others. When faith is “fetishized” in this way, it can become a source of evil, rather than a counterweight to evil.⁴⁴ Therefore, Kant stresses the need for an ongoing reflective process, in which religions serve as ethical guides that must yet be subjected to critical analysis *based on the principle of ethical regard for other human beings*.

³⁹ Kant (1998, p. 185) (AK 6: 193–194).

⁴⁰ Kant (1998, p. 165) (AK 6:169). Also see Besançon (2000, p. 203) “It is because of Kant’s religious ethic that he refuses to be drawn into *Schwärmerei*, the fanaticist debauchery of sensible representation.”

⁴¹ Kant (1998, p. 178), (AK 6: 185). These critical analyses occur throughout *Religion*, and are essential to Kant’s emphasis on the primacy of ethics, or religion as ethics. It seems to me the significance of this ethical emphasis is often lost in attempts to appropriate Kant’s thinking for a more traditional Christian theological vision. See Firestone and Palmquist (2006), especially the “Editor’s Introduction.”

⁴² Ricoeur (1970, p. 530).

⁴³ Kant (1998, p. 170) (AK 6: 175). I prefer the more precise translation of *Reich* as “Realm” rather than “Kingdom.”

⁴⁴ Ibid, p.173 (AK 6: 178–179).

One important result of this stance is a strong emphasis on respect for religious freedom and diversity. In Kant's words, "That to take a human being's life because of his religious faith is wrong is certain...."⁴⁵ Here, the humanistic regard for others takes priority over "idols," and actually serves as the key means of distinguishing ethical from idolatrous religion. This generates a reflective hermeneutical process that in some ways anticipates Ricoeur's attempts to mediate between reason and symbols, with the latter understood as the doctrines, rituals, and narratives of religious traditions. In this way, autonomy (in the form of the rational interpreter applying ethical criteria) and heteronomy (in the form of historical religious traditions that provide symbolic meaning systems) are brought into interaction, potentially leading to a gradual improvement of our moral condition. Although Kant's concern to maintain a "pure" religion of reason is evident here, his critique of particularism also serves the social and ethical goals of openness and reciprocity that were of increasing concern to Freud.

I also want to suggest that there is a *critically transformative function* to Kant's postulating an autonomous practical reason. It is essential that the free use of reason be directed at passing judgment on the ethical worth of the specific doctrines and practices of historical religions, and on other social and political forms (which often ally themselves with religion). Without critical reflection, there would be no means of inquiring into the historically produced limitations and biases inherent in human social constructions, and no means of ameliorating the practices and worldviews informing human communities, religious or otherwise. For Kant, the argument concerning an independent faculty of pure practical reason is connected with this critical task. Adorno similarly notes that Kant's rationalism allows for a reference point *outside* the closed worldview of any specific social construction. On this basis, Adorno argues that "Kant's seemingly formalistic ethics ends up being far more radical than the content based ethics of Hegel.... This is because Kant's principle of universality elevates his ethics above every determinate configuration of the world that confronts it, above society and existing conditions...."⁴⁶ The key here is that this "elevation" need not be hypostasised into a set of inflexible moral norms. Rather, practical reason is indicative of our capacity to reflect on existing norms, to compare them with other such norms and with ideals and principles, and in this way to create a critical distance from the actual that might assist in ameliorating those actual conditions. However, Adorno also characterizes Kantian ethics as being "paradoxical" in nature, because at the same time the categorical imperative, in its abstract universality, is prone to rigidity, and thus difficult to apply within the variegated dilemmas of social and inter-personal relations.⁴⁷

Kant's ethical universalism explicitly attempted to define *inclusive* views of ethics, religion, and politics. In this regard, Kant was an outspoken advocate for human rights, and argued strongly that the value of persons must not be made secondary to social status, or to ideology of any form. This project remains influential in attempts to establish ethical meeting points among the world's religions and in global human rights movements. In a recent work, for example, Sankar Muthu provides a rigorous reading of Kant's social and political theory that sees it as contesting European paternalism. Kant, he argues, "explicitly defended non-European peoples and the equality of varying collective lifestyles ... and vehemently attacked European empires and conquest."⁴⁸ For Muthu, the "universalism" formulated by Kant is in fact quite antithetical to any form of domination and repression. Thus he refers to the "one innate right of humanity" as "the protection of the distinctively human freedom that

⁴⁵ Ibid, p.179 (AK 6: 186–187).

⁴⁶ Adorno (2000, p. 165).

⁴⁷ Ibid, pp.155–156.

⁴⁸ Muthu (2003, p. 184).

underlies humanity as cultural agency,” and he emphasizes that this receives “its most robust political expression in Kant’s account of cosmopolitan right.”⁴⁹ The key here is that this notion of right, built upon Kantian ethical theory as emphasizing respect for humanity, does not entail imposing a fixed set of norms upon others, but can take shape within multifarious cultural frameworks.

Freud, however, focuses on the other side of universalism, that is, its very real historical associations with cultural, political and religious hegemony. He expressed deep suspicion of any such form of universalism, and rightly argues that attempts to posit an abstract, universal religio-ethical stance remain blind to their own entrenchment in specific histories, religions, and cultures. They impose their own culturally-formed norms upon others under the guise of “universalism.” If we attempt to juxtapose these positions, we might end up with something like the following qualified assessment. Unless it incorporates a self-critical reflexive capacity, universalism runs the risk of absolutizing a particular culturally-influenced set of views to the exclusion of others.⁵⁰ This is why Stephen Bronner, in his recent work on the Enlightenment, emphasizes that, although a form of “universalism can be found in western imperialist propaganda... such universalism is not universal at all: it lacks reciprocity, an open discourse, and a concern with protecting the individual from the arbitrary exercise of power.” He further argues that reciprocity “is what differentiates Enlightenment universalism from its imitators, provides it with a self-critical quality, and enables it to contest Euro-centrism and the prevalent belief in a ‘clash of civilizations’.”⁵¹ Of course, this may be an idealized view of Enlightenment universalism as it was actually formulated in the 18th century, but it provides a guideline for ongoing attempts to re-think Enlightenment values. Like Muthu, I believe that Kant’s work attempts to articulate a form of universalism that exhibits the qualities of reciprocity and self-criticism Bronner highlights. This is not to say, however, that Kant’s work is not culturally and historically conditioned in ways that sometimes curtail and distort its realization of these aims. For example, many comments concerning the status and role of women in *The Metaphysics of Morals* are at best grossly out-dated, and in *Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, Kant makes statements about non-Christian religions, and particularly about Judaism, that exhibit a parochial and biased understanding.⁵² Overall, Kant’s work aspires to an inclusive and egalitarian vision that still inspires efforts to overcome parochialism, bigotry, and injustice of all kinds. Unfortunately, however, Kant often seems to accept Christian-inspired norms and assumptions and their correlative stereotypical caricatures of Jews and others. These problems indicate the need for more *differentiated* analyses

⁴⁹ Ibid, p.191.

⁵⁰ See Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*, SE XXI:108ff. Freud targets the “universal imperative” of the love commandment to make his point, arguing that the aggression repressed by the commandment is channeled onto those outside the group. He therefore speaks ironically of how “the Jewish people, scattered everywhere, have rendered most useful services to the civilizations of the countries that have been their hosts...” (Ibid, p.114). Kant, in fact, was not completely oblivious to this issue, although it is never fully developed in his work. In the *Lectures on Ethics* (Collins), p.188 (AK 27: 428), Kant makes reference to the human need to band together into groups with shared ideals and values, and then makes the following observation: “This has a laudable appearance... but it has the effect, in a religious party, for example, of closing the human heart towards those who are outside the group.”

⁵¹ Bronner (2004, p. xii).

⁵² See Mack (2003, pp. 23–41), for a very strong critique of Kant in this regard. However, in my opinion Mack goes too far, and is too one-sided, in characterizing Kant as an anti-Semite. Kant most certainly had a falsified understanding of the Jewish tradition, not untypical in his cultural milieu. Yet, on a personal and biographical level, there is ample evidence that Kant most certainly was *not* an anti-Semite, and if anything quite the opposite. For relevant biographical information, see Kuehn (2001) especially pp.161–162, 333.

of religions, that are inclusive of the multiple variables of human historical existence and that foster the form of critical self-reflexivity to which Bronner alludes.

In a related vein, the political philosopher James Tully has assessed Kant's efforts at formulating a cosmopolitan and multi-cultural ethical model. He concludes that Kant's vision remains bound by transcendental principles that function "monologically and comprehensively," and that therefore inhibit the establishment of a truly pluralistic and dialogical model.⁵³ This assessment does not necessarily conflict with Muthu's emphasis on the resources Kant develops for genuinely cosmopolitan thinking. The analyses of both are nuanced, and indicate points of tension within Kant's thinking on these matters. Tully's critique, rather than being dismissive, shows the limits of Kant's ability to fuse a transcendently based ethics with recognition of the multifarious and ever-evolving nature of cultures. Such criticism is equally applicable to Kant's approach to the world's religions: because it is predicated on a model of pure practical reason not understood to be rooted in history and tradition, his hermeneutical approach tends to be unidirectional. It does not formulate a truly dynamic inter-relationship between reason and history (or traditions), and does not sufficiently allow for the ongoing critical engagement of a plurality of historically engendered cultural differences to widen the scope of ethical understanding.

Freud's Historicized Ethics

If we now return to Freud's criticisms of Kant, we might see that these are directed against precisely the ahistorical tendencies that work to disconnect Kantian ethics from the multi-layered, diversified realms of social-historical existence. Freud's analyses of religion are notoriously slanted and limited in several ways; yet, within the course of those analyses he formulates an approach to religion that is ethically oriented, while grounded in a psychodynamic model that can more consistently attend to historical and cultural differences. The point is well made by Paul Ricoeur when he argues that "The advantage of the Freudian 'prejudice' is that it begins without taking anything for granted: by treating moral reality as an a posteriori reality, constituted and sedimented, Freud's analysis avoids the laziness that is part of any appeal to the a priori."⁵⁴ Following from Freud's more empirically oriented model of rationality, an a posteriori approach is similarly evident in Freud's discussions of religion. Hence, Freud can help us extend and modify Kant's ethically oriented approach to religion, resolving its inner tension in the direction of the historicity of human existence. Freud's mature work develops a stance that is neither idealist nor realist, but rather works within a critical tension embracing both extremes. At the heart of this tension, Freud's dynamic model understands higher-order cultural formations such as ideas and values as fostering an emergent capacity for *renunciation* (and this point, of course, returns us to my original reference to Adorno). Unlike repression, renunciation does not *deny* the material realm and the drives. It rather involves a capacity to distance oneself from immediate gratifications (physical, emotional, egotistical, societal, or otherwise) by virtue of autonomously embraced values or principles. A key contribution of this position is that it approaches ideals and values, as well as the religious doctrines that express them, in a non-reified or non-idolatrous way. Freud's analyses explicate the psychological and cultural significance of religious ideals, while holding them open to reflective engagement.

⁵³ Tully (2002, p. 54).

⁵⁴ Ricoeur (1970, p. 530).

Freud's writings on religion explore the agonistic inter-determinations of psychological and cultural forms. His work does not merely contribute a *descriptive* analysis of these relations, but offers a critical *prescriptive* analysis. It is therefore highly significant that one of the opening themes of *The Future of an Illusion* is the question of a possible "re-ordering of human relations."⁵⁵ It is in the context of an investigation that is broadly historical and social that Freud's inquiries into religion, ethics, and reason arise. Freud's concerns are ultimately directed towards assisting the psychological and ethical maturation of individuals by modifying culturally-sustained orientations. In this analysis, there is a prominent emphasis on rationality as related to a Stoic capacity to "renounce," as opposed to the immature tendency to deny reality and cater to wish-fulfilling illusions that Freud finds in popular religious and political forms. Indeed, in a particularly powerful argument still highly pertinent to contemporary societies, Freud argues that we curtail and deform our intellectual capacities by segregating beliefs (religious or otherwise) that are not allowed to be questioned.⁵⁶ "How can we expect people who are under the dominance of prohibitions of thought," Freud inquires, "to attain the psychological ideal, the primacy of the intelligence."⁵⁷ In this way, freedom of thought is aligned with a capacity to renounce the comfort and security that comes with popularized religious teachings and other ideologies. We saw earlier that Freud seeks to differentiate psychoanalysis from any form of *Weltanschauung* that promises totalized explanation. It is not surprising that in the *Weltanschauung* essay, Freud also emphasizes that the most dangerous "enemy" of empirically-oriented reason is religion, which he describes as an "immense power which has the strongest emotions of human beings at its service." It is significant that Freud describes religion as having "constructed a *Weltanschauung*, consistent and self contained to an unparalleled degree, which, although it has been profoundly shaken, persists to this day." (In this discussion, Freud also makes reference to philosophy, which clings "to the illusion of being able to present a picture of the universe which is without gaps and coherent" and which "goes astray by over-estimating the epistemological value of our logical operations....")⁵⁸ These comments solidify the sense that Freud is consistent in his model of experimental reason, applied to the human condition, as eschewing the grandiose claims of either "religion" or "philosophy." This is also compatible with his model of ethics as requiring an engagement with the full spectrum of faculties and drives constituting the human being. However, it is crucial to note that the cultivation of reason Freud advocates is irreducible to what might be termed "instrumental reason." Rather, it has profound resonances with the practical reason of Kantian ethics, though in a modified way. This appears in Freud's statement, uttered to an imaginary interlocutor of traditional religious sensibilities, that the psychoanalytic project of attaining primacy of the intellect "will presumably set itself the same aims you expect from your God ... namely *the love of man and the decrease of suffering*."⁵⁹ Therefore, in Freud's discussions of the meaning and value of religions, questions of shared *ethical practice*, of the motivations, impulses and ends that govern our interactions with others, actually take precedence over the ability to adapt to an empirically defined reality that is characteristic of instrumental reason.

⁵⁵ Freud (1961, p. 7).

⁵⁶ I am paraphrasing the argument from SE: XXI: 47–8. Freud explicitly notes a parallel between "religious inhibition" and what he terms "loyal inhibition," which the editor of the Standard Edition notes refers to "the Monarchy" (ibid, 48, and editor's note 2).

⁵⁷ Ibid, 48.

⁵⁸ Freud (1964b, pp. 160–161).

⁵⁹ Freud (1961, p. 53) (emphasis added).

Both *Totem and Taboo* and *Moses and Monotheism* develop inquiries into religion within different imagined cultural scenarios. These psycho-historical constructions attempt to explain both what is highest in culture (ethical ideals), and what is pathological (rigid belief systems fostering guilt and compulsion). Because Freud postulates traumatic events occurring in early human history (or pre-history), there seems to be a deterministic style of thinking governing these arguments, basing cultural developments on a causal reaction to events (guilt, and ethical codes such as totemism, arise from the murder of the “primal father,” etc.). However, it is possible to understand Freud as formulating a generally historicist theory of religions, and of the ethical worldviews that accompany them, without taking his specific historical speculations literally. Here we can follow Ricoeur’s comments about religious symbolism and apply them to Freud’s historical narratives. In Ricoeur’s words, “such symbols show in operation an imagination of origins, which may be said to be historical, *geschichtlich*, for it tells of an advent, a coming into being, but not historical, *historisch*, for it has no chronological significance.”⁶⁰ Freud’s speculative religious narratives are “historical” in precisely the sense indicated by Ricoeur. They articulate religious ideals and values as coming into being over time and through human interactions, even if the literal “history” they convey is inaccurate. Indeed, both Freud and Kant draw upon “religious representations,” i.e., symbols, as a way to articulate and foster the development of ethical capacities. On this matter, Kant seems to be more conscious than the empirically-minded Freud of the need to dissociate the significance of these symbols from a more literally conceived “historical” narrative. On the other hand, Kant interprets religious narratives as symbolic expressions of *a priori* moral truths, so that the historical genesis of ethical and religious values is obscured.

In light of these considerations, it is significant that Freud prefaces *Totem and Taboo* by again mentioning Kant. Freud proposes that, although the symbolic structures of totemism are alien to modern people, the “ethical system” constituted by taboos actually resembles modern ethics. As he states, “though expressed in a negative form and directed toward another subject-matter, they [taboos] do not differ in their psychological nature from Kant’s ‘categorical imperative’, which operates in a compulsive fashion and rejects any conscious motives.”⁶¹ It is important to ask *why* Freud views the categorical imperative as being compulsive in a manner akin to taboos. Freud does not elaborate, but it would seem that he is focusing on the self-contained, virtually *automatic* quality of Kant’s formula of universality, which can in principle be applied uniformly regardless of context and circumstance. Freud wants to emphasize a degree of context-specific choice and fluidity in making ethical judgments, which is also related to a capacity for rational reflection. This means that faculties classified under the “ego,” as much as those classified under the “super-ego,” are conjoined in making ethical decisions. For Freud, it is this ability to evaluate independently the often complex variables of specific moral dilemmas, without recourse to the comfort offered by a fixed ethical model, that is indicative of a mature ethical stance.

However, although much of *Totem and Taboo* is devoted to formulating analogies between neuroses and taboos in a way that is pathologizing, Freud also notes that the parallels break down in one crucial respect. The activities and attitudes associated with the neuroses alienate individuals from their societies. Their fantasies, rituals, and obsessive acts are not grasped as interpersonally and collectively meaningful, and they cannot be brought into critical dialogical engagement in the public sphere. This, combined with the compulsive quality that makes them a burden, constitutes a break with social reality. By contrast, Freud notes that,

⁶⁰ Ricoeur (1970, p. 540).

⁶¹ Freud, S. (1955b, p. xiv).

“after all, *taboo is not a neurosis but a social institution [eine soziale Bildung]*.”⁶² He thus establishes a distinction between mental constructs that depart from reality as socially established, and practices that are *constitutive* of interpersonally meaningful social realms. This point emerges even more clearly in his stating that “the real world, which is avoided ... by neurotics, is under the sway of human society and of the institutions collectively created by it. *To turn away from reality is at the same time to withdraw from the community of man.*”⁶³ Freud also emphasizes that “even under the animistic system advancements and developments took place which are unjustly despised on account of their superstitious basis.” Thus, while disparaging “fetishism” and “superstition,” Freud seeks to extricate the progressive elements of these “religious systems” from the accompanying regressive ones. The heart of the advancements experienced by the practitioners of animism, he asserts, is that “they have made an instinctual renunciation [*Triebversicht*].”⁶⁴ Freud’s earlier essay “Obsessive Acts and Religious Practices,” amplifies this point. Freud argues that obsession involves the renunciation of “constitutionally present” drives, while religion renounces drives springing from “egoistic sources.” Religion is intertwined, as Freud puts it, with “a progressive *renunciation* of constitutional drives, whose activation might afford the ego primary pleasure.” Most importantly, Freud emphasizes that this “*appears to be one of the foundations of human civilization.*”⁶⁵ In this way, Freud outlines a model of religion that makes it a key cultural vehicle for the institution of psychologically transformative systems of meaning and value.

In *Moses and Monotheism*, Freud further develops these issues by analyzing the intrinsic relationships among religion, ethical ideals, and progressive transformations of personalities. He points to a special quality of Jewish monotheism, which he summarizes as “a more highly spiritualized (*vergeistigte*) notion of God, the idea of a single deity embracing the whole world, who was not less all-loving than all-powerful, who was averse to ceremonial and magic and set before men as their highest aim a life of truth and justice.”⁶⁶ In the crucial section on “The Advance of Intellectuality” (*Der Fortschritt in der Geistigkeit*), Freud articulates a feature of these ideals that works to foster reflective ethical capacity, that is, *Mosaic iconoclasm*. Freud draws attention to the psychological and ethical advancements inhering in the iconoclastic prohibition. “Among the precepts of the Moses religion there is one that is of greater importance than appears to begin with. This is the prohibition against making an image of God—the compulsion to worship a God whom one cannot see.”⁶⁷ The psycho-cultural implications of this prohibition are profound, Freud states, “for it meant that a sensory perception was given second place to what may be called an abstract idea—a triumph of intellectuality (*Geistigkeit*) over sensuality or, strictly speaking, an instinctual renunciation (*Triebversicht*) with all the necessary psychological consequences.”⁶⁸ These psychological consequences include the freedom to act according to values rather than in response to ego gratifying stimuli. Of course, Freud’s reference to “the compulsion” to worship a God whom one cannot see indicates that in his eyes even an iconoclastic religiosity can still be welded to literally conceived tenets that inhibit independent reflection. This iconoclastic form of religiosity is, however, a crucial step in the direction of autonomous ethical capacity.

⁶² Freud (1955b, p. 71) Freud et al. (1940, p. 188) (emphasis added).

⁶³ Freud (1955b, p. 74) (emphasis added).

⁶⁴ Freud (1955b, pp. 97–98), Freud (1940, pp. 119–120).

⁶⁵ SE IX: 127 (emphasis added).

⁶⁶ Freud (1964b, p. 50); (*eine andere, höher vergeistigte Gottesverstellung*) GW XVI: 151.

⁶⁷ Freud (1964b, pp. 112–113).

⁶⁸ Freud (1964b, p. 113); (*...einen Triumph der Geistigkeit über die Sinnlichkeit, streng genommen einen Triebversicht mit seinen psychologisch notwendigen Folgen*) GW XVI: 220.

Later in the text, Freud notes that “the religion which began with the prohibition against making an image of God develops more and more in the course of centuries into a religion of instinctual renunciations.”⁶⁹ This comment reinforces the connections among iconoclasm, renunciation, and ethical capacity. Freud emphasizes that with these psycho-cultural developments God is “elevated into an ideal of ethical perfection.” Freud continues: “The Prophets are never tired of asseverating that God requires nothing other from his people than a just and virtuous conduct of life—that is, abstention from every instinctual satisfaction which is still condemned as vicious by our morality to-day as well.”⁷⁰ Freud’s analysis of Judaism emphasizes its ethical impact, and at least implicitly differentiates between religious ethics as externally based and authoritarian, and religion as contributing to an internal ethical transformation of personalities. The latter occurs when ethical principles are rationally grasped and accepted freely—and not imposed heteronomously.

One cannot ignore Freud’s argument in *Group Psychology* that “cruelty and intolerance towards those who do not belong to it are natural to every religion.”⁷¹ To this we might add that intolerance is likely to be greater to the degree that a religious orientation is closed and unreflective, and hence bound up with unconscious emotional needs. Because of the uncertainties and hardships of human existence, and because it is so difficult to adhere to a value system while remaining self-critical and open to alternate views and possibilities, there is a common tendency to absolutize cultural forms. When this occurs, the ethical principles of religions are eclipsed by adherence to fixed doctrines that often have little to do with ethics. I believe that Freud’s work contributes to the Kantian and Enlightenment projects of articulating a critical, progressive vision of religion that cuts across specific religio-cultural forms. In many ways, however, Freud’s work is more contemporary in its approach to addressing these problems, precisely because it does not replace absolutized religions with an analogously absolutized *a priori* moral law. For both Kant and Freud, autonomy remains paramount. The main difference between them is that Kant, despite some important qualifications within his work, generally fuses autonomy with a rationalism that stresses formal principles such as the categorical imperative, and with a model of conscience as given with practical reason. For Freud, autonomy is a variegated historical project conceived humanistically and without reference to teleological principles. It involves an ongoing process whereby individuals draw upon, and critically reflect back upon, diverse cultural resources. Likewise, Freud’s model of conscience emphasizes its variable and constructed nature, so that while the agency of conscience is an essential aspect of mature ethical personalities, it is always subject to limitations and pathologies. While this can be disconcerting for those seeking ethical certainty, it also serves to offset the danger of complacency, the “peace of conscience” prone to self deception.

Freud’s approach to religion is therefore characterized by the quality of historicity in Ricoeur’s sense of “historial,” if not always by historical accuracy. Because religious traditions and teachings are shown to be inter-connected with a series of dynamic forces operating over time, Freud portrays them as changing, and as irreducible to a single paradigm or symbol system. Freud not only inquires into how religious worldviews and cultural practices have come to be constructed, he also reflects on how they may be critically re-constructed, that is, ameliorated in ways that provide better resources for increased ethical awareness and autonomy. In this way, Freud makes a definitive contribution to the lineage of Enlightenment

⁶⁹ Freud (1964b, p. 118).

⁷⁰ Freud (1964b, pp. 118–119).

⁷¹ Freud (1955a, p. 98). Freud prefaces this remark by noting that “a religion, even if it calls itself a religion of love, must be hard and unloving to those who do not belong to it.”

and post-Enlightenment thinkers who have engaged the question of religion as intrinsic to the ways in which we are constituted ethically, and who have formulated possible ways in which we might constructively re-constitute ourselves. At the same time, there are distinctive features of Freud's work, such as its being informed by psycho-therapeutic practice, its understanding of reason as a faculty requiring arduous ongoing cultivation, and its capacity to engage human beings and their cultural works on multiple diversified levels, that take it beyond a classical Enlightenment approach. It should be evident that I am not interested in Freud as a theoretician who provides definite and final *answers* to the perennial questions of religion, culture, and ethics. Rather, I am interpreting Freud, and juxtaposing him with Kant, so as to present them together as outlining an approach to religion that is compatible with historicity and with autonomous ethical reflection. The goal they share, along with a variety of other theorists, is to engage religion in a way that brings out its potential to further human well-being, rather than to work against it.

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