

Chapter 10

Freud and the Psychology of Atheism¹

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will address primarily the deep personal psychology of the greater—at least the passionate and influential—atheists, with a focus on Freud. Atheism has not simply been the expression of the personal psychology of important atheists: It has received much support from social, economic, and cultural forces. Nevertheless, atheism began in the personal lives of particular people, many of them the leading intellectuals of the modern period, such as Friedrich Nietzsche, Sigmund Freud, Bertrand Russell, and Jean-Paul Sartre. *I propose that atheism of the strong or intense type is to a substantial degree generated by the peculiar psychological needs of its advocates.*

But why should one study the psychology of atheists at all? Is there any reason to believe that there are consistent psychological patterns in their lives? To begin, it should be noted that self-avowed atheists tend, to a remarkable degree, to be found in a somewhat narrow range of social and economic strata: in the university and intellectual and media world and in certain professions. Today, as a rule, they make up a significant part of the governing class. (By contrast, believers are found much more widely throughout the entire social spectrum.) Given the relatively small numbers of intense unbelievers and the limited number of social settings in which they are found, there is certainly reason for expecting regularity in their psychology.

Nevertheless, the reader might ask if this is not unfair—even uncalled for. Why submit atheism to psychological analysis at all? Is this relevant to the issue of unbelief? Here we must remember that it is atheists themselves who began the psychological approach to the question of belief. Indeed, many atheists are famous for arguing that believers suffer from illusions, from unconscious and infantile needs, and from other psychological deficits. A significant part of an atheist's position has been an aggressive interpretation of religious belief as arising from psychological factors, not the nature of reality. Furthermore, this interpretation has been widely influential. In short, the theory that God is a projection of our own needs is a familiar modern position and is, for example, presented in countless university courses. But the psychological concepts used so effectively to interpret religion by those who reject God are double-edged swords that can also, as we will see, easily be used to explain their unbelief.

Finally, a valid reason for exploring the psychology of atheism is to give us some understanding of why certain historical forces common in the modern period have so reliably promoted an atheistic attitude. By identifying psychological factors in the lives of prominent rejecters of God, we will observe how social and economic conditions which fostered a similar psychology also promoted the spread of atheism. By starting with the psychological, we will be able to see how the personal became political. In short, there has been a synchrony between the psychology and the sociology of atheism.

Before beginning, I wish to make two points bearing on the underlying assumptions of the present analysis. First, I assume that the major barriers to belief in God are not rational but can be called, in a general sense, psychological. I am quite convinced that for every person strongly swayed by rational argument, there are countless others more affected by non-rational, psychological factors such as those I will discuss here. One of the earliest theorists of the unconscious, St. Paul, wrote: "I can will what is right, but I cannot do it... I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind" (*Rom. 7:18, 23*). The explicit comments of perhaps the most famous atheist Friedrich Nietzsche are to the point. Nietzsche wrote, "I have absolutely no knowledge of atheism as an outcome of reasoning, still less as an event; with me it is obvious by instinct."² He also wrote, "Gradually it has become clear to me what every great philosophy so far has been: namely the personal confession of its author and a kind of involuntary and unconscious memoir."³

Hence, it seems to me sound psychology to accept that psychological factors can be impediments to belief and that these factors are often unconscious. To know the human heart—though no one can truly fathom it or know all its deceits—is the proper task of a psychologist. I propose, then, that irrational, often neurotic, psychological barriers to belief in God are of great importance. This is most likely true in the case of intense and dogmatic atheists.

Second, in spite of various difficulties, all of us still have a free choice to accept or reject God. This qualification is not a contradiction of the first. A little elaboration will make this clearer. As a consequence of particular past or present circumstances some may find it much harder to believe in God. But presumably they can still choose to move toward God or to move away. Likewise, those born without psychological barriers to belief can choose either path. Although the ultimate issue is one of the will, it is nonetheless possible to investigate those psychological factors that predispose many to unbelief.

The Projection Theory of Belief in God

As is generally known, Freud's criticism of belief in God is that such a belief is untrustworthy because of its psychological origins. That is, God is a projection of our own intense, unconscious desires. He is a wish-fulfillment derived from

childish needs for protection and security. Since these wishes are largely unconscious, any denial of such an interpretation is to be given little credence. It should be noted that in developing this kind of critique, Freud raises the *ad hominem* argument to a new importance. It is in *The Future of an Illusion* that Freud makes his position clearest: “Religious ideas have arisen from the same need as have all the other achievements of civilization: from the necessity of defending oneself against the crushing superior force of nature.” Therefore, religious beliefs are “illusions, fulfillments of the oldest, strongest and most urgent wishes of mankind.... As we already know, the terrifying impression of helplessness in childhood aroused the need for protection—for protection through love—which was provided by the father.... Thus the benevolent rule of a divine Providence allays our fear of the dangers of life.”⁴

Looking at this argument carefully, we see that in spite of its enthusiastic acceptance by so many, it is very weak. In the first passage, Freud notes that his arguments against religious belief are equally valid against many of the achievements of civilization, including psychoanalysis itself. Although aware of this problem, he fails to relate the logic of his critique of religion to a critique of the various achievements of civilization—e.g. psychoanalysis.

In the second passage Freud makes another strange claim—namely that the oldest and most urgent wishes of mankind are for the loving protection and guidance of a powerful father. However, if these wishes were as strong as he claims, one would expect the religions that immediately preceded Christianity to have strongly emphasized God as a benevolent father. An emphasis on the father does seem to be characteristic of the most primitive religions.⁵ In general, however, this was not the case for the pagan religions of the Mediterranean world and for such major religions as Buddhism, Hinduism, and Islam. For example, for Muslims to refer to almighty God as father is a kind of blasphemy. Indeed, Christianity is in many respects *distinctive* in its emphasis on God as a loving Father. Apparently Freud seems to think that Christianity is representative of all religions

Let us set aside the preceding weaknesses and turn to another aspect of Freud’s projection theory. It can be shown that his theory is not really a part of psychoanalysis—and hence cannot claim support from psychoanalytic theory. To put it differently, Freud’s argument is essentially *autonomous*. His critical attitude toward and rejection of religion are rooted in his personal predilections, and his interpretation of religion is a kind of meta-psychoanalysis, or framework, that is not supported by specifically clinical concepts. Indeed, the lack of theoretical connection of the projection theory to psychoanalysis probably accounts for its wide general influence outside the psychoanalytic world. There are two strong pieces of evidence for this interpretation of the projection theory.

First, Freud’s theory had been clearly articulated many years earlier by Ludwig Feuerbach in his book *The Essence of Christianity*, first published in

1841. Feuerbach's interpretation was well known in European intellectual circles and Freud, as a youth, read Feuerbach avidly. Illustrative quotations from Feuerbach's work make his influence on Freud clear: "What man misses — whether this be articulate and therefore conscious, or an *unconscious* need — that is his God"; "Man projects his nature into the world outside himself before he finds it in himself"; "To live in *projected dream-images* is the essence of religion. Religion sacrifices reality to the *projected dream*"⁶ (emphasis added). Throughout the work, Feuerbach describes religion in "Freudian" terms such as "wish-fulfillment" and the like. What Freud did, years later, was to revive Feuerbach's position, articulate it more eloquently, and publish it at a time when the audience for such a theory was much larger. (Between 1841 and 1927, atheistic attitudes had made substantial headway in Western society.) And because Freud is the author, somehow the findings of psychoanalysis are assumed to support the theory. The Feuerbachian character of Freud's position in *The Future of an Illusion* is also revealed by his use of such key phrases as the "crushing superior force of nature" and the "terrifying impression of helplessness in childhood," which are not psychoanalytic, either in terminology or in meaning.

Second, Freud himself states that projection theory does not arise from psychoanalytic evidence. In a letter of 1927 to his friend Oskar Pfister, an early psychoanalyst and believing Protestant pastor, Freud wrote: "Let us be quite clear on the point that the views expressed in my book [*The Future of an Illusion*] form no part of analytic theory. They are my personal views."⁷

Nevertheless, Freud states in *The Future of an Illusion* that he is very familiar with the psychological origins of belief in God. Such, however, is not the case. In fact, Freud had very little psychoanalytic experience with patients who believed in God or were genuinely religious. None of his published cases deals with a patient who believed in God at the time of the psychoanalysis. That is, *nowhere did Freud publish a psychoanalysis of the belief in God based on clinical evidence provided by a believing patient*. He never presented publicly any serious psychological evidence for his projection theory or for his other ideas about religion. Instead, Freud's peculiar personal obsession with religion is primarily focused on texts and issues drawn from anthropology, history, and literature—not from any cited psychoanalytic experience. In short, Freud's general projection theory is an interpretation of religion that stands on its own, unsupported by psychoanalytic theory or clinical evidence.

It is important to add that, to the best of my knowledge, there is still no systematic empirical evidence to support the thesis that religious belief is a neurotic projection. Instead, there is now much research showing that a serious and committed religious life is associated with greater physical health and psychological well-being.⁸

Freud's Overlooked Theory of Unbelief

Nevertheless, Freud is quite right to consider that a belief might be an illusion because it derives from powerful wishes or unconscious, childish needs. The irony is that he inadvertently provides a powerful new way to understand an illusion as the psychological basis for rejecting God—that is, a projection theory of atheism.⁹

The central concept in Freud's work, aside from the unconscious, is the well-known Oedipus complex. In the case of male personality development, the essential features of this complex are the following. Roughly at age three, the boy develops a strong sexual desire for his mother. At the same time, he develops an intense hatred and fear of his father and a desire to supplant him—a "craving for power." This hatred is based on the boy's knowledge that his father, with his greater size and strength, stands in the way of his desire. The child's fear of his father may be explicitly a fear of castration by the father, but more typically it has a less specific character. The son does not really kill his father, of course, but patricide is assumed to be a common preoccupation of his unconscious fantasies and dreams. The "resolution" of the complex is supposed to occur through the boy's recognition that he cannot replace his father and through fear of castration which eventually leads the boy to identify with his father—with the aggressor—and to repress the original frightening components of the complex. This resolution is normally completed around age five.

It is important to keep in mind that, according to Freud, the Oedipus complex is never truly resolved, and is capable of activation at later periods—almost always, for example, at puberty. Thus, the powerful ingredients of murderous hate and of incestuous sexual desire within the family are never in fact removed; they are merely covered over and repressed. The adult continues to fear his now-internalized father, who has been incorporated into his super-ego. This fear and self-directed moral hostility are always ready to erupt from the unconscious. Freud explains the neurotic potential of the situation: "[T]he Oedipus complex is the actual nucleus of neuroses.... What remains of the complex in the unconscious represents the disposition to the later development of neuroses in the adult."¹⁰ In short, in classical Freudian theory, all human neuroses derive from this complex. In many cases, this potential is not expressed in any seriously neurotic manner but shows up in critical attitudes toward God and authority, and also in slips of the tongue, transient irrationalities, and the like.

Aside from the personal dimensions of the Oedipus complex, Freud elaborated a cultural-historical model of this complex in *Totem and Taboo*. In this work, Freud proposed an Oedipal and totemic origin of religion. He begins by postulating that the earliest stage of society consisted of "a violent and jealous father who keeps all the females for himself and drives away his sons as they grow up." Freud proposed that such a primal horde, without real culture,

was the initial human state. But “one day the brothers who had been driven out came together, killed and devoured their father and so made an end to the patriarchal horde. United, they had the courage to do and succeeded in doing what would have been impossible for them individually.”¹¹ Freud explains the eating of the murdered father:

[C]annibal savages as they were, it goes without saying that they devoured their victim as well as killing him. The violent primal father had doubtless been the feared, envied model of each one of the company of brothers; in the act of devouring him they accomplished their identification with him and each one of them acquired a portion of his strength. The totem meal, which is perhaps mankind’s earliest festival, would thus be a repetition and commemoration of this memorable and criminal deed, which was the beginning of so many things—of social organization, of moral restrictions and of religion.¹²

He concludes his argument with a reference to the Oedipus complex:

In order that these latter consequences may seem plausible, leaving their premises on one side, we need only suppose that the tumultuous mob of brothers were filled with the same contradictory feelings which we can see at work in the ambivalent father-complexes of our children and of our neurotic patients. They hated their father, who presented such a formidable obstacle to their craving for power and their sexual desires; but they loved and admired him too. After they had got rid of him, had satisfied their hatred and had put into effect their wish to identify themselves with him, the affection which had all this time been pushed under was bound to make itself felt. It did so in the form of remorse. A sense of guilt made its appearance, which in this instance coincided with the remorse felt by the whole group. The dead father became stronger than the living one had been.¹³

The development of this idea in *Totem and Taboo* closely parallels Freud’s presentation of the Oedipus complex, for example, in *The Ego and the Id*, but with one interesting difference. In his discussion of the origin of religion in *Totem and Taboo*, Freud is more concerned with violence—with the son’s hatred of and rebellion against the father—while in his other oedipal writings he places heavier emphasis on the sexual relationship with the mother.

As a statement about the origins of religion, Freud’s interpretation is thoroughly rejected by anthropologists, because there is simply no evidence that culture began with anything like Freud’s “primal horde.” Basic family units appear from the very start. Wilhelm Schmidt presents a simple but devastating critique of Freud’s Oedipal totemic theory about the origin of religion: First, there are many cultures which have not yet reached a totemic stage; nevertheless, these pre-totemic cultures have religion. Second, some rather advanced cultures do not appear to ever have had a totemic stage—yet, like all cultures, they have a religion. No totemic theory—much less an oedipal one—can account for the origin of religion. Freud’s theory of how religion arose is a kind of “just-so story.”

Yet in postulating a universal Oedipus complex as the origin of all our neuroses, Freud inadvertently developed a straightforward rationale for understanding the wish-fulfilling origin of the rejection of God. After all, the Oedipus complex is unconscious, it is established in childhood, and above all its dominant motive is hatred of the father (God) and the desire for him not to exist, something represented by the boy's desire to overthrow or kill the father. Freud regularly described God as a psychological equivalent to the father, and so a natural expression of Oedipal motivation would be powerful, unconscious desires for the nonexistence of God. Therefore, in the Freudian framework, atheism is an illusion caused by the Oedipal desire to kill the father (God) and replace him with oneself. To act as though God does not exist reveals a wish to kill Him, much in the same way as in a dream the image of a parent going away or disappearing can represent such a wish. The belief that "God is dead," therefore, is simply an Oedipal wish fulfillment—the sign of seriously unresolved unconscious motivation.

It is certainly not hard to grasp the oedipal character of so much contemporary atheism and skepticism. Those whose lives are characterized by sexual promiscuity and atheism are, on Freud's analysis, living out the Oedipal, primal rebellion. And of course the oedipal dream is not only to kill the father and possess the mother or other women in the group, but also to displace the father. Modern atheism has attempted to accomplish this. Man, not God, is now the consciously specified ultimate source of goodness and power in the universe. Secular philosophies glorify him and his "potential" in much the same way religion glorifies the Creator. We have *devolved* from the one god reliably found in the very primitive cultures to simple then complex polytheism and finally to modern narcissistic cultures where everyone is a god. Man, through his narcissism (pride) and oedipal wishes, has made himself divine. Thanks to Freud, we may more easily understand the deeply illusory and thoroughly neurotic oedipal psychology of this intellectual position.

One interesting example of the oedipal motivation proposed here is that of Voltaire, a leading skeptic about all things religious who denied the Judeo-Christian concept of a personal God, especially of God as a Father. Voltaire was a deist who believed in a cosmic, depersonalized God of unknown character. The psychologically important thing about Voltaire is that he strongly rejected his father—so much so that he repudiated his father's name (Arouet) and took the name "Voltaire." It is not certain where the new name came from. When Voltaire was in his twenties (in 1718), he published a play entitled *Oedipe* (Oedipus), the first of his plays to be publicly performed. The play, which was a major success, recounts the classical legend, with heavy undertones of religious and political rebellion.¹⁴

Voltaire's rejection of his own father, his rejection of God as Father, and also (in his play) his political rejection of the king—an acknowledged father figure—are all reflections of the same basic need. Psychologically speaking,

Voltaire's rebellion against his father and God are directly interpretable as unresolved oedipal wish-fulfillments derived from childhood. Voltaire's rejection of God is therefore a comforting illusion, and—following Freud's logic—is a belief unworthy of a mature mind.

Diderot, the great encyclopedist and avowed atheist—indeed he is one of the founding brothers of modern atheism—had both oedipal preoccupation and insight. Freud approvingly cites Diderot's anticipatory observation, "If the little savage were left to himself, preserving all his foolishness and adding to the small sense of a child in the cradle the violent passions of a man of thirty, he would strangle his father and lie with his mother."¹⁵

The "Defective Father" Theory of Atheism

I am well aware that there is good reason to give only limited acceptance to Freud's Oedipal theory. In any case, it is my own view that, although the Oedipus complex is valid for some, the theory is far from a universal explanation of unconscious motivation. There is a need, therefore, for a wider understanding of atheism, especially of the intense kind. Since I know of no theoretical framework other than the oedipal one, I am forced to sketch something of a new model. But in fact I will develop an undeveloped thesis of Freud himself. In his essay on Leonardo da Vinci, Freud remarks that "psychoanalysis, which has taught us the intimate connection between the father complex and belief in God, has shown us that the personal god is logically nothing but an exalted father, and daily demonstrates to us how youthful persons lose their religious belief as soon as the authority of the father breaks down."¹⁶

Freud's interesting observation requires no assumptions about unconscious sexual desires for the mother, or even about presumed universal competitive hatred focused on the father. Instead, Freud makes the simple and easily understandable claim that once a child or youth is disappointed in or loses respect for his earthly father, belief in a heavenly father becomes impossible. That a child's psychological representation of his father is intimately connected to his understanding of God was assumed by Freud and has been rather well developed by a number of psychologists, especially psychoanalysts. In other words, an atheist's disappointment in and resentment of his own father unconsciously justifies his rejection of God.

There are, of course, many ways a father can lose his authority or seriously disappoint his child: he can be absent through death or abandonment; he can be present but obviously weak, cowardly, and unworthy of respect, even if he is otherwise pleasant or "nice"; or he can be present but physically, sexually, or psychologically abusive. I will call these proposed determinants of atheism, taken together, the "defective father" hypothesis and will seek evidence for it in

the lives of prominent atheists, for it was in reading their biographies that this interpretation first occurred to me.

I start with two famous atheists, namely Frederick Nietzsche and Sigmund Freud.

I begin with Nietzsche (1844-1900) because he is probably the world's most famous atheist. In particular, he dramatically rejected Christianity and the Christian God. His best-known pronouncement, "God is dead," is familiar to millions. He was deeply preoccupied with religion all his life and repeatedly and obsessively denounced Christian ideas and those who believed them. In addition, Nietzsche himself provided the basis for this linkage: "Gradually it has become clear to me what every great philosophy so far has been: namely the personal confession of its author and a kind of involuntary and unconscious memoir.... In the philosopher, conversely, there is nothing whatever that is impersonal; and above all, his morality bears decided and decisive witness to *who he is*."¹⁷ In a like vein Nietzsche claimed, "I have absolutely no knowledge of atheism as an outcome of reasoning, still less as an event; with me it is obvious by instinct."¹⁸ We have, then, good reason to believe Nietzsche's psychology (unconscious "instinct") bears on his philosophy.

Nietzsche was born in a small village in Prussian Saxony (Germany) on October 15, 1844, the son of a Lutheran pastor. On both sides of his family there had been numerous clergymen. One of his biographers notes that although Nietzsche did not learn to speak until he was two and a half, "By then he had an extremely close relationship with his father, who even allowed him in the study while he was working."¹⁹

Friedrich's father, Pastor Ludwig Nietzsche, died on July 30, 1849, two or three months short of Nietzsche's fifth birthday. Pastor Ludwig had been sick for the previous year from a brain disease. (The postmortem spoke of a "softening" affecting as much as a quarter of his brain.) Prior to his death, and even before his illness, he occasionally suffered from what appeared to have been small epileptic seizures that were of concern to his young wife. Nietzsche often spoke positively of his father and of his death as a great loss which he never forgot. As one biographer has put it, Nietzsche was "passionately attached to his father, and the shock of losing him was profound."²⁰ When he was in his early teens, Nietzsche wrote recollections of his childhood—*Aus meinem Leben [From My Life]*—which included an account of the day his father died:

When I woke up in the morning I heard weeping all round me. My dear mother came in tearfully, wailing "Oh God! My dear Ludwig is dead!" Young and innocent though I still was, I had some idea of what death meant. Transfixed by the idea of being separated forever from my beloved father, I wept bitterly. The ensuing days were taken up with weeping and with preparation for the funeral. Oh God! I had become an orphan and my mother a widow! – On 2 August my dear father's early remains were consigned to the earth.... The ceremony began at one o'clock, accompanied by the tolling of the bells. Oh, I shall always have

the hollow clangour of those bells in my ears, and I shall never forget the gloomy melody of the hymn *Jesu meine Zuversicht* ["Jesus My Faith"].²¹

In this same early autobiography, the young Nietzsche expressed strong religious feeling and identified God with his dead father.

When he was twenty-four, Nietzsche wrote that his father "[d]ied all too soon. I missed the strict and superior guidance of a male intellect."²² But other comments of Nietzsche make it clear that although he loved and admired his father, he also saw him as weak, sickly, and lacking in the "life force." He wrote in July 1888, six months before the nervous breakdown from which he never recovered, that he is suffering "under the pressure of nervous exhaustion (which is in part heredity—from my father, who also died from the consequences of a pervasive lack of life force)."²³ Nietzsche made the connection equally clear when he wrote, "My father died at the age of thirty-six; he was delicate, lovable and morbid, like being destined to pay this world only a passing visit—a gracious reminder of life rather than life itself."²⁴

The general weakness and sickness of his father was for Nietzsche also associated, naturally enough, with his father's Christianity. Nietzsche's major criticism of Christianity—of its morality, of the Jesus of Christian theology, and of the whole meaning of the Christian God—was that it suffers from an absence, even a rejection, of "life force." The God that Nietzsche chose was Dionysius—a strong pagan expression of the life force. It is therefore not hard to view Nietzsche's rejection of God and Christianity as a rejection of the weakness of his father. Nietzsche's own philosophy, with its emphasis on the "superman" (German, *Übermensch*), on the "will to power," on "becoming hard," on the "blond beast," as well as his well-known denigration of women (He remarked, for example, "You are going to see a woman? Do not forget your whip!" and "The happiness of man is 'I will.' The happiness of woman is 'He will.'"), can all be seen as further expression of his attempt to identify with a masculine ideal that his father and, by association, his father's religion, were never able to provide.

His search for masculinity was further undermined by the domination of his childhood, after his father's death, by his mother and female relatives: he lived in a very Christian household with his mother, his younger sister, his paternal grandmother and two paternal aunts until he went away to school at age fourteen. It is not surprising, then, that for Nietzsche Christianity and its morality was something for women—a sign of weakness, a slave mentality. In *Ecce Homo*, his autobiography, he stated: "When I look for my profoundest opposite, the incalculable pettiness of the instincts, I always find my mother and my sister—to be related to such *canaille* [rabble, riffraff] would be a blasphemy against my divinity. The treatment I have received from my mother and my sister, up to the present moment, fills me with inexpressible horror, there is an absolutely hellish machine at work here."²⁵

At the local school he attended as a young boy, Nietzsche had difficulty relating to other boys. They mocked him as “little pastor” for his serious, self-controlled, pious manners. Because of his myopia, his physically passive temperament, and his frequent illness even as a child, he did not participate in boyhood games. To compensate for his social deficiencies, Nietzsche, even at this young age, emphasized his will, indeed, he had a real desire for self-mastery. He once demonstrated his courage to other children by taking a handful of matches, setting them alight, and holding them in the palm of his hand until a bystander forcibly knocked them to the ground. His hand was badly burned.

Many have noted the strong discrepancy between Nietzsche’s harsh, dramatic, and very masculine philosophy—a kind of fantasy persona which he created—and his actual temperament and behavior. “War is another thing,” he wrote, “I am by nature warlike. To attack is among my instincts.”²⁶ But in person he was reserved and intellectual, frequently ill with headaches, stomach pains, and other assorted physical problems, including symptoms of syphilis. His health was so bad that he was often bedridden and nursed by his younger sister and his mother.

His philosophy can be interpreted as an intense intellectual struggle to overcome the weakness of his Christian father, a weakness that often seemed to haunt him, as in a dream, which he had a young boy in 1850, six months after his father died and just before his baby brother died:

I heard the church organ playing as at a funeral. When I looked to see what was going on, a grave opened suddenly, and my father arose out of it in a shroud. He hurries into the church and soon comes back with a small child in his arms. The mound on the grave reopens, he climbs back in, and the gravestone sinks back over the opening. The swelling noise of the organ stops at once, and I wake up. In the morning I tell the dream to my dead mother. Soon after that little Joseph is suddenly taken ill. He goes into convulsions and dies within a few hours.²⁷

In short, in Nietzsche we have a strong, intellectually macho reaction against a dead, very Christian father who was loved and admired but perceived as sickly and weak, a representative of what might be called a “death force”—the very opposite of the Superman figure. Nietzsche’s life can be seen as a permanent “quest for the father” with the Superman interpreted as Nietzsche’s idealized father figure.

Next there is Sigmund Freud (1856-1939), the focus of this anthology.

That Sigmund Freud’s father, Jacob, was a disappointment or worse to his son is generally agreed upon by his biographers. Jacob Freud was a weak man, unable to provide for his family. Instead, the money seems to have come from his wife’s family and others. Furthermore, Freud’s father was passive in response to anti-Semitism. Freud recounts a frequently-noted episode told him by his father, in which Jacob allowed an anti-Semite to call him a “dirty Jew”

and knock his hat off. Young Sigmund, on hearing the story, was mortified at his father's failure to respond strongly, at his father's weakness. Sigmund Freud was a complex and in many respects an ambiguous man, but all agree that he was a courageous fighter and that he greatly admired courage in others. As a young man, Sigmund several times physically stood up against anti-Semitism, and of course he was a great intellectual fighter.

Jacob's defectiveness as a father, however, probably went deeper than incompetence and weakness. Specifically, in two of his letters as an adult, Freud writes that his father was a sexual pervert and that Jacob's children suffered as a result. Finally, it should be recalled that in proposing the Oedipus complex, Freud placed hatred of the father at the center of his psychology. It is not unreasonable to assume that this expressed, at the least, his strong unconscious hostility to and rejection of his own father.

The connection of Jacob to God and religion was also present for his son. Jacob was involved in a kind of "reform" Judaism when Freud was a child; the two of them together spent hours reading the Bible, and later Jacob became increasingly involved in reading the Talmud and in discussing Jewish scripture. In short, for Sigmund this weak, rather passive "nice guy" was clearly connected to Judaism and God, and also to a serious lack of courage and to sexual perversion and other weaknesses very painful to young Sigmund. It is not surprising then that we owe to Freud the autobiographical insight, "Psychoanalysis ... daily demonstrates to us how youthful persons lose their religious belief as soon as the authority of the father breaks down."²⁸

Other well-known atheists who fit the pattern and documented by me²⁹ include David Hume, whose father died when he was two and there was no subsequent substitute father; Bertrand Russell, whose father died when he was four and he was raised by a puritanical grandmother nick-named the "Deadly Nightshade"; John Paul Sartre, whose father died when he was a baby and whom he spent years repudiating; and Albert Camus, who lost his father in WW I and who, near the end of his life, began searching for what his father might have been like. Also Arthur Schopenhauer hated his mother and had a modest but weak bond with his father for whom he was working at age 16 at the time his father committed suicide. Seriously abusive or weak fathers are found in the lives of Thomas Hobbes, Voltaire, Jean D'Alembert, Ludwick Feuerbach, Samuel Butler, and H.G. Wells. Contemporary atheists with such defective fathers include Madalyn Murray O'Hair, past president of an atheist society and public atheist who was responsible in the 1960s for having prayer removed from the public schools, and Albert Ellis, a famous cognitive and behavioral psychologist who very often attacked God, religion, and believers in public lectures and his published writings. Political atheists with nasty fathers include Josef Stalin, Adolf Hitler, and Mao Zedong.

In contrast, prominent theists during the same time period and in the same cultures as in the above list of atheists who had positive fathers or occasionally

very positive father substitutes include Blaise Pascal, George Berkeley, Joseph Butler, Thomas Reid, Edmund Burke, Moses Mendelssohn, William Paley, William Wilberforce, Francois Rene de Chateaubriand, Friedrich Schleiermacher, John Henry Newman, Alexis de Tocqueville, Samuel Wilberforce, Søren Kierkegaard, Baron Friedrich von Hugel, G.K. Chesterton, Albert Schweitzer, Martin Buber, Karl Barth, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and Abraham Heschel. The autobiographical comments of Kierkegaard are especially insightful and come close to stating the present position about the relevance of one's father-relationship to belief in God. In any case, it is the contrast between the fathers of major theist and atheist types of intellectuals that constitutes the best evidence for the "Defective Father" hypothesis.

It is not possible to have a genuine control group when looking at our historical group of unbelievers and believers; however I suggest that the above list of theists can be roughly considered as a control group. I have also, since the publication of my *Faith and the Fatherless*, received many personal testimonies about the barriers set up by negative fathers to belief in God, especially in the case of men.³⁰

Notes

1. This paper is based heavily on Chapter 1 of my book, *Faith of the Fatherless: The Psychology of Atheism*. A fuller development and documentation of the present position can be found there.

2. Nietzsche, 1966, 13-14.

3. Nietzsche, 1979, 51.

4. Freud, 1961, 30.

5. Schmidt, 1935, 267.

6. Feuerbach, 1957, 33, 11, 49.

7. Freud and Pfister, 1962, 117.

8. See Bergin, 1983, Larson & Larson, 1981, Koenig, McCullough & Larson, 2001.

9. Quite some time after developing this oedipal hypothesis I came across a "Freudian" comment by the well known philosopher John MacMurray, "The wish to destroy the father and to take his place is one of the common phantasies of childhood. Would it not be as good an argument as Freud's, then, if we were to conclude that adult atheism was a projection upon the universe of this phantasy?" (MacMurray, 1961, p. 155)

10. Freud, 1919, 193.

11. Freud, 1950, 141.

12. Freud, 1950, 142.

13. Freud, 1950, 143.

14. See Aldridge, 1975, 4, 28-33.

15. From *Rameau's Nephew*, quoted by Freud, in Lecture XXI, 1916-17, p. 338.

16. Freud, 1947, 98.

17. Nietzsche, 1966, 13-14.

18. Nietzsche, 1979, 51.
19. Hayman, 1980, 18.
20. Holingdale, 1965, 10.
21. Hayman, 1980, 18.
22. Nietzsche, 1969, 47.
23. Nietzsche, 1969, 47.
24. Nietzsche, 1979, 38.
25. Nietzsche, 1979, 41.
26. Nietzsche, 1979, 47.
27. Cited in Hayman, 1980, 18.
28. Freud, 1947, 98.
29. Vitz, 1999.
30. This entire interpretation of fathers as influencing later relationships to God can be placed in the contemporary literature on attachment. Indeed there is some evidence that anxiously attached college students are more likely to be atheist or agnostic in contrast to believers who are more likely to be securely attached. Kirkpatrick, 2005.

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