

# COUNTERING THE 'NOTHING BUT' ARGUMENT<sup>1</sup>

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My purpose in this article is to counter one type of argument often put forward to debunk religious experience. Those making the argument announce that, whatever the believer may think, all that is really going on is some natural process. I consider two versions of this argument: one made by those who claim that when the believer takes himself to be experiencing God, what is really happening is nothing but changes in his brain, and one made in the Freudian tradition. I conclude that Christians who believe themselves to have experienced God should not allow themselves to be intimidated.

My purpose in this article is to counter one type of argument often put forward in order to debunk religious experience. Those making this argument most aggressively are dogmatic naturalists who offer alternative explanations of religious experience, and then announce that, regardless of what the believer may think, all that is really going on is *nothing but* electrical and chemical changes in the brain, or regression to an infantile state (to mention only two examples). There are also, of course, people who are generally skeptical about religious experience and who think that it is impossible to decide between naturalistic and theistic explanations. And those of a Calvinist bent may have theologically based doubts about religious experience as a result of their deeply suspicious attitude toward the religion of the "natural man."

In this essay, I will discuss the naturalistically based doubts and not the theologically based ones, because the latter raise a whole different set of issues. I focus on Christian religious experience, and have written the paper as though it is addressed to an intelligent believer (sometimes addressed as "you") who has had at least some experiences which he takes to be experiences of God, but who feels a bit shaken and at a loss about how to defend his conviction that he was, indeed, experiencing God against these types of doubts. Philosophers, in part under the influence of William James, have tended to concentrate on the dramatic, Damascus Road types of religious experiences, but that, I think, is misleading. Experiences of God are often quite subtle, and for that reason it is easy to begin to wonder afterwards whether what you experienced was really the presence of God, or whether there might be some other explanation for it.<sup>2</sup>

Naturalists who make the "nothing but" argument are not merely arguing that on occasion you might take something to be an experience of a



spiritual being that in fact has a purely natural cause — for example, that your perception of demons surrounding your bed last night may have been the result of the LSD you consumed while watching *The Exorcist*, or that your vision of the Virgin Mary telling you that women who wear short skirts are all going to Hell may have been the product of your own overheated imagination, motivated, perhaps, by some sort of jealousy or sexual frustration. If that were all they were saying, what they say might be useful as a corrective for weeding out some fraudulent religious claims (believers are, after all, not committed to accepting every claim to religious experience). But they are saying more than this. They would never, in principle, permit a supernatural cause to play any role in explaining a putative religious experience because they believe that there *is* nothing transcending the physical world to act upon us.

Such people thus rule the believer's own lived experience and understanding of that experience out of court at the start. But if you do not assume that there *is* no God to act upon us, and leave that question open, then what they say looks a lot less threatening. And to the extent that the science they rely on is sound, it remains to be established that it even threatens faith.<sup>3</sup>

I will consider two versions of the "nothing but" argument — one put forward by those who claim that when the believer takes himself to be experiencing God, what is happening is really nothing but chemical and electrical changes in his brain, and the other articulated by those in the Freudian tradition. I will deal with the first type of reductionist explanation quite briefly.

Those naturalists who argue that all that is really going on is some sort of strange chemical or electrical changes in the brain have a way of making authoritative sounding claims about the relationship between the brain and the mind that leave the non-scientist feeling mystified and impressed. The notion of a "soul" seems positively medieval to them, and is never mentioned at all. They are materialists, and simply identify the mind with the brain and central nervous system. The doubts they raise can be countered in two ways.

First, on their own account, *all* our mental states are equally the product of processes going on in the brain. If I see a tree in front of me, there is a complicated process going on in my nervous system and brain. If I have a hallucination, likewise, there is also a complicated process going on in my nervous system and brain. So if complicated electrical and chemical processes were occurring in my brain at the time when I was having an experience of God, that by itself would not invalidate my claim to be experiencing God. Whether God in fact communicates with us by causing changes in our brains that, then, cause certain mental states in us, or whether He does so in some other way is not, I think, something that the believer needs to take a position on. How one explains perception (religious or ordinary) depends on one's background metaphysics, and so long as that metaphysics does not exclude God, then He is free to act on us in a variety of different ways that would produce the observed electrical and chemical changes in the brain. Second, people who claim to understand brain function and the way it impacts our conscious experience are largely engaged in bluffing. The brain is poorly understood, and there seems to be

a very loose fit between brain function and mental function. People who have lost important parts of their brain are often able to function surprisingly well because other parts of the brain take over functions originally done by the damaged part. And I recently read that there are people who were found in autopsies to have the brain deterioration characteristic of Alzheimer's but who had not had the symptoms of it during their lives. In light of all this, then, the suggestion that "all that is going on is weird changes happening in your brain" should not intimidate you.

The Freudian version of the "nothing but" argument requires more extensive discussion. Freudian psychology has permeated down to the grassroots level, and spawned a variety of inter-related doubts, both about the origin and nature of religious belief and about what is really going on in cases where people claim to have had experiential awareness of God. I will first say some general things about that psychology, and then address a few of the specific ways in which Freudians have attempted to discredit religion and religious experience. My purposes do not require a precise scholarly account of Freud's theory or that of his successors: versions of Freudian psychology that differ in other ways – for example, in regarding religion as healthy or pathological, or in providing different analyses of the psychology of women – converge on a reductionist view of religious experience.

The Freudian version of the reductionist argument goes like this: Believers pray the Lord's prayer addressing God as "father," and sometimes believe that they are experiencing God's love or being in some special way united with God. They believe that they stand under God's judgment, and that God forbids certain actions and enjoins others. But all this can be easily explained in naturalistic terms. What is really going on is *nothing but* wishful thinking and projection of their infantile image of their father, regression to an infantile fantasy, or perhaps some sort of auto-erotic narcissistic phenomenon. And what we take to be God correcting us morally is really *nothing but* our own superego which derives from our internalization of parental authority figures.

I begin by treating Freud's objection as it pertains to religion in general, and then look at its application to particular types of religious experience. As in the case of the "nothing but something weird going on in your brain" objection, there is quite a bit of bluffing going on here. For one thing, since Freud assumed without proof that there is no God and then set out to try to find naturalistic explanations for religious belief and practice, there could be considerable truth to some of his naturalistic explanations without this proving that there is no God. Just as God may choose to cause our experiences of Him by means of certain changes in our brains and nervous systems, He may also draw on some of the parental imagery from our memories and imaginations in revealing Himself in Scripture or religious experience. If you take away the unstated premise that there is no God, the Freudian arguments look a lot less convincing. All the same, they do retain a certain force. *If* a purely naturalistic explanation can be actually provided for all putative cases of religious experience, then why postulate a supernatural cause? But can such an explanation be provided? In responding to the Freudian critique of religion, it is necessary to acknowledge what is right about their views before going on to point out where they go wrong.

One thing that they have right is the fact that human beings, like other species, have instincts — certain patterns that are “hard-wired” in our brains and bodies. For example, the sucking reflex. If this were not instinctually programmed into us, babies would not survive. The higher mammals generally have fewer hard-wired instincts (behaviors that do not need to be learned and that occur in exactly the same way each time), and more open-ended instincts than lower animals. Thus, although females may have an instinctual desire to care for their infants, the ways in which they manifest this care are largely learned. For example, female apes that had not been raised by their mothers were found to have seriously deficient mothering skills when they became mothers. There are also some instinctual patterns that shape our reproductive behaviors, but there is controversy over just how many basic innate instincts there are and what they are. But whatever we perceive we perceive *through* the nature we have and this nature includes (even though it is not limited to) some deeply rooted instincts.

The other thing they have right is that we are not entirely transparent to ourselves; our motivations are not always what we tell ourselves they are, and we can sometimes be confused about what comes from outside us and what arises from the depths of our own psyche. Freudians, thus, argue that something may *seem* to us to come from outside, and yet still be in fact something that is within our own psyche. Freud calls the *id* the “*id*” (a Latin word meaning “it”) because the person (wrongly) experiences it as something other than himself, and the “superego” likewise can masquerade as something external to the person. If this sort of thing can happen, then the fact we experience God as “other” than ourselves is not sufficient to establish that He is, in fact, a being other than ourselves.

Neither of these concessions to the Freudians, however, need be fatal to the religious believer’s confidence that there is a God and that we can sometimes experience His presence. Given that we are embodied beings, the way we perceive God’s action on us and the language we use in trying to communicate it to others will be affected by our bodily nature. So, for example, if Brother Lawrence or St. John of the Cross or St. Theresa of Avila liken what they experience in prayer to the sort of delight the infant experiences at the mother’s breast, this does not mean that all that is going on is that they are remembering their experience as infants or “regressing” to that infantile state. It means, rather, that they are praying in a deep way that involves surrender of their whole being to God, and not just their conscious minds. Given that the sucking reflex is one of our most deeply rooted instincts, the experience of being nourished and filled by God’s love is, as it were, filtered through our instinctual nature which colors the way we experience God’s love and provides an useful analogy for communicating our experience to others.

At the risk of sounding a bit irreverent, I offer the following comparison. Sometimes when you pet a cat, stroking it all over, it will begin to purr and knead you with its forepaws, pushing with first one paw and then the other in a regular rhythm. If you know anything about cats, you will realize that this is what kittens do when they are nursing; the motion with the paws makes the milk flow better and is, I believe, expressive of both its desire for more milk and its pleasure in the taste of the milk it is enjoying.

The cat, then, is perceiving your behavior toward it through the filter of its own hardwired instincts, and responding to you as it would to its mother. Obviously the gap between us and God is much larger than that between us and other animals, but the same general principle holds. Aquinas says that what is received is received according to the nature of the one receiving, and our instincts are one aspect of our nature.

Likewise, even though there is more to us than our conscious minds and we are not wholly transparent to ourselves, it does not follow that *every* time we think we are experiencing God's presence or guidance that all we are experiencing is some part of ourselves (unless of course you assume, as Freud did, that there *is* no God to act on us). There may be ways of learning to tell real experiences of God from illusory ones. Furthermore, it is one thing to say that perhaps what appears external to us may in fact not be, and quite another to provide a plausible account of exactly how the mechanisms work, and why the naturalistic explanation is to be preferred to the religious explanation (either in general or in particular cases). Freudians tend at this point to do a lot of hand-waving and say vague things like "religious experience can be reduced without remainder to the working out of various infantile complexes," or that their theories have attained clinical success – whatever that means.

The first two claims made by Freudians that I will examine are ones that attempt to discredit religion in general. Although professional philosophers give them little attention, they are the sort of objection to religion that has a lot of currency at a popular level.

*Religious belief is just the result of wishful thinking.*

This argument is directed against the whole idea that there *is* a God at all, especially one who watches over us and loves us (Freud had Judaism and Christianity in mind here). It seems, Freudians suggest, a bit suspicious that God is so often experienced as a loving Father. Isn't there some kind of wish fulfillment at work here? Perhaps we desire a God of this sort for purely psychological reasons, and delude ourselves into believing He is real. Freud thus argued that God was a kind of projection of the infant's image of the all-powerful, loving and protective Father. Life is too harsh and unbearable without the sense that one is watched over and protected by a father figure, so the believer projects a kind of great father in the sky and becomes persuaded that this is reality.

First, we should beware of what is sometimes called the "let's not kid ourselves" fallacy. X is unpleasant and therefore it must be true. The fact that we long for God and hope to find that He is real and loves us does not by itself show that if we do sometimes experience a sense of His presence and love that therefore such experiences are illusory and simply conjured up because we want them. Certainly deception and self-deception are possible. But there is no reason to think *all* religious experiences result from them. Perhaps one might take our longing for God to be evidence that there *is* a God. It would be odd, would it not, if all the members of a species had a deeply rooted desire that could never be satisfied? Might we not argue that our desire for God is a kind of "mark of the maker" implanted in us by God to draw us to Him, as Descartes argues from the fact that we have an idea of God (which he calls "the mark of the maker") to the existence of

God as its cause. This may or may not be an adequate proof of God's existence, but it does provide an alternative explanation of the facts.

Second, it seems very implausible that our idea of God resembles the idea we had of our fathers as infants. And the problem is not just with the fallibility of our own fathers or with the fact that we live in a less patriarchal society than Freud. Arriving at an idea of an infinite being on the basis of experiences of finite beings is at least arguably impossible. Descartes tries to show this in his Third Meditation, and other arguments that carry less metaphysical baggage can be devised. At least Freudians owe us more in the way of an explanation than is usually provided.

Finally, even if our idea of God *did* have strong affinities with the way we thought about our fathers when we were infants, this would not show that there is no God. Perhaps God, in revealing Himself to us as "father" in Scripture, is simply tapping into images we already have stored in our imaginations in order to communicate certain things about Himself,<sup>5</sup> as happens also when God is described as "king" or "bridegroom," or likened to a nursing mother, or even to inanimate things — rocks, wind, fire.

*Religion is just a crutch.*

Pervading the way Freudians talk about religion is a rhetoric suggesting that religion is something for the weak — for those unable to face the harshness of reality as it is and needing comforting illusions to make it through the day (or perhaps the night). This rhetoric is one that many atheists employ, and it can be intimidating. We all naturally want to be treated with respect as adults, and therefore tend to shy away from things others regard as inappropriate to adults. So the way in which Freud traces religious belief to our infantile fears and desires can be unsettling.

A little historical perspective is useful, for a start. Freud was the product of a highly patriarchal, Victorian culture. Women were expected to be innocent, sweet, pure, pious and sheltered from the "real" world of fierce, cut-throat competition through which men earned money. Children were brought up in this sort of sheltered and pious atmosphere until they (the males among them) were ready to go out and be introduced by their fathers to the "real" world. But there is no reason to think either that women are less mature and strong than men, or that religion is only for the weak and immature. Maturity requires both women and men to fearlessly pursue the truth and embrace it when they find it. So unless you have already assumed (along with Freud), that there is no God and that there are no even halfway plausible reasons to suppose that there is, there is no reason to think that atheists are more fearless, truth-regarding, or mature than believers. For, if the pursuit of the truth leads to God, then there is nothing weak or immature about worshipping, loving, and serving that God. Christian beliefs, attitudes, and practices are altogether reasonable and appropriate if God is what they take Him to be.

Imperfect as they are, parental analogies for thinking about God are also appropriate;<sup>5</sup> He is, after all, the source of our being. And a kind of child-like obedience, dependence, and trust in God is likewise the proper response to a loving and omnipotent God (Jesus, after all, says we must

become like little children in order to enter the Kingdom of God.). Americans think of strength in terms of independence and believe there is something bad or weak about dependence on others. We are, however, excessive in our admiration of independence. The individual securely anchored into a community (upon whose help and support he can depend in times of need) is in a far stronger position than the isolated person, and the person who has learned to depend on God in all the vicissitudes and storms of life is the strongest of all.

Having looked at some of the Freudian ways of debunking religion in general, we turn more specifically to religious experience and their attempts to provide purely naturalistic explanations of this. Freudian reductionist analyses of religious experience are likely to cut close to the bone for many believers because our relationship with God is, on one important level, an erotic one. There is a similarity between the religious impulse and the sexual impulse; both are connected with a sense of one's own incompleteness and a longing for wholeness. Mystics often have recourse to sexual metaphors to describe the soul's union with God, and lovers often employ religious imagery in their poems. As Augustine said, "Thou hast made us for Thyself, and our hearts are restless until they find rest in thee."

Eros has been understood in a variety of ways, depending on the metaphysics of the individual. Freud and Augustine stand, as it were, at opposite poles here. For Augustine, all Eros is at bottom religious, for only in God can our desire be finally brought to rest. We mistakenly seek fulfillment in earthly goods, but in vain. Freud, being a materialist, regards all Eros as biologically rooted<sup>6</sup> and treats the more rarified manifestations of Eros like love of beauty or friendship as sublimations of basic instinctual drives.

A particularly interesting illustration of the way in which one's understanding of Eros is tied to one's metaphysics is the case of Plato. Since he regarded things in the physical world as only imperfect copies of timeless and eternal exemplars, his understanding of Eros reflects this. He regarded Eros as one basic longing in us for wholeness and fulfillment, expressed in many different ways, ranging from the crudest sort of sexual impulse to mystical yearning for the Good. The task of philosophy, for Plato, is to direct our erotic energies from their lower to their higher objects. The Good is eternal and therefore real, while fleshy satisfactions are transient and therefore unreal. Plato's teacher Socrates likewise used sexual metaphors in describing the student's progress toward attaining wisdom. He spoke of desire, conception and giving birth, and saw himself as a "midwife" helping his students give birth to the truth that they have conceived in their souls through love of and desire for beauty.

Eros, even on naturalistic assumptions, need not be only sexual. For example, our need for a strong protector, to which Freud appeals to explain religion generally, has an erotic element. But wherever it occurs, Eros has a way of making us vulnerable. Keeping our discussion of our faith squarely in the cognitive realm — on our beliefs and the rationality of those beliefs — is far less threatening than exploring the deep affective roots of faith. Acknowledging our brokenness, our hunger, our desperate need for God, exposes us in ways that open us up to being laughed at or thought of as weak. But while Christian philosophers should certainly not

abandon efforts to articulate the rational grounds of our faith, a balanced understanding of Christian faith must include both the cognitive and the affective, and perhaps Freudians do us a service in highlighting this element in religious faith. The problem is not that they discover an erotic element in faith, but that they massively misunderstand Eros.

We turn now to some ways Freudians have tried to provide naturalistic explanations of certain types of religious experience.

*Putative experiences of union with God are merely regression to early infancy.*

Fundamental to the religious impulse is a desire to attain union with God – a union of love and knowledge. Freud, however, dismisses this as a kind of unhealthy regression. By the term “regression,” Freudians mean that the one experiencing this reverts back to and re-experiences an earlier state of being — a more primitive and less developed one in which the boundaries between self and other are not yet sharply drawn. When the mystic claims to be experiencing unity with a transcendent being, Freudians argue that what is going on is in fact *nothing but* regression to an infantile fantasy of total union with his mother. The infant experiences his desire for his mother not just as a desire for nourishment, warmth and comfort, but also as a kind of longing to totally possess her – to be one with her. This fantasy can never be fulfilled according to Freud, as we can never be wholly one with another person, and by proper resolution of the Oedipus Complex, the child learns to renounce this longing. Since this particular fantasy of total union with the mother is closely tied to the death wish (a wish to be re-absorbed back into the being of the mother), it can be dangerous, and hence it is especially important to outgrow it, according to Freudians.

There is an old hymn that says “Rivers to the ocean run, nor stay in all their course; fire ascending seeks the sun, both speed them to their source. So a soul that’s born of God pants to view his glorious face; upwards tends to his abode to rest in his embrace.”<sup>7</sup> In a naturalistic framework, the desire to return to one’s source can only be a desire to return to union with one’s mother, since our flesh was taken from her.<sup>8</sup> But if one believes, as Christians do, that our souls are created by God, then the picture is radically different. As argued above, the very desire for union with God can be understood as a kind of “mark of the maker.” And God has ways of being intimate with us that no other human being ever could be. If God is the source of our life, then union with Him would be life and not death.

Freudians and Christians, however, agree that total union with another is impossible, for it would mean a kind of death or dissolution of the individual. The Christian understanding of our union with God in the afterlife is one that preserves our individuality.<sup>9</sup> We are not united with God like a drop of water that dissolves into the ocean. And even those Christian mystics who claim to have experienced union with God, when they reflect about their experience, say that although phenomenologically their experience was one of union (their souls were so inebriated with God’s love that they ceased to have any awareness of themselves as separate beings at all), the underlying reality could not have been union in the sense of the two becoming one. For God and human beings have radically different natures.<sup>10</sup>

Experiences of union with God are in any case fairly rare. Most of the average believer's religious experiences are not of this type, and so would not be vulnerable to Freud's criticism here. For example, believers may, in prayer, simply have the sense that they are not alone, or feel that God is showing them something about themselves, correcting them in some way, or giving them guidance about what they should do, and it is an important feature of such experiences that God is experienced as other.

*Mystics are just engaged in some sort of unhealthy self-worship (narcissism).*

If, in fact, the Freudians were right that there is no God (or other supernatural beings that could act upon us), then it would follow that mystics must be discovering some previously unknown part of themselves when they take themselves to be experiencing God. They are thus simply self-absorbed and engaged in a kind of unhealthy self-worship. There are, of course, religions that would accept and even celebrate this interpretation of what is going on in mystical experience. Some Eastern Religions and New Age gurus hold that ultimately there is a kind of god-self in us that we should try to get in touch with — that at the deepest level we *are* divine, and need only come to realize this fact. So the idea that what we are getting in touch with is a part of ourselves would not trouble them, although they would object to the accusation that discovering this inner self is in any way unhealthy. However this interpretation of mystical experience would not be acceptable to Christians. They believe that God is present everywhere (and consequently within us), but they also believe that He is transcendent and that His divine life in us is His gift to us and not something we possess by our own nature or power.

Accusations that the mystic is entangled in mere self-love, however, are premised on the belief that what the mystic is experiencing is *in fact* only himself or herself. So, unless you are an atheist, or perhaps a deist,<sup>11</sup> it would seem reasonable to evaluate purported mystical experiences on a case by case basis.

Brother Lawrence, interestingly, was charged by some of his contemporaries with "inactivity, delusion and self-love." His reply was to say: "Yet I cannot bear that this should be called delusion, because the soul which thus enjoys God desires herein nothing but Him. If this be delusion in me, it belongs to God to remedy it. Let Him do what he pleases with me; I desire only Him and to be wholly devoted to Him."<sup>12</sup> This reply would not, of course, persuade Freud, who would regard him as the victim of a delusion. But in a sense Brother Lawrence's reply contains the essential kernel of the appropriate Christian response to all such doubts. We must be passionate in our quest for the truth, beg God constantly to protect us from being deceived by the figments of our own imaginations (or anything else), and trust that He will not allow the person who is genuinely seeking Him to be permanently caught in delusions. After all, He is seeking us as much as we are seeking Him. That is the point of the incarnation.

*The Importance of the Christian Community*

Deception and self-deception are, of course, always possible, and apodeictic certainty is probably too high a goal to aim at. But Christians have ways of distinguishing veridical from illusory experiences of God. Scripture and the accumulated wisdom of Christians who have gone before us provide what Alston, in *Perceiving God* (Cornell, 1991), calls “overrides” that can help. Experiencing God directing you to forgive your father, for example, is “in character” for God in a way that telling you to kill yourself would not be. Being anchored in a tradition in this way is a corrective for certain types of delusional religious experiences. Philosophical reflection also has a role to play, as does private prayer — especially when we discern consistent patterns over a period of time. A detailed examination of how to distinguish veridical from illusory experiences of God goes beyond the purposes of this essay.<sup>13</sup> Suffice it to say here that Christians have considerable resources for making such discernments. It is not necessary to choose between complete skepticism and naive credulity.

Actual Christians with whom you worship and share your faith can also help you make the appropriate discernments, although you need to keep the right balance between allowing yourself to be corrected by others and being faithful to your own experience. There is a part of us that belongs to God alone, and keeping this sort of private space is important for the growth of genuine intimacy. So be cautious about who you open up to, always praying before doing so. God may use others to steer us in the right way, and others may be often be perceptive in their criticisms, but ask *God* to make the kernel of truth clear to you; don’t just accept everyone’s criticisms as true. There is a golden mean here. Don’t be so thick skinned and smug that you are convinced you are always right. But don’t take every criticism to heart either. A good prayer life will help you achieve the right balance. In the light of God’s love you will be able to face the truth about yourself (gradually, of course).

*Religious longings are merely sublimated sexual desire.*

Some of those inspired by Freud interpret people’s desire for God, or longing to attain union with God, as simply sublimated sexual desire. Bernini’s famous statue of St. Theresa pierced by the arrow of divine love depicts her in a position highly evocative of sexual arousal. Needless to say, Bernini was not present during St. Theresa’s ecstatic experience, and is drawing on the vocabulary of earthly passion to convey something of the passionate quality of her experience. We, living in the wake of Freud and surrounded by a heavily sex-saturated culture, could easily be inclined to snicker and set it all down to her being a frustrated celibate; we know all about what that arrow symbolizes. Regardless of what Theresa herself may think, what is really going on is an intense sexual fantasy of some sort, culminating, perhaps in orgasm. Bernini’s contemporaries would, I think, have been far less inclined to respond in this way because they did not draw a sharp dividing line between sacred and profane love in the way our puritanical and prurient culture tends to do. Sexual ecstasy was viewed as

analogous to religious ecstasy so that either one could be viewed as a symbol of the other.

Freud has, in fact, come under attack lately from postmodernists who have questioned his tendency to stop interpretation when a sexual meaning is discovered, arguing that anything can symbolize anything and that therefore there is no reason to take sexual meanings as basic. Might not sexual phenomena, themselves, symbolize non-sexual things? Impotence, for example, has frequently been used as a symbol of a broader loss of creative power – as in T.S. Eliot, Ernest Hemingway and Petronius. Or, from the female side, might not receptivity to penetration symbolize openness to receiving and nurturing new life, and fertility be symbolic of fruitfulness in a more general sense?

Which meanings you take to be basic has a lot to do with your metaphysics – your understanding of human nature and our place in the world. Underlying Freud's view is a metaphysical understanding of the person as essentially a biological organism like other animals, whose erotic longings are directed at purely physical satisfactions. But, as I have argued above, this is a very truncated and narrow understanding of Eros, and the metaphysics underlying it is not uncontroversial.

Finally, since Freud subjects *all* culture (and not just religion) to the same sort of reductionist analysis, he really has no good reason to heap such scorn upon religion, but not upon morality, science, and high culture generally. He believed that our basic personality structure has already been laid down well before we arrive at the age of reason. Our morality has its source in the way in which we internalized our parent of the same sex in the process of resolving our infantile Oedipal feelings (thus forming our "superego"). And this same superego is a crucial force in the formation of all human culture. Employing guilt as its weapon, it enables us to keep our instinctual desires under control, so we can sublimate them into "higher" things like art, science, law and so on. Even friendship is regarded by Freud as a sublimation of our erotic feelings toward the friend. Although he does not subject science to the same sort of reductive analysis he employs elsewhere, he provides no good reason for not doing so. Might one not argue, for example, that attempts to purify our thought of irrational elements is a sublimation of primitive fear of excreta? Yet Freud regards morality and high culture as valuable even though they arise (on his view) from the transformation of infantile urges, and takes science to give us access to reality in a privileged sort of way.

#### *Concluding Thoughts*

*The damned if you do, and damned if you don't problem.*

There is something disturbing about the way in which Freudian explanations seem to be infinitely capable of being stretched to explain contrary phenomena. For example, Freud is wedded to the conviction that the Oedipus Complex is universal. If a man denies that he has ever felt any sexual desire for his mother, Freudians will insist that he is merely in denial. The more strongly the man denies such feelings for his mother, the more

the Freudians take this to be evidence that denial is at work. Or the man who declares that, really, he has no strong feelings toward his mother of any sort will be immediately diagnosed as repressing his feelings. So what would count as evidence against the universality of the Oedipus Complex?

And it seems a similar dialectic is at work in the case of religious experience. Freud was wedded to the conviction that a naturalistic explanation of all such phenomena could be provided. If you experience God as "other" then it must be your superego. If you experience yourself as united with God it must be regression or some sort of auto-erotic narcissistic phenomenon. So what would count as evidence that an experience was veridical? Nothing. If you start with dogmatic naturalism, then naturalistic explanations are all you are going to find. The important question has been begged. Really hard core naturalists will claim that, even if now some phenomena resist scientific explanation, eventually science will be able to explain them. These promissory notes on the future of science are worthless, however, since the future of science is unpredictable.

*People who live in glass houses should not throw stones.*

Naturalists often talk as though their view of the world was wonderfully rational and consistent, and the religious view of the world, alone, was fraught with difficulties and inconsistencies. The truth, however, is that every world view has its weak points, or points at which it has to be stretched to fit reality. Reality is complex and multifaceted and beyond the power of the human mind to grasp completely.

Materialism has its weak points. Reductive materialism has difficulty explaining consciousness. And materialism of any sort threatens to undermine itself. For if all our beliefs are equally just brain states caused by environmental and physiological factors, what grounds have we for saying some are true and others false? They are all, after all, simply responses of an organism to its environment, some of which may be adaptive and some of which may not be. Moreover, if eliminative materialism is true, there are no beliefs, so that neither a materialist nor anyone else believes materialism (nor can anyone be brought to do so).

Freudians are in something of a pickle as well. On the one hand, there is the Freud who discusses the psyche in very mechanistic terms, as though it were a kind of complicated hydraulic system. And on the other hand there is the wildly speculative Freud, who sought to understand the origin of culture (including religion) by opening the throttle on the mythic imagination and hypothesizing all sorts of things like the Primal Ape Horde, the slaying of the Primal Father by the band of brothers who then ate his flesh and had sex with all the females in the group, thus giving rise to guilt feelings which inhibit the direct expression of instinct and thus require sublimation in the form of religion and high culture. (Moreover, these feelings must be somehow expunged if life is to go on.) The problem, however, is that these two Freuds do not fit together, and indeed seem to inhabit different conceptual universes.<sup>14</sup> Freud #1 is, or at least takes himself to be, a hard-nosed scientist. Freud #2 is essentially the founder of a new religion in which the Primal Ape Horde story replaces *Genesis*.

Even the systems of thought devised by the great philosophers of the past have their rough spots. Plato's theory of forms ran into problems with

the famous "third man" argument; Aquinas had problems explaining the nature and powers of the separated soul; Descartes' dualism was notorious for its difficulties in explaining mind-body interaction, and so on. So if you have to struggle to fit things together, you are not alone. This is the task of a lifetime, no matter what basic conceptual framework you choose. It is true that to be an intellectually serious Christian requires some swimming against the stream culturally, so you have to work at articulating and defending your beliefs at those points where they are under attack by people around you, and seek some support from other Christians at times. But this is merely a contingent cultural fact. If you were an atheist in Europe in the sixteenth or seventeenth centuries you would likewise have needed to seek fellow freethinkers to support you in your dissent from the way people around you thought. Being countercultural does not show that Christianity is wrong (nor, of course, does it show it is right). But don't be intimidated into thinking that the sceptics' views are perfectly consistent and rational and explain everything because they aren't and they don't

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#### NOTES

1. I wish to express my thanks to my husband Phil Devine for helping me talk out some of the ideas in this paper, making some helpful suggestions and commenting on two drafts of it.

2. The same is true, I suppose of more dramatic experiences as well, although distinctions could perhaps be drawn among these. Conversion experiences characteristically impart a firm conviction of their veridicality. Strange and bizarre experiences might be doubted, not only on naturalistic grounds, but on the grounds that they could be demonic counterfeits. And so on. An interesting book on contemporary religious experiences of a dramatic sort is Phillip H. Wiebe's book *Visions of Jesus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

3. Perhaps evolutionary biology might pose a more serious challenge to faith, but I do not discuss this here.

4. This argument is modeled on one that Aquinas gives for the immortality of the soul.

5. This, of course, may make it harder for those who had harsh, rejecting, or otherwise abusive fathers to relate to God.

6. We can think of God both as a father who is the cause of our being and watches over, guides, and protects us, or as a mother who nourishes, comforts, and sustains us. Paternal images arguably have a certain primacy for Christians for scriptural reasons, but any number of different images of God are present in Scripture as well and may be helpful in prayer. For an extended discussion of the issue of whether we should address God as "Father" see Unit VI of *Sex and Gender: A Spectrum of Views* edited by myself and Philip E. Devine (Wadsworth 2003).

7. Freud says that "the forces which drive the mental apparatus into activity are produced in the bodily organs as an expression of the major somatic needs." "The Question of Lay Analysis: Conversations with an Impartial Person," in *The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. James Strachey, ed., London: Hogarth Press, 1975. Volume XX, p. 200. )

8. The hymn is entitled "Amsterdam," and can be found in *The Sacred Harp* 1991 revision. The Sacred Harp Publishing Company. (For more information on

this see [www.fasola.org](http://www.fasola.org).)

8. Thinking literally, here, the nutrients that go to build up the infant's flesh are taken from her blood. This, of course, does not imply that the infant is part of the mother – only that he or she takes his or her physical substance from her.

9. Christian philosophers have wrestled with the problem of how to understand this for centuries. I offer some reflections on it in my manuscript *The Heart Transformed: Prayer of Desire* in the last section entitled "The Hope to Which We are Called."

10. See, *Mystic Union: An Essay in the Phenomenology of Mysticism*, by Nelson Pike (Oxford; 1992) for a fascinating discussion of the way various saints and mystics have described their experiences of union with God.

11. Again, I am omitting those whose worries about religious experience are grounded in Calvinist theology.

12. Brother Lawrence, *The Practice of the Presence of God*, (Springfield, IL: Templegate Publishers, 1974), pp. 77-78.

13. I discuss the problem in some detail and supply a few guidelines in *The Heart Transformed: Prayer of Desire* [see footnote 9]

14. I owe this point in part to discussions with Josef Velazquez.