

The origins of ‘God’: psychological and social explanations

FREUD: A PSYCHOLOGICAL EXPLANATION

In *The Future of an Illusion*, Sigmund Freud presents a psychological explanation of the origins of beliefs in God. He suggests that these beliefs could originate not in an attempt to explain the world, but in a very deep unconscious wish that human beings have. This wish goes back in history to the emergence of the human race, and in each individual, to their earliest infancy. The wish is for consolation and reassurance.

In the face of the uncontrollable forces of nature, we feel vulnerable, afraid and frustrated that there is so little we can do. We want to rob life of its terrors. Likewise, when we are infants, we are completely helpless and dependent and need protection. Both motives come together in the thought that there is a God, a protector, a means by which we can control nature (for early religions) or feel safe in the face of danger and uncertainty. Our relationship to God takes on the intimacy and intensity of our relationship to our parents (Freud thought the father gives protection and security, so we think of God as more of a father than a mother).

Religious beliefs are

fulfilments of the oldest, strongest and most urgent wishes of mankind. The secret of their strength lies in the strength of those wishes. (*The Future of an Illusion*, p. 30)

Isn't it remarkable, he says, that religion describes the universe 'exactly as we are bound to wish it to be'? A belief that is based on a wish, rather than on evidence, Freud calls an 'illusion'. It isn't necessarily false; it's just that it isn't based on seeking the truth.

(Just as religious beliefs are based on wishes, so religious experiences are as well. Freud argues that dreams are caused by deep desires we are unaware of, and he argues that religious experiences are similarly caused. They are hallucinations that happen when we are awake, caused by the wish for security and meaning, for things to 'be ok'.)

Discussion

It would be wrong to think that the conclusion of Freud's argument is that God doesn't exist (though it suggests that the mere fact of religious belief is not good evidence for God's existence). Freud's argument, and our concern here, is about the origin of the idea GOD, not about whether God exists or not. It is not enough to know how a belief is arrived at to know whether it is true.

At the heart of Freud's account is the claim that the type of thinking that produces the concept GOD is not directed towards truth or reality. But let us suppose, for the sake of argument, that God does exist. If God exists and human beings need a relationship with God to be fulfilled, then we would of course have a strong wish for such a relationship. Our wish for contact with God would be realistic – if we are made by God, then a relationship with God would be one of our deepest desires. In other words, the wish

Freud identifies may not be the result only of our vulnerability in the face of nature and as infants; it could be a response to our needy spiritual nature. This alternative account situates the origin of GOD in human psychology, but explains human psychology in terms of creation by God.

Freud can reply that this doesn't do justice to the difference between the kind of thinking that aims at discovering the truth about the world and the wish-fulfilling nature of religious belief. But to this, we might say that religious belief is not obviously the fantasy Freud says that it is. Belief in God can be very demanding in how it requires one to act. For example, if one takes the life of Jesus as a model of a relationship with God, one could argue that there is a great deal of engagement with the world, with poverty and oppression, which involves a rejection of the fantasy that God will 'make everything alright'. Again, many religious believers do not seem to exhibit a kind of neurotic need for a father figure; many can be examples of psychological maturity. Of course, they take comfort from their religious beliefs, but this is not enough to make Freud's case.

SOCIAL EXPLANATIONS

Popular alternative explanations of religious belief, and the concept GOD, are sociological and/or evolutionary. For example, in a recent book, the biologist and anthropologist D S Wilson argues that

Many features of religion, such as the nature of supernatural agents and their relationships with humans can be explained as adaptations designed to enable human groups to function as adaptive units. (*Darwin's Cathedral: Evolution, Religion and the Nature of Society*, p. 51)

At the level of society (or at least the groups of human beings that existed in the evolutionary past), religious belief promotes cooperation, mutual respect, and solidarity, and these features help the group to survive. As with Freud's explanation, this theory claims that what produces religious beliefs are not processes aiming at discovering the truth. In this case, the processes are aiming at evolutionary survival.

The line of thought that religion is socially valuable is also put forward by the 'founding father' of sociology, Emile Durkheim, in his book *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*. Durkheim emphasises the way in which religion secures solidarity and a sense of identity for individuals in the society, but most importantly, it provides the basis for a collective morality and for authority in the society. Durkheim thought of religion positively, as an expression of being social, which is what makes us human.

Karl Marx, however, was more cynical about religion and the collective morality and authority it supported. In his 'Contribution to Hegel's Philosophy of Right, Introduction', he argued that what created the need for religion was tension within the society, in particular between those who had power – especially economic power – and those who did not. Those who do not have power, he argued, are 'alienated' from their own lives (he thought that working for a fixed wage, and not getting a full share in the profits generated by what one does, was a central example of alienation – in this case, alienation from one's labour, even more so if the job is boring and unfulfilling).

Marx is not completely clear on how alienation creates religion, but one element is that, as Durkheim says, we need a sense of communal identity. Religion creates this sense, but it is a false sense of a community in which we are all equal in the eyes of God. The idea

of religion – and its support of authority – actually works in favour of those who have power, because, with its false idea of equality, it undermines the motivation of the powerless to try to change society. And so Marx said that ‘Religion is the opiate of the people’ (opium calms people down, saps them of energy and creates a sense of lethargy).

Durkheim rejected Marx’s derivation of religion from economic life. In primitive societies, he argued, religion permeates life; it is the first expression of society and communal identity. If Marx were right, religion ought to emerge later in the development of society, as a response to particular economic conditions.

Discussion

As with Freud’s account of religious belief, the fact that religious belief has some positive effect on human beings, in this case on human society, does not demonstrate that the beliefs are false.

However, there is an additional point to make here. As it stands, however, this is not an explanation of the origin of the concept GOD. Explaining the origins of religious practices and beliefs is not yet to explain the origins of GOD, because even if human societies work better with religious belief, this is not to say that the concept or belief in God must be part of that religious belief, and Durkheim recognised this. Some religions don’t believe in God, e.g. Buddhism. Some societies, noticed Durkheim, don’t even believe in the supernatural.

To make the explanations offered work as an account of the origin of the concept GOD, what we need is either an account of how possession of the concept GOD itself, rather than religion in general, leads to group success; or a separate, supplementary account of how and why some religious beliefs and practices came to develop the concept GOD.

It may be that the concept evolved over time. There is no need for our explanation to say that the concept – characterised by all the divine attributes discussed in this chapter – emerged all at once. For example – a purely speculative story – it could be that at first people worshiped their ancestors and exceptional human beings. Those who had power in life were thought to retain it after their death. And so the idea of a spirit emerges as well as the connection of being a spirit and having power. Then the forces Durkheim mentions shape this idea, so that the group comes to identify with one particularly powerful spirit as ‘theirs’ communally. And so there are different tribes, each with their own ‘god’. In this way, human beings create an idea of ‘god’ that reflects themselves, their ideas of power, and their community.

But do we have enough evidence to assert that this story is in fact true? This is not a question we can answer as philosophers. What we can require of any answer is that it gives us a clearer, more detailed story is given of how people might move from a conception of human power and values to an idea of God.

NIETZSCHE

Friedrich Nietzsche accepted the connection between religious belief and morality that Durkheim noticed. All gods, he argued, are no more than reflections of what people value. We project our values on to the world, but claim that our interpretation of the world is objective (*Beyond Good and Evil*, §§ 1-9). The idea of a god that embodies these values is part of this projection. God is a personification and objectification of what we

value. To continue to believe in God is to lack the courage to recognise that values originate with us and have no external source or confirmation.

Part of Nietzsche's argument for this view is a historical one. We can see, he said, that societies with different values have different ideas of God. We can even see how changes in the idea of God are part of an attempt to change the system of values. The most significant shift was the shift from pagan gods to the Christian idea of God (*On the Genealogy of Morals*, Essay 1)

Any system of value, Nietzsche argued, will favour some people over others. The first set of values that European societies had reflected powerful people's idea of what was good. This class of people called themselves and the traits of character they valued 'good', in contrast to the sorts of people who were in lower classes. The Greek and Roman gods reflected these values. Some of the values involve self-control and self-denial (particularly important in military situations). But these were given a new interpretation by people who were not in power – that self-denial is intrinsically valuable, because our animal nature is bad. This life is not valuable, but the suffering we go through has a meaning – that it will be redeemed by another life, the afterlife. In the afterlife, we no longer have our animal nature.

The new idea of God that emerged – as pure thought, caring for human suffering, beyond emotion – was a projection of this new value system. (This life-negating idea of God Nietzsche thinks is found in most religions.) It emerged as an attempt by weak people to turn the tables on powerful people; in particular, Nietzsche thought it was promoted by the priests, who were weak people who wanted power, but couldn't get it by competition with people who were powerful. An important part of the new idea of God is that God judges us, and will reward or punish us in the afterlife. The priests know what it is that we must do to be judged favourably. So the new value system gives them power, and makes the lives of powerful people appear 'wrong'.

Nietzsche indicates the kind of evidence we should look for in arguments that the origins of GOD lie in human society, and gives us a historical argument regarding the concept as we now have it. But we may challenge him with two questions: First, is his story historically accurate? Second, is his view of Christianity fair? As both of these are empirical questions, and very large questions at that, we will not pursue them further here.