

# Introduction

## *Of Human Bondage*

### Back to the Future

What is the moral legacy of the Enlightenment? How, to use Kant's 1784 definition of "Aufklärung," has "man's emergence [Ausgang] from his self-incurred immaturity [aus seiner selbstverschuldeten Unmündigkeit]" (Auf 33; 54) left its mark on the twentieth century? Are we to remember the Enlightenment as but a moment of "shallow and pretentious intellectualism" characterized by "individualistic tendencies" and an "unreasonable contempt for tradition and authority" as we read in the most recent edition of the Oxford English Dictionary? Or is there perhaps at the heart of the Enlightenment another Enlightenment: one that not only gestures beyond the "individualistic tendencies" of the Enlightenment and its "contempt for tradition" but also—precisely because it always gestures beyond the Enlightenment—comes to us through its heirs?

Freud, I will suggest, is one of the Enlightenment's truest heirs in this sense. Indeed, in his controversial and unsettling book *The Future of an Illusion* (1928), Freud issues a indictment of religion so scathing that it is rivaled only by the devastating attack on religion's claims to supersensible knowledge that we find in Kant's critical philosophy. All religious ideas, Freud contends in this book, are illusions—dangerous to reality and motivated solely by wish-fulfillment. And yet in this most anti-religious of treatises, Freud

ends up pointing to something in reason itself that takes us beyond the scientific grounds from which he launches his attack. In this text that condemns our psychical need to humanize the non-human forces of the external world, in a manifesto that equates religious belief with a kind of neurotic infantilism, there is, I will argue, a trace of something distinctly moral. Moreover, as we will see, Freud's concept of reason not only points to a strange "common compulsion," it also links this compulsion to a notion of right and futurity.

No civilization can decide *never* to make further progress in its thinking just as no religion can decide never to reform its churches. It simply does not have the "right," says Freud. No people can make such a decision because a decision of this kind—in the words of Kant this time—"would be opposed to the humanity in their own persons and so to the highest Right of the people" (MS 327–28; 137). Freud's "common compulsion" in *The Future of an Illusion*, I will argue, brings to mind the Enlightenment in its insistent call to reason, but also, I would claim, in its recognition of something whose grounds are no longer to be found in objective knowledge. Freud's recourse to a "common compulsion," I will suggest, repeats Kant's positing of a "cognitive drive" in "What Is Orientation in Thinking?" (1786). At the heart of *The Future of an Illusion*, in other words, lies a thoroughly Kantian legacy.

At the root of a psychological "compulsion [*Zwang*]" lies the history of a philosophical "drive [*Trieb*]." Indeed, with this shift from psychology to philosophy, we pass from a critique of the human need for psychical mastery (for a closed cognitive system) to another and more enigmatic need: the need of reason *not* to be reinscribed within a cognitive system. Only by returning to the Enlightenment, I will suggest, do we emerge from it with new, more enigmatic, moral insight.

## A Tale of Two Cities

I begin with two examples, the juxtaposition of which will help lay the groundwork for the relation between Freud and Kant. What

lies in the future, says Freud, is the primacy of the intellect. Although the voice of the intellect is soft, “it does not rest until it has gained a hearing [*sie ruht nicht, ehe sie sich Gehör geschafft hat*].”<sup>1</sup> Indeed, this restlessness, according to Freud, is “one of the few points on which one may be optimistic about the future [*in denen man für die Zukunft der Menschheit optimistisch sein darf*]” (SE 21: 87). The primacy of the intellect (*der Primat des Intellekts*) is our best hope for the future, even if this future is only a distant one.

What thwarts the progress of civilization and represents its greatest danger is religion. In spite of their incontrovertible lack of authentication, Freud marvels, religious doctrines have always exerted the strongest possible influence on humankind. What is so remarkable, says Freud, is the sheer inner force of doctrines whose effectiveness is wholly independent “of recognition by reason [*von der vernünftigen Anerkennung*]” (SE 21: 45). Religion—or that “most important item in the psychical inventory of a civilization” (SE 21: 18)—is so effective, Freud explains, because it ministers to the narcissistic needs of human beings. Religious teachings are not “precipitates of experience or end-results of thinking [*Niederschläge der Erfahrung oder Endresultate des Denkens*]”: they are illusions through and through, but they are also, at the same time, “fulfillments of the oldest, strongest and most urgent wishes of mankind” (SE 21: 47).

The relationship between civilization and religion must undergo a fundamental revision for there to be a future. Although religious teachings may at times resemble other kinds of teaching that lay claim to our belief and tell us something about the world, they must be distinguished from them. When we are told, for example, that “the town on Konstanz lies on the Bodensee” (SE 21: 37–38), anyone who does not believe it can always “go and see” and thereby verify the correctness of the assertion. Unlike religious teachings, assertions of a historical nature “demand belief in their contents,” but not without producing *grounds* for their claims (SE 21: 38–39).

In “What Is Orientation in Thinking?” (1786), Kant presents us with an example of belief identical in form to Freud’s Konstanz example. Again this example is used to illustrate the difference

between a belief whose grounds for considering something to be true “are by nature devoid of all objective validity” and a belief whose grounds are objective but are “consciously regarded as inadequate” (DO 141; 244). Only in the latter case can the belief in question ever be transformed into knowledge:

It is therefore perfectly consistent that something should be considered historically true purely on the strength of testimonies [*bloß auf Zeugnisse*], as in the belief that there is a city called Rome and the fact that someone who has never been there should nevertheless be able to say ‘*I know*’ and not just ‘*I believe* that Rome exists.’ (DO 141; 244)

Like the Konstanz example in Freud, the Rome example<sup>2</sup> here moves easily between belief and knowledge. In both cases, historical belief is based on objective grounds of knowledge. In neither case, therefore, is historical belief the kind of belief that is under discussion.

And yet, the Rome example in Kant’s argument serves a completely different function from that of the Konstanz example in Freud’s. For Kant, the example of a belief that can become knowledge is not a strong example of the production of objective grounds but, on the contrary, a weak example (even a counterexample) of the production of subjective ones. The belief that there is a city called Rome is not a strong example of belief because the belief can eventually become knowledge. In this way, the belief that Rome exists serves only as a foil for the belief that is to be treated as the *opposite* of knowledge: namely, the belief that can never become knowledge and which Kant calls a “rational belief” (*Vernunftglaube*). Instead of leading us to the primacy of intellect, in effect, Kant’s example already indicates a possibility beyond objective principles of reason.

For Kant the notion of “rational belief” is not opposed to reason. Rather it emerges from reason, from a need “inherent in reason itself” (DO 136; 240). Although a “rational belief” must be distinguished from “an insight capable of fulfilling all the logical requirements for certainty”—indeed, a “need” must never be regarded

as an “insight”—the conviction of truth of a rational belief is “not inferior in degree to knowledge . . . even if it is totally different from it in kind” (DO 141; 245). I will suggest in what follows that “rational belief” is not only a necessary presupposition for finite rational beings, as Kant argues, but also a rational remainder of a need that could begin to account for the inaugural grounding or founding of speculative reason itself. Since this rational remainder is not accessible to speculative reason, as we will see, it is only ever conveyed through it. Indeed, as it turns out, it is to this rational remainder that Freud’s “common compulsion” can be seen to testify.

## A Human Need

Freud sees religion as civilization’s response to the hostility of which it is itself the object. Every individual, Freud tells us in *The Future of an Illusion*, “is virtually an enemy of civilization” (SE 21: 3). Civilization brings with it coercion and the renunciation of instinct. Yet this hostility also binds the individual to civilization, for civilization represents a protection against the superior powers of nature, on the one hand, and the “destructive . . . anti-social and anti-cultural” instincts of other human beings on the other (SE 21: 5). It is perhaps not a coincidence, therefore, that *The Future of an Illusion* is staged as a dialogue—that is, as an exemplary form of civilized hostility—between Freud and an “opponent” (*Gegner*) who speaks on behalf of religion and follows his every move with distrust and offers a series of critical remarks.

The discussion between Freud and Freud’s opponent centers around the psychological need of human beings to humanize the impersonal forces and destinies that afflict them. Freud’s opponent, the arch defender of human proclivities, immediately appeals to the natural predisposition of human beings to project their own existence into the world: “It is natural to them, something innate, as it were, to project their existence outwards into the world and to regard every event which they observe as the manifestation of beings who are at bottom like themselves” (SE 21: 22). Freud’s opponent

will then conclude that because self-projection is the “only method of comprehension” (SE 21: 22) that human beings have at their disposal, because human beings cannot understand the world except by measuring all that they observe by human measurements (by bringing everything back to themselves), they are therefore justified in doing so. In order to understand the world, according to Freud’s opponent, human beings must defend against its non-human aspects.

Freud ends up expressing both his compassion for and his impatience before this all too human predicament. Thus, although Freud clearly recognizes the naturalness of the propensity of human beings “to personify everything they want to understand” (SE 21: 22), he also sees this propensity as a kind of neurotic infantilism when it is allowed to develop unchecked beyond a certain point. Just as the infant learns from the persons in its vicinity that the way to influence them is to establish a relationship with them, so too the adult learns to understand and to control everything it encounters by positing a common measure between itself and what it encounters. In this way, Freud contends, the adult recreates the parental house “in which [as a child, it] was so warm and comfortable [*in dem es ihm so warm und behaglich war*]” (SE 21: 49).

But surely, Freud cannot help but wonder, infantilism is meant to be surmounted:

One cannot remain a child forever; one must in the end go out into “hostile life [*feindliche Leben*].” We may call this “education to reality [Erziehung zur Realität].” Need I confess to you that the sole purpose of my writing is to point out the necessity of this forward step? (SE 21: 49)

If, on the one hand, infantilism brings with it wish-fulfillment and consolation, on the other hand it comprises a system of illusions along with a “disavowal of reality [*Verleugnung der Wirklichkeit*],” such as we find in amentia, in a state of “blissful hallucinatory confusion” (SE 21: 43). Freud’s irony is unmistakable here. Indeed, we would all prefer to keep so warm and comfortable.<sup>3</sup>

The longing for the parental home is for Freud a motive identical with the need for protection against all the undefined dangers that

threaten the child in the external world. But when this defense against childish helplessness is carried on into adulthood, when the adult's reaction to helplessness acquires the "sanctity, rigidity and intolerance" of a religious system (SE 21: 51)—and the formation of religion is, for Freud, the adult's reaction to helplessness *par excellence*—it is time for civilization to give up its infantile wishes. Because the consolations of religion inevitably bring with them a "prohibition of thought" (SE 21: 51), it becomes imperative that civilization finally come of age. Civilization must grow up. Just as the individual must give up the warmth and comfort of the parental home, so must civilization give up the consolation of religious illusion and bear "the troubles of life and the cruelties of reality" (SE 21: 49).

Freud's conclusions are not without political and/or ethical implication. Not only does Freud not despair of humanity's ability to live without the wish-fulfilling and consolatory power of illusion, he sees the turn *away from consolation* (the consolations of religion) and *toward reason* as a step in the right direction—that is, in the direction of justice:

By withdrawing their expectations from the other world and concentrating all their liberated energies on their earthly life [*auf das irdische Leben*], [human beings] will probably arrive at a state of things in which life will be more tolerable [*erträglich*] for everyone and civilization no longer oppressive to anyone. Then, with one of our fellow unbelievers [*mit einem unserer Unglaubensgenossen*], they will be able to say without regret:

Den Himmel überlassen wir [We leave heaven]  
 Den Engeln und den Spatzen [To the angels and the sparrows].  
 (SE 21: 50)

The energies directed toward the warmth and comforts of heaven will be withdrawn, detached from their object and thus liberated—made available—for other, worldly, applications. With human energies newly cathected on their life on earth, the heavens will be left to those creatures to whom they properly belong: to the angels and the sparrows as set forth in the two lines by Heine with which

Freud concludes his chapter. Not only religion but any doctrinal system that takes on the psychological characteristics of religion (“the same sanctity, rigidity, and intolerance; the same prohibition of thought” [SE 21: 51]) will have to be discarded in the end. These systems must eventually be discarded in the name of what Freud calls “the reality principle”: that momentous step in the process of human development when “what was presented in the mind was no longer what was agreeable but what was real” (SE 12: 219). The process of human development must finally dispel the consolatory power of illusion that blinds us to reality: to that reality which we would prefer not to see.

Religion, Freud tells us, is an illusion that derives its strength from its readiness to fit in with our instinctual wishful impulses. In the last of his *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis* (1933), Freud describes religion as the attempt “to master the sensory world in which we are situated by means of the wishful world [*mittels der Wunschwelt*] which we have developed within us as a result of biological and psychological necessities [*die wir infolge biologischer und psychologischer Notwendigkeiten in uns entwickelt haben*]” (SE 22: 168). But the world is not a “nursery”; it is no “Kinderstube.”

It is striking, however, that when Freud reiterates his critique of religion in this lecture, he does so in very different terms: “Whatever may be the value and importance of religion, it has *no right* in any way to restrict thought [*sie hat kein Recht, das Denken irgendwie zu beschränken*]*—no right, therefore [also auch nicht das Recht], to exclude itself from having thought applied to it*” (SE 22: 170, my emphasis). It would seem, in other words, that this infantilism Freud calls “religion” not only claims a right it does not have but also abuses the right of a legitimate claimant.

Religion’s “prohibition against thought [*Denkverbot*]” presents “a danger for the future of humanity [*eine Gefahr für die Zukunft der Menschheit*]” because it is an abuser of rights (SE 22: 172). Religion does not have the “right” to prohibit thought; it does not have the “right” to stand outside of thought and exempt itself from “having thought applied to it” (SE 22: 170). It does not have the right because thought and thought alone—as opposed to the



recuperative humanization of nature—makes possible the maturation process of a civilization. The future of civilization itself, one might say, has a right to reality, as determined by objective principles of knowledge.

What is remarkable here is that Freud indicts religion's "Denkverbot" *in the name of the future*—and not, as was the case with his opponent, *in the name of the human*. Freud indicts religion in the name of the future, that is to say, in the name of a *right*, the right of reality to determine a future independent of our wishes and inclinations. But one should hasten to add that that in the name of which Freud issues his indictment stems not from any chance or anarchic future, but from a particular and quite special future, one that is bound up with a compulsion: "the common compulsion [*der gemeinsame Zwang*] exercised by . . . [the] dominance of reason [*Herrschaft der Vernunft*]" (SE 22: 171).

The grounds for Freud's indictment of religion are clear: only the common compulsion exercised by the dominance of reason can offer anything in the order of justice, that is to say, "a strong and unifying bond [*Band*] among human beings" (SE 22: 171). Only this common compulsion can lead the way to further unions. Only reason, the scientific spirit, the primacy of intellect are capable of gesturing beyond themselves, beyond the neurotic infantilism of human need—and to the future. The very notion of futurity for Freud is predicated on the dominance of reason but more particularly on the exercise of a "common compulsion." Could it be, then, that there is something about the nature of reason that "stands surety [*bürgt*]" for the future of "a strong and unifying bond among human beings" (SE 22: 171)? Is there something in reason itself that would be the ground not only of Freud's "common compulsion" but also of the alternative future of the Enlightenment?

## The Need of Reason

To read this future of the Enlightenment, however, we must first return to Kant. Kant will conclude his 1786 essay "What Is Orientation in Thinking?" with an impassioned appeal to the future:

Friends of the human race and of all that it holds most holy! [*Freunde des Menschengeschlechts und dessen, was ihm am heiligsten ist!*] Accept whatever seems most credible to you after careful and honest examination . . . but do not deny reason that prerogative which makes it the greatest good on earth, namely its right to be the ultimate touchstone of truth [*streitet der Vernunft nicht das, was sie zum höchsten Gut auf Erden macht, nämlich das Vorrecht ab, der letzte Probestein der Wahrheit zu sein*]. (DO 146; 249)

What is at stake for Kant in this essay—just as it was for Freud in *The Future of an Illusion*—is the prerogative or right (*Vorrecht*) of reason to be the final arbiter of truth, the supreme touchstone of the reliability of a judgment. For Kant, however, this right is first a privilege (*Vorrecht*) and as privilege it must never be abused.

The good of the world (*das Weltbeste*) depends on the free and unfettered use of reason. Freedom of thought, says Kant, must remain “inviolable [*ungekränkt*]” if human beings are not to fall prey to zealotry, superstition, and the political repressions that inevitably follow from them (DO 144; 247). Kant sees civil coercion (*bürgerliche Zwang*) and moral constraint (*Gewissenszwang*) as the most conspicuous forms of opposition to freedom of thought. However, Kant will also point to a third form of opposition—to what is perhaps the most formidable form of opposition since it comes from within reason itself. For Freud, the best hope for the future “is that intellect—the scientific spirit, reason—may in process of time establish a dictatorship in the mental life of man” (SE 22: 171). For Kant, on the contrary, the “dictatorship” or despotism of speculative reason represents a third form of opposition to freedom of thought.

Freedom of thought signifies for Kant the subjection of reason to no laws other than those which reason imposes on itself. Thus, in addition to civil coercion and moral constraint, opposition to freedom of thought may come from “the maxim of the lawless use of reason [*die Maxime eines gesetzlosen Gebrauchs der Vernunft*]” (DO 145; 247): that is, from the emancipation of reason from its own restrictions. When reason acquires a “presumptuous confidence

in the independence of its own powers from every restriction" (DO 146; 248), it quickly degenerates into misuse. The result is a conviction in the absolute and exclusive authority of speculative reason ("intellect . . . the scientific spirit, reason"). One might say that in such cases speculative reason itself becomes a religion or dictatorship of sorts—"accept[ing] only what can be justified on *objective* grounds and by dogmatic conviction . . . brashly dismiss[ing] everything else" (DO 146; 248).

The consequences of this presumed independence are very serious indeed, for, as Kant demonstrates, they lead first to "the attitude known as *libertinism* [Freigesterei] (i.e. the principle of no longer acknowledging any duty)" and finally to the abolition of freedom of thought altogether (DO 146; 249). In the end, freedom of thought destroys itself "when it wills to proceed independently of the very laws of reason [*wenn sie so gar unabhängig von Gesetzen der Vernunft verfahren will*]" (DO 146; 249). The laws of reason impose restrictions on the powers of reason, and reason depends upon these laws—it *needs* these laws—for its proper use. Hence, the lawless use of reason is also said to stem from "the maxim of the independence of reason from its *own need* [*von ihrem eigenen Bedürfnis*]" (DO 146; 249).

Now Kant's notion of "orientation in thinking" arises precisely in connection with this need. Orientation in thinking is the means whereby pure reason regulates its use "when, taking leave of known objects (of experience), it seeks to extend its sphere beyond the frontiers of experience and no longer encounters any objects of intuition whatsoever" (DO 136; 239–40). Just as we are able to orient ourselves in space (i.e. mathematically) so too, Kant contends, are we able to orient ourselves in thought (i.e. logically). To orient oneself in thought is to be guided by a subjective principle of reason where objective principles of reason are lacking:

This subjective means which still remains available to [reason] is simply the feeling of a *need* which is inherent in reason itself [*Dies subjektive Mittel, das alsdann noch übrig bleibt, ist kein anderes als das Gefühl des der Vernunft eigenen Bedürfnisses*]. (DO 136; 239–40)