

Psychoanalysis and Religion*

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1. Introduction

A large part of the theory and practice of psychoanalysis, from Sigmund Freud onwards, has been concerned with the treatment of disturbed and troubled patients seeking help with their symptoms, but the philosophical importance of the Freudian revolution is very far from confined to the domain of the pathological or the neurotic. What Freud in effect challenged was a simplistic but widely held model of the mind as a kind of transparent goldfish bowl inside which straightforwardly identifiable beliefs and desires float around, ready to inform our actions and choices. In the wake of Freud, it has become much harder to be confident about the image of ourselves as self-sufficient and autonomous rational agents whose decisions are based solely on what is straightforwardly accessible to the reflective mind. This does not mean that the Freudian revolution in our conception of ourselves undermines the very possibility of rational thought – if that were the case, psychoanalytic thought would be self-refuting, since it would undermine the possibility of its coherent articulation. What *is* entailed is that we should give up the naïve conception of our mental powers and capacities as transparent tools of reason, and start working towards a more nuanced conception, according to which uncovering the truth about ourselves and our relation to the world must be approached in a spirit of humility and receptivity that acknowledges the intensely complex and problematic nature of the instrument which we must use to undertake that task – the human mind.

These general lessons of the Freudian revolution evidently have application to the domain of religious belief, along with many other areas of human thought. But acknowledging the layers of the mind that operate below the level of overt consciousness can lead to very divergent accounts of the status and validity of religious beliefs and attitudes. One way to go – the route that Freud himself took – is to argue that religious belief should be abandoned, in so far as it is unavoidably contaminated by unconscious drives and motivations (an infantile longing for security, for example) that distort our rational judgement. A quite opposite approach, exemplified by that of Freud's onetime disciple Carl Jung, is to maintain that religious thinking is typically shaped by unconscious forms and structures (what Jung called the 'archetypes') which, so far from being generators of neurosis, can play a vital role in the development of a healthy and integrated human personality. We shall look in more detail at these two influential but strongly contrasting psychoanalytic interpretations of religion in the next two sections, before going on, in section four, to explore more recent accounts of the workings of the human psyche and how they may affect the status of religious belief. The fifth and final section will aim to tease out some general conclusions about the relationship between psychoanalysis and religion, and the implications of this for the epistemic status of religious belief, and the way in which the philosophy of religion should be conducted.

2. Freud's critique of religion

Freud's attack on religion begins by drawing attention to our human helplessness before the 'majestic, cruel and inexorable powers of nature'.¹ These powers include both external forces (earthquakes, floods, hurricanes) and the equally threatening internal forces (lust, anger, brutality) arising from our own nature. Freud sees religion as an attempt to mitigate our defencelessness by

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¹ Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion* [*Die Zukunft einer Illusion*, 1927], Ch. 3, in *The Penguin Freud Library* (hereafter *PFL*) (London: Penguin, 1991), Vol. 12, p. 195.

endeavouring to ‘adjure, appease, bribe’ or otherwise influence a celestial father figure, who will protect us from suffering, and impose justice on a seemingly chaotic and terrifying universe.²

The vulnerability of the human condition, and the fact that since time immemorial humans beings in extremis have resorted to a variety of supposed divine powers and forces to rescue them when all else fails, are familiar enough themes which have been commented on by many writers, including Jean-Paul Sartre:

When the paths traced out become too difficult, or when we see no path, we can no longer live in so urgent and difficult a world. All the ways are barred. However, we must act. So we try to change the world, that is, to live as if the connection between things and their potentialities were not ruled by deterministic procedures, but by magic.³

The same general line had been taken much earlier by another stern critic of religion, David Hume. What prompts us to suppose there is a God, according to Hume, are ‘the ordinary affections of human life’ such as the ‘dread of future misery’ and the ‘terror of death’.⁴

But to explain the religious impulse simply in terms of human vulnerability and helplessness leaves something out: no doubt people earnestly desire to be rescued when in trouble, but that in itself does not seem to account for the strength and pervasiveness of the human belief in the divine. When in grave distress we might *like* to deceive ourselves into thinking the world is determined not by natural forces but by magic (as Sartre phrases it), but this does not in itself explain how widespread and successful such self-deception (if it is indeed that) has become. Here Freud contributes something crucially important by addressing himself to the psychological question of *how* the belief becomes so powerfully entrenched in the minds of so many religious adherents. The human psyche, he argues in *The Future of an Illusion*, is *already predisposed*, as a result of the traces left by our forgotten experience as infants, to conjure up the image of a powerful protector to rescue us from our helplessness. For when we encounter threats and dangers

... this situation is nothing new. It has an infantile prototype of which this is in fact only the continuation. For once before one has found oneself in a similar state of helplessness: as a small child, in relation to one’s parent. One had reason to fear them, and especially one’s father; and yet one was sure of his protection against the dangers one knew. Thus it was natural to assimilate the two situations. Here, too wishing play its part, as it does in dream-life ...⁵

So just as with the strange deliverances of dreams, what is planted in our consciousness has a resonance, a power that takes hold of us quite independently of the normal criteria of reasonable evidence and rational judgement. The mind is in the grip of an *illusion*, but this is not just a mistake, or a piece of deliberate self-deception. Rather, layers of mentation working beneath the level of explicit awareness or rational reflection have been activated by our helplessness in the face of the perils we face as adults, and we revert, without being consciously aware of what is going on, to the infantile state of fear and dependency which is ineradicably linked to the yearning for security and the hope of parental protection. Only as a result of delving into the deeper workings of the mind right back from early childhood does the full explanation of the process come to light. This is the background that enables Freud to declare with such confidence ‘the derivation of religious needs from the infant’s helplessness and the longing for the father aroused by it seems to me

² Freud, *Future of an Illusion*, Ch. 3; *PFL*, Vol. 12, p. 196.

³ Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Emotions: Outline of a Theory* [*Esquisse d’une théorie des émotions*, 1939], transl. B. Frechtmann (Secaucus, NJ.: Citadel Press, 1975), pp. 58-9. Quoted in T. Martin, *Oppression and the Human Condition* (Lanham, MD.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002), p. 67. (It should be noted that Sartre himself was critical of the Freudian concept of the unconscious mind.)

⁴ David Hume, *The Natural History of Religion* [1757], Section 2.

⁵ Freud, *Future of an Illusion*, Ch. 3; *PFL*, Vol. 12, p. 196.

incontrovertible.’⁶ So we arrive at the famous Freudian diagnosis: religion is an illusion born of helplessness and fear.

Freud makes it clear, however, that he does not intend his psychoanalytic diagnosis of our longing for protection to be a logical demonstration of the falsity of the religious worldview. That would be to commit the ‘genetic fallacy’ (the logical fallacy of supposing that giving an account of the causal genesis of a belief is enough to show it is false). Illusions, as Freud concedes, are not *necessarily* erroneous: ‘A middle class girl may have an illusion that a prince will come and marry her ... and a few such cases have actually occurred.’⁷ But Freud argues that it is characteristic of illusions in his sense that they are held on to without regard for rational justification; further, they characteristically stem from (indeed are generated by) the wishes or needs of the believer. So it is a short step from this to the conclusion that Freud is aiming at: religion is an infantile piece of wishful thinking that we need to grow out of.

Yet on further reflection the implications of Freud’s critique are by no means as damaging as might at first appear. The believer might well concede to Freud that our infantile helplessness leaves a lasting stamp on the psyche, but go on to insist that this can scarcely be the whole story. For beyond any mere desire for protection (Freud’s ‘longing’ for the father figure), it seems hard to deny that the religious impulse is in large part connected with the powerful yearning human beings have for meaning and purpose in their lives. Now it could be proposed, as is done by many secularists, that meaning and purpose must be found in the chosen activities and pursuits – intellectual, artistic, social, familial, and so on – which are the components of a worthwhile human life. But, without denying the value and meaningfulness of such activities and pursuits, it may be argued that they cannot in themselves bear all the weight of in satisfying our human hunger for meaningfulness. One way of putting this is to say that to be human is to have a characteristic restless, a sense of incompleteness, such that even were all our specific needs and goals to be satisfied (for food, for shelter, for company, for recreation for satisfying relationships, for creative activities, and so on), there would always remain a longing for something more – something that will provide an ultimate grounding for our lives, or give us a sense of ‘ontological rootedness’.⁸

God, for the religious believer, is the ultimate source of being and value towards which we yearn, and which alone can satisfy the existential longing which is part of the nature of dependent and contingent beings such as us. Pointing this out does not of course vindicate belief in God, nor does it of itself refute deflationary Freudian-style explanations of it, but it at least it may open up the possibility that religious belief connects with something in our human nature of deeper significance than a mere neurotic or infantile impulse. Certainly there are many places in Scripture where the strange open-ended longing of the human spirit is underlined (‘Like as the hart desireth the water-brooks, so longeth my soul after Thee, O God’); and the theme is reiterated in seminal Christian writers such as St Augustine (‘You have made us for Yourself, and our heart is restless until it finds repose in You’) and Dante (‘In his will is our peace’).⁹ The thought in such passages is not merely that religious devotion provides peacefulness of mind, in the sense of securing some kind of tranquillizing or calming effect; rather, the idea is that God is the source of genuine value, and that orienting ourselves towards that source bestows ultimate meaning on our human existence and enables us to find true fulfilment even in the face of danger and turmoil. Augustine and Dante acknowledge our vulnerability, but manage to construe it as a corollary of our creatureliness, so they can end up celebrating it as a cause for joyful affirmation of our creator. Freud by contrast sees

⁶ Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents* [*Das Unbehagen in der Kultur*, 1929], *PFL*, Vol. 12, p. 260.

⁷ Freud, *Future of an Illusion*, Ch. 6; *PFL*, Vol. 12, p. 213; see Michael Palmer, *Freud and Jung on Religion* (London: Routledge, 1997), Ch. 3.

⁸ See Simon May, *Love: A History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), p. 7.

⁹ Psalm 42 [41]: 1; St Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions* [*Confessiones*, c. 398], Book I, Ch. 1: ‘fecisti nos ad te, et inquietum est cor nostrum donec requiescat in te’; Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy: Paradise* [*La Divina Comedia: Paradiso*, c.1310], iii, 82: ‘E’n la sua volontade è nostra pace’.

our vulnerability as a condition which scares us so much that we desperately fantasize that we have found a way of assuaging it – even though in fact the power we appeal to has no reality outside the human psyche. But as to which of the two accounts reflects the way things actually are, this remains to be determined; so however disconcerting Freud’s analysis may initially be for the religious believer, it seems clear that it cannot finally settle the matter.

3. *Carl Jung and the importance of symbolic thought*

While Freud’s view of religious belief places it under the same general heading as the neurotic, the infantile and the disturbed, or at rate as falling short of the standards of balanced judgment to which we aspire as reasonable adults, Carl Jung, though concurring with Freud that such belief has roots buried deep in the human psyche, took a very different view of the resources of the unconscious mind, regarding them in a potentially much more benign light. For Jung, Freud’s dismissal of the religious impulse as infantile fails to recognise the imaginative and symbolic role of religious modes of thought and expression, and their possible role in the healthy development of the human personality. Crucial here is the idea of ‘individuation’ as Jung terms it, the ‘process by which a person becomes a psychological “in-dividual”, that is, a separate, indivisible unity or whole.’¹⁰ Jung sees human psychological development in terms of a struggle to achieve internal balance and psychic integration, where integrating the conscious and unconscious elements of the self is a precondition for psychic health or wholeness;¹¹ and religious imagery and symbolism, according to Jung, perform a vital function here.¹² The process of individuation requires modes of thought and expression that operate not just on the surface level of explicit assertion, but which carry deep imaginative resonances that are vital for our psychological balance and harmony. To give but one example of this, the figure of Christ functions for Jung as an ‘archetype of the self’, a deeply resonant image of the perfectly unified and integrated human being.¹³ From this perspective, as Michael Palmer aptly puts it in his account of the Jungian position:

Religion, far from being neurotic, is revealed as a constant and evolving process in the development of the psychic personality ... Religious symbols ... open up a psychic level ... that is primordial and ... of supreme value for the present and future development of the human psyche.¹⁴

Jung’s ideas have encountered considerable philosophical opposition (as indeed have those of Freud). Many contemporary analytic philosophers are supporters of what Brian Leiter has called the ‘naturalistic revolution in philosophy’, according to which philosophy should ‘adopt and emulate the methods of the successful sciences.’¹⁵ Such philosophers often tend to be sceptical about the very idea of the unconscious mind, and *a fortiori* the Jungian idea of the archetypes, on the grounds that the theories that invoke such ideas lack the kind of hard scientific warrant demanded by today’s dominant naturalistic paradigm. In response to this kind of critique, defenders of the Jungian approach have two possible lines of defence. One is to argue that there is in fact hard empirical evidence, for example from cognitive science and developmental psychology, that can be

¹⁰ Carl Jung, ‘Conscious, Unconscious and Individuation’ [1939], in C. G. Jung, *Collected Works* [hereafter ‘*CW*’] (revised edition, London: Routledge, 1967-77), Vol. 9, para. 490.

¹¹ For more on the psychodynamics of this transformational process, see John Cottingham, *Philosophy and the Good Life: Reason and the Passions in Greek, Cartesian and Psychoanalytic Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), Ch. 4.

¹² See Carl Jung, *Symbols of Transformation* [*Wandlungen und Symbole der Libido*, 1912; revised edn. 1952], in *CW*, Vol. 5.

¹³ See Jung, *Aion* [1951], in *CW* Vol. 9(2), p. 183. See also Jung, *Psychology and Religion* [first published in English, 1938], in *CW* Vol. 11, pp. 89-95.

¹⁴ Palmer, *Freud and Jung on Religion*, pp. 110-11.

¹⁵ Brian Leiter, *The Future for Philosophy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004), Editor’s Introduction, pp. 2–3.

used to support the Jungian hypothesis of the role of symbols and archetypes in psychic integration.¹⁶ Another response would be to take issue with the doctrine that the methods of science are the only valid way of uncovering the truth. Thus Thomas Nagel has argued, in the case of Freud, that irrespective of what we think about the authority of analysts or the clinical evidence for their theories, there is an ‘evident usefulness of a rudimentary Freudian outlook in understanding ourselves and other people, particularly in erotic life, family dramas, and what Freud called the psychopathology of everyday life.’¹⁷ And similarly one could argue that Jung’s ideas, like those of Freud, are best assessed not as contributions to science, but in a more ‘hermeneutic’ way – that is, as ways of enriching our understanding of the human predicament, and the deeper significance of our thoughts and feelings and beliefs.¹⁸

To suggest that Jung’s ideas may enrich our understanding without qualifying as contributions to science is not at all to dismiss or downgrade the value and importance of scientific inquiry or scientific methods. One can be a genuine and wholehearted admirer of the achievements of *science* while at the same time resisting the false allure of *scientism* – the dogma that scientific methods give us everything we need to understand all aspects of reality. To be sure, we live in, and are an integral part of, the physical world constituted by the particles and forces studied by science – that is undeniable. But when it comes to understanding aspects of human life such as religious experience (and the same goes for poetic or artistic or moral experience, or even our ordinary human interactions with each other) we patently need other categories than those of the physical sciences; for even the fullest and most detailed print-out of the relevant particle collisions and biochemical processes will tell us nothing about the *human significance* of these processes and events.

In addition to the physical sciences there are of course the social sciences (including for example economics, sociology and psychology), and there are continuing debates as to how far such disciplines meet the standards of the ‘hard’ physical sciences (in matters such as experimental repeatability, verifiable prediction, mathematical modelling, and so on). There is probably no simple answer to this question, since the term ‘social science’ covers a large array of divergent disciplines and inquiries, whose methods manifest varying degrees of precision and rigour. A particular issue as regards psychology is the inevitable reliance on reports by individual human subjects of their thoughts, feelings, sensations, beliefs and desires, thus making reference to what is, according to some philosophers, an irreducible domain of qualitative subjective experience that resists subsumption or explanation in objective scientific terms.¹⁹ But however that may be, psychoanalytic approaches to psychology present special additional problems, in so far as the ‘data’ being studied come to light in the context of special relationship with the analyst – an issue which led even Freud, despite his attraction to the scientific model, to remark on how far psychoanalysis diverges from normal scientific procedures. We shall return to this issue in section five, below.

At all events, when we come to religious feelings, beliefs, attitudes and experiences, it is apparent that these have a characteristic depth and complexity that can seldom if ever be conveyed in a set of straightforward factual propositions laid out for our assessment and awaiting verification. For religious thoughts and ideas operate within a rich and complex web of *associations*, carrying manifold metaphorical and symbolic echoes which may often have powerful effects on us in ways

¹⁶ See Jean Knox, *Archetype, Attachment, Analysis* (Hove: Brunner-Routledge, 2003).

¹⁷ Thomas Nagel, ‘Freud’s Permanent Revolution’, *New York Review of Books*, XLI, 9 (12 May 1994), pp. 34-38, at p. 35. The reference is to Freud’s essay *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* [*Zur Psychopathologie des Alltagslebens*, 1901].

¹⁸ ‘Hermeneutics’ in the most general sense may be thought of as an approach to philosophy which gives a central place to the (culturally mediated) search for self-understanding. See Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: an essay on interpretation*, [*De l’interprétation: Essai sur Sigmund Freud*, 1965], transl. D. Savage (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1970).

¹⁹ The locus classicus is Thomas Nagel’s ‘What is it like to be a bat?’, in *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), Ch. 12.

that are not fully transparent to consciousness. This, as Jung sees it, is the key to the peculiar resonance and power of the images and icons that inform the thoughts and ideas of religious believers, and what explains their role in the search for integration and healing within the troubled human psyche. None of this of course means that we should uncritically accept all or any of Jung's ideas about the role of religious concepts; but at least it reminds us of the context in which his theories are meant to operate, and within which they need to be evaluated.

Whatever conclusions one finally reaches about the Jungian theory of archetypes, important questions remain about Jung's general approach to religion. The foremost among these is the objection that the Jungian approach leads to a kind of psychologizing or subjectivizing of religion, where the question of the truth or validity of any given religious outlook (Christian theism, for instance) boils down to no more than the question of whether certain archetypal images (such as that of God the Father, or Christ the Son, for example) have a transformative power within the human psyche.²⁰ Jung's own response to this type of criticism was that his role as a psychologist was not to make pronouncements about the existence or non-existence of transcendent realities, but simply to describe the role of certain fundamental and universal images and symbols in human development:

We know that God-images play a great role in psychology, but we cannot prove the [actual] existence of God. As a responsible scientist, I am not going to preach my personal and subjective convictions which I cannot prove ... To me, personally speaking, the question whether God exists at all or not is futile. I am sufficiently convinced of the effects man has always attributed to a divine being. If I should express a belief beyond that ... it would show that I am not basing my opinion on facts ... I am well satisfied with the fact that I know experiences which I cannot avoid calling numinous or divine.²¹

This makes quite clear the restricted scope of Jung's position: it insists that religious concepts and images play a crucial role in the development of the human personality and its search for integration, but leaves completely open the question of whether there is some objective reality – something 'external' or independent of the subjective structure of the human psyche – to which those concepts and images refer.

To sum up our necessarily compressed and selective account of the contrasting attitudes of Freud and Jung to religion – the former's highly negative, the latter's much more positive – what emerges is that in neither case do their suggested findings about the workings of the human psyche in themselves either establish or refute the truth of the religious outlook. The partly hidden motivation for religious belief may, if Freud is right, be an infantile one; but as we have seen, that in itself does not logically entail the falsity of such a belief. And the symbols and images drawn from the unconscious mind may, if Jung is right, exert a powerful psychological influence on the human quest for integration; but that, as just noted, still leaves open the real existence or otherwise of the God that is the object of religious belief.

In the wake of these two seminal thinkers, however, one thing at any rate should be clear: that any philosophical attempt to address the fundamental questions of religious belief will find it hard to carry conviction unless it takes some account of the complexity that lies beneath the seemingly transparent surface of propositional assent to religious claims and doctrines. No account of religious belief and experience is going to look plausible unless it acknowledges the complexity of the human mind – the strata of hidden longings and needs and the manifold symbolic forms and images resonating deep within the human psyche. To some of the more recent attempts to address that complexity we shall now turn.

²⁰ Compare Palmer, *Freud and Jung on Religion*, pp. 187, 196.

²¹ From correspondence with H. L. Philp of 1956, repr. in *CW*, Vol. 18, pp. 706-7. See Palmer, *Freud and Jung on Religion*, p. 125.

4. *The complexity of belief*

The contemporary debate over the validity of religious belief tends to play out in a curiously abstract and rationalistic way. The implicit assumption is that the participants are detached evaluators, judiciously examining the ‘God hypothesis’ (as Richard Dawkins calls it),²² scrutinizing the supposed evidence, and weighing up the arguments for and against. Particularly among anglophone philosophers in the analytic tradition, where psychoanalytic ideas have tended to be resisted or ignored by many practitioners, the claims of religion are implicitly construed as rather like scientific claims, suitable subjects for purely intellectual disputation, the province, as it were, of scholarly discussion in the seminar room. But a number of recent writers have started to challenge this very austere and bloodless picture of religious belief.

Philosophers have argued endlessly about the epistemic status of religious and other kinds of belief, and what entitles some beliefs to the accolade ‘knowledge’, but comparatively few have paid attention to ‘what lies beneath’ – to the ‘archaeology of belief’, as the British theologian Graham Ward as called it. Ward argues that believing or disbelieving something involves far more complex processes than the scrutiny and evaluation of factual evidence. There are much ‘deeper layers of embodied engagement and reaction’, where we are touched ‘imaginatively, affectively and existentially’.²³ Drawing on empirical research into the behavioural and neurological underpinnings of belief, and its evolutionary and prehistoric roots, Ward delves into the domain of what the Berkeley psychologist John Kihlstrom has termed the ‘cognitive unconscious’.²⁴ A rich array of non-conscious mental activity, including learned responses that have become automatic, subliminal perceptions that impact on our conscious judgements, and implicit but not consciously recalled memories – all these profoundly affect how we perceive and interpret the world.²⁵ And as we saw in the case of Freud (whose general influence is clearly discernible here), the implications of the resulting conception of human belief and understanding extend far more widely than the domain of the pathological. Not just in neurotic desires and perceptions, but whenever we believe anything at all, there is, as Ward puts it, a ‘mode of liminal processing, related to embodiment and affectivity, which “thinks” more quickly and reacts more instinctively than our conscious rational deliberation.’²⁶

A further dimension of complexity in our beliefs is explored in Iain McGilchrist’s groundbreaking work *The Master and His Emissary*, according to which there are two different modes of relating to the world, broadly correlated with the activities of the left and right hemispheres of the brain respectively, one mode being detached, fragmented, abstract and analytical, the other being more direct, holistic, intuitive and empathetic. McGilchrist speaks of

... two ways of being in the world, both of which are essential. One is to allow things to be *present* to us in all their embodied particularity, with all their changeability and impermanence and their interconnectedness, as part of a whole which is forever in flux ... The other is to step outside the flow of experience and ‘experience’ our experience in a special way: to *re-present* the world in a form that is ... is abstracted, compartmentalised, fragmented, static ... From this world we feel detached, but in relation to it we are powerful.²⁷

Acknowledging McGilchrist’s influence, Graham Ward urges us to question the ‘left-brain hegemony’ that has increasingly dominated our culture since the Enlightenment, and to reconfigure

²² Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (London: Transworld Publishers, 2006), Ch. 2.

²³ Graham Ward, *Unbelievable: Why We Believe and Why We Don’t* (London: Tauris, 2014), pp. 7, 10, 31.

²⁴ John Kihlstrom, ‘The cognitive unconscious’, *Science*, Vol. 237, pp. 1445-52. See also Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking Fast and Slow* (London: Penguin, 2011), Ch. 1.

²⁵ Ward, *Unbelievable*, pp. 11, 68.

²⁶ Ward, *Unbelievable*, p. 12.

²⁷ Iain McGilchrist, *The Master and His Emissary* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), p. 93.

our understanding of belief. Doing justice to the full range of our embodied human engagement with the world could allow for a ‘rebalancing’ of left-brain and right-brain modes of awareness. This, he argues, might enable us to overcome the sterile opposition between scientific and religious modes of thinking, and to understand what lies ‘at the very core of poetic and religious faith’.²⁸

Before proceeding, it needs to be noted that many critics have questioned the distinction that is invoked here between ‘left-brain’ and ‘right brain’ activity, objecting that the available scientific research on the neurophysiology and functioning of the brain does not support a strong dichotomy between the functions performed by the two hemispheres.²⁹ There may be evidence to suggest that in most subjects one can distinguish between ‘logical-conceptual’ and more ‘intuitive’ mental activity, each broadly correlating with neural activity in the relevant halves of the brain; but the critics point out that in normal subjects both halves play some role in both, and in any case there is constant interaction between the two hemispheres. All this, however, is readily conceded by McGilchrist, who fully acknowledges the massive degree of interconnectivity in the wiring of the brain, while nevertheless insisting that the two hemispheres have been shown to function in ways that are to some degree independent, and that this can tell us something important about the different ways in which we experience the world.³⁰

However that may be, the position taken by McGilchrist, Ward and others³¹ about the need to challenge what they term ‘left-brain hegemony’ does not seem ultimately to hinge on the precise details as to how the brain is configured. For the crucial point at issue is not a neurological one, but what might be called a psycho-ethical or spiritual one: that our ultimate flourishing as human beings depends on our being able to integrate our detached and analytic modes of relating to the world with our more direct and intuitive modes of awareness. This is not to say, however, that the scientific study of the brain has no relevance to the psychological-cum-moral task of striving for an integrated vision of the world. For the wiring of the brain, shaped by the long history of its evolution, is an integral part of our nature as biological creatures, and our human ways of perceiving and understanding the world must inevitably be conditioned and mediated by that history. The point was in fact explicitly anticipated by Jung in a paper written early in his career:

Just as the human body represents a whole museum of organs, with a long evolutionary history behind them, so we should expect the mind to be organized in a similar way ... We receive along with our body a highly differentiated brain which brings with it its entire history, and when it becomes creative it creates out of this history – out of the history of mankind ... that age-old natural history which has been transmitted in living form since the remotest times, namely the history of the brain structure.³²

In short, whatever scientific consensus is eventually reached with regard to the precise workings of the brain and the functioning of its parts, the resulting picture seems likely only to reinforce the idea that our grasp of reality depends at the physiological level on a intricate nexus of mechanisms and processing systems evolved over many millennia and working beneath the threshold of conscious awareness and control. And alongside this neurological complexity there also has to be taken into account the complex array of socially and culturally inherited associations

²⁸ Ward, *Unbelievable*, p. 110.

²⁹ See for example J. Nielsen et al., ‘An Evaluation of the Left-Brain vs. Right-Brain Hypothesis’, *Plos One* (2013), <http://dx.doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0071275>.

³⁰ See McGilchrist, ‘Exchange of Views’ at http://www.iamcgilchrist.com/exchange_of_views.asp#content, accessed 2 July 2016.

³¹ See for instance Eleonore Stump on ‘cognitive hemianopia’, in *Wandering in Darkness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 26–27.

³² Carl Jung, ‘The Role of the Unconscious’ [‘Über das Unbewußte’, 1918], in *CW*, Vol. 10, p. 12; see McGilchrist, *Master and Emissary*, p. 8.

and resonances that condition our cognitive and emotional responses to the world, again working largely below the level of our explicit conscious awareness. So the more we learn about all this, the more pressure is put on the idea of the detached autonomous agent, somehow operating above the fray of evolution and history, and forming beliefs based solely on dispassionate scrutiny of the evidence. like some pure disembodied intelligence.

So what are the implications of the growing interest in the ‘archaeology of belief’ for our understanding of religion and its place in the modern scientific age? Graham Ward, as already noted, maintains that a greater understanding of what lies beneath the surface of conscious belief-formation will help us to overcome what he sees as the ‘sterile’ opposition between scientific and religious thought and to give up the idea that primitive mythological ways of thinking about the world will progressively be replaced by modern scientific methods. For placing the belief-forming faculties of our species within the context of their biological and social development over many millennia reveals the ineradicable role of the mythic and the symbolic in *all* human cognition, and thus radically undermines the idea of the inevitable triumph of a science-based, demythologized and secularized belief system. Just as Jung had argued that mythical and symbolic forms powerfully and inescapably impinge on our human beliefs and attitudes, so Ward argues that all human belief systems involve mythmaking. And this includes not just archetypal stories of our origins (such as the Genesis narrative), but a whole range of human activity – the ‘symbolic realms we hominids have been cultivating for 2.2 million years’, including art, poetry, rite and dance. In ways we cannot fully explain, these interlocking modes of human culture tap the powers of what (for a want of a better term) we call the imagination, which operates at many more levels than are accessed by our conscious reflective awareness. Such works of the imagination ‘intimate that our experience ... of being in the world is freighted with a significance that only an appeal to the mythic can index.’³³

Many important issues are raised by this stress on the psychological depth and complexity of human cognition, and its mythical and the imaginative aspects. But for present purposes two key questions present themselves: first, what are the implications of all this for the epistemic status of religious belief; and second, what lessons emerge for the way in which the philosophy of religion should be conducted? To these questions we shall briefly turn in the fifth and final section of our discussion.

5. Philosophizing about religion and the layers of the human psyche

The line of argument canvassed in the previous section – emphasising the creative, imaginative and mythical elements in all human belief systems – might seem to offer a kind of protective armour for religious ways of thinking against the advances of modern scientific rationalism. But there may be grounds for concern that such a defence of religion is bought at too steep a cost – the cost of eroding the very distinction between *mythos* and *logos*, between imagination and reason. For even if science is necessarily the creation of our evolved human capacities, conditioned by our long human history, it has nevertheless developed tried and trusted methods (empirical investigation, mathematical modelling) for understanding and predicting the workings of nature. And the secularist charge against religious ways of thinking is that they completely fail to pass these tests for reliable belief formation, and thus do not deserve a place in our modern worldview.

There is no space here to delve further into the extensive and continuing contemporary debate about the future of religion in the modern world. What needs to be addressed in the present context are the implications for philosophy, and in particular the philosophy of religion, of the issues raised in the previous section about the complex ‘archaeology of belief’. In this connection, one does not have to sign up to a questionable assimilation of science and myth in order to wonder if contemporary analytic philosophy of religion has become too dry and austere, too closely modelled on the pared down unambiguous language of the sciences, to do justice to the

³³ Ward, *Unbelievable*, p. 186.

complexities of religious belief and the ways in which it might contribute to our understanding of ourselves and the nature of the reality of which we are a part. It is here that the contribution of psychoanalytic thought seems particularly relevant. For if there is any truth in what the psychoanalytic movement has tried to uncover about the hidden layers of the human mind, then it seems plausible to suppose that being more open to ‘what lies beneath’ might lead to a more nuanced epistemology, less modelled on the austere language and methods of the physical sciences, but arguably better equipped for the task of philosophizing insightfully about religion. It is striking in this connection to find even a committed analytic philosopher of religion such as Eleonore Stump arguing recently that in order to do its job philosophy of religion may require deeper and richer resources than those afforded by the tools of logical analysis and technically expert argument.³⁴

Stump does not explicitly mention or invoke the resources of psychoanalytic theory, but significantly she does argue that philosophers of religion need to make use of our manifold responses to the multiple resonances of literary, and scriptural, narrative. This chimes in with earlier calls for a certain kind of narrative or literary turn in philosophy, as advocated for example in the work of Martha Nussbaum. Nussbaum argues that in learning to appreciate a great literary text we have to allow ourselves to be receptive and ‘porous’, knowing when to yield instead of maintaining constant critical detachment.³⁵ Some philosophers may suppose that any departure from complete analytical detachment would involve a loss of philosophical integrity; and certainly there is need for philosophical caution whenever our imaginative and emotional resources are made use of. But equally, if we insist on maintaining a detached analytical stance at all times, this may be less a sign of intellectual integrity than what Nussbaum calls ‘a stratagem of flight’³⁶ – a refusal of the openness and receptivity that is prepared to acknowledge all the dimensions of our humanity.

If this is right, then one lesson to emerge is that we may need a new epistemology for thinking about religious belief and its basis. In contemporary analytic philosophy of religion, both the advocates of religious belief and its critics tend to operate with an *epistemology of control*. We stand back, scrutinize the evidence, retaining our power and autonomy, and pronounce on the existence or otherwise of God. But such methods implicitly presuppose that the divine presence ought to be detectable via intellectual analysis of formal arguments or observational data. Yet the ancient Judaeo-Christian idea of the *Deus absconditus* (the ‘hidden God’)³⁷ suggests a deity who is less interested in proving his existence or demonstrating his power than in the moral conversion and freely given love of his creatures, and in guiding the steps of those who ‘seek him with all their heart’, in Pascal’s phrase.³⁸ And when we start to think about the means of such conversion, it becomes clear that it could never operate through detached intellectual argument alone, or through the dispassionate evaluation of ‘spectator evidence’.³⁹

Any suggestion that religious claims cannot fully and properly be evaluated from a detached and dispassionate standpoint may at first seem to be special pleading on behalf of religion; but further reflection makes it clear that there are all sorts of other areas of life – appreciation of poetry, of music, entering into any kind of personal relationship – where we need to be (to use Nussbaum’s term) ‘porous’. Otherwise, while we pride ourselves on being in control and judiciously evaluating the evidence, we may actually be closing ourselves off from allowing the evidence to become manifest to us. In short, there may be many areas of human life where a proper understanding of

³⁴ Stump, *Wandering in Darkness*, pp. 26–27.

³⁵ Martha Nussbaum, *Love’s Knowledge* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 281–2.

³⁶ Nussbaum, *Love’s Knowledge*, p. 268.

³⁷ See Isaiah 45:15. For more on the ‘hiddenness’ of God, see Daniel Howard-Snyder and Paul Moser (eds.), *Divine Hiddenness* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

³⁸ Blaise Pascal, *Pensées* [1670], ed. L. Lafuma (Paris: Seuil, 1962), no. 427.

³⁹ For this notion, see Paul Moser, *The Elusive God: Reorienting Religious Epistemology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 47.

what is going on requires us to relinquish the epistemology of control and substitute an *epistemology of receptivity*.⁴⁰

Perhaps surprisingly, this plea for the adoption of an epistemology of receptivity when assessing the claims of religion can draw some support from the writings of the founding father of psychoanalysis. Although as we have seen, Freud himself was a stern critic of religion, and although he tended to present himself very much in the garb of the austere scientific rationalist, he also acknowledged, perhaps most explicitly in his *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, that his methods of treatment diverged very significantly from those which are typical of standard scientific procedure. He points to two important differences. First, conventional scientific medicine looks to ‘establish the functions and disturbances of the organism on an anatomical basis, to explain them in terms of chemistry and physics, and to regard them from a biological point of view’, whereas Freud concedes that his own approach focuses on a much more elusive aspect, namely the ‘psychological attitude of mind’. And second, Freud acknowledges the oddity of the fact that the processes involved are not susceptible of public investigation under normal observer conditions, because the psychotherapeutic process takes place in a private consulting room and ‘only under the conditions of a special affective relationship to the physician’.⁴¹

Thus, so far from there being an objective scientific template to which all valid discourse and all legitimate human inquiry must conform, Freud in the *Introductory Lectures* appears ready to allow that there are phenomena whose nature is such that quite different modes of understanding are appropriate. Indeed, he goes further and acknowledges that ‘psychoanalysis is learnt first of all on oneself, through the study of one’s own personality.’⁴² These concessions are most significant, since (whether Freud himself drew such an inference or not) they implicitly cut the ground from underneath those critics of religion who would dismiss the validity of religious experiences on the grounds that they resist external verification by detached or non-involved observers.

The important lesson to emerge here is that despite the prevalence of scientific modes of thinking in our contemporary culture (and in some parts of Freud’s own thinking), we need to take seriously the idea that there may be phenomena that do not manifest themselves ‘cold’, as it were, but require involvement and commitment on the part of the subject in order to be apprehended. It has been an assumption of modern scientific inquiry that the truth is simply available for discovery, given sufficient ingenuity and the careful application of the appropriate techniques, and that the dispositions and moral character of the inquirer are entirely irrelevant. But while this assumption may be correct enough when inquiring into truths within meteorology, say, or chemical engineering, it seems quite out of place when we are dealing with certain central truths of our human experience – for example truths about how a poem or symphony may be appreciated, or how a loving relationship may be achieved and fostered. In these latter areas, the impartial application of a mechanical technique is precisely the wrong approach: the truth yields itself only to those who are already to some extent in a state of receptivity and trust.⁴³ The upshot is that there may be phenomena, or parts of reality, whose detection or apprehension is subject to what might be called *accessibility conditions*: the requirements for getting in touch with them include certain requirements as to the subjective attitude and psychological (and perhaps moral) state of the

⁴⁰ The argument of the last three paragraphs draws on material from John Cottingham, *Philosophy of Religion: Towards a More Humane Approach* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), Ch. 1. See also John Cottingham, *How to Believe* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), esp. Ch. 3.

⁴¹ Sigmund Freud, *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis* [*Vorlesungen zur Einführung in die Psychoanalyse*, 1916-17], Lecture I, transl. by J. Riviere as *A General Introduction to Psychoanalysis* [1920] (New York: Washington Square Press, 1952), pp. 22-4.

⁴² Freud, *Introductory Lectures*, p. 23.

⁴³ For more on this theme, see Michel Foucault, Seminar at the Collège de France of 6 January 1982, transl. in Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), pp. 1-19. See also John Cottingham, *The Spiritual Dimension* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), Ch. 5 and Ch. 7.

subject.⁴⁴ And Freud himself seems clearly to acknowledge this when he speaks of the insights arising from the psychotherapeutic process making themselves available ‘only under the conditions of a special affective relationship to the physician’.⁴⁵ Yet once it is granted that there are psychological truths that may come to light only given certain affective and other transformations within the experiencing subject, then may become possible to see how the same principle might be applied to religious truths, so that certain transformations in the subject may be crucially necessary preconditions for the manifestation of the divine reality that is the object of the religious quest.⁴⁶

What thus emerges, as we bring to a close our discussion of the relation between psychoanalysis and religion, is the remarkable degree of convergence that obtains between these two very different ways of thinking about the human condition. Not only do both outlooks search for deeper layers of significance beneath of the surface world of factual assertion and plain ‘common sense’, but also, as we have just seen, both hold that this deeper world may disclose itself only to those who are in a suitable state of receptivity – a point that carries important epistemological implications perhaps not yet fully assimilated in our contemporary philosophical culture. To be sure, none of this is sufficient on its own to constitute a vindication of the claims either of psychoanalytic theory or of traditional religion, nor is it intended to be; but at least it may give some indication of the way in which those claims might have to be assessed.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ See Cottingham, *The Spiritual Dimension*, Ch. 1, §§ 3 and 4; Ch. 7, §4.

⁴⁵ Freud, *Introductory Lectures*, p. 23.

⁴⁶ See John Cottingham, *Why Believe?* (London: Continuum, 2009), Ch. 5.

⁴⁷ I am grateful to Richard Gipps and Michael Lacewing for their most thoughtful comments on an earlier draft of this chapter.