

Lacan and Monotheism: Not Your Father's Atheism, Not Your Atheism's Father

Adrian Johnston

§1 Feuerbach Avant la Lettre: A Hegelian Prelude

As with so many other aspects of G. W. F. Hegel's philosophy, his stance regarding religion has remained a matter of fierce dispute for the past two centuries up through the present. Hegel has been portrayed as a Protestant theologian, an insidious atheist, and everything in between. Although Bruno Bauer's 1841 rendition of Hegel as vehemently atheistic is hyperbolic (Bauer 1999), I at least agree with the Left Hegelians that Hegelianism is, at a minimum, in tension with orthodox Protestantism specifically and theism generally.

To be more precise, I would argue that Hegel is the forefather of Ludwig Feuerbach's philosophy of religion (see Bloch 1972, pp. 65, 208–10, 268). Feuerbach's November 22, 1828 letter to Hegel indicates that the eventual author of 1841's *The Essence of Christianity* recognizes this himself (Feuerbach 1984, pp. 547–50). And, evidence suggests that Hegel left this letter unanswered out of political and professional cautiousness, due more than anything else to fears of the practical consequences of being associated with atheism (Hegel 1984, pp. 467–68). However, neither Hegel nor Feuerbach are atheists in the sense of simple dismissers of all things religious as unworthy of consideration, appropriation, or subl(im)ation.

The debates about Hegel's religiosity or lack thereof initially irrupt in German-speaking intellectual circles during the 1830s and 1840s. With this original context's repressive and reactionary political atmosphere, questions about the Hegelian philosophy of religion cloak, and are motivated by, the issue of what politics follows from Hegel's thought. It is no coincidence that the distinction between Right and Left Hegelians aligns with that between those who affirm Hegel's Protestantism and irreligiosity respectively.

Relatedly, one finds in Hegel's political philosophy some of the clearest statements of his philosophy of religion. Of course, perhaps the most (in)famous instance of this Hegelian linkage between the political and the religious is the declaration from 1821's *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* according to which the "state consists in the march of God in the world [es ist der Gang Gottes in der Welt, daß der Staat ist]" (Hegel 1991, p. 279; 1970, Vol. 7, p. 403). Starting with critics such as Rudolf Haym (1975), those eager to tar-and-feather the mature Berlin-era Hegel as a rationalizing apologist for the Protestant conservatism of Friedrich Wilhelm the Third's Prussia latch onto this statement, among others, as evidence for their accusations.

Yet, one can and should ask: By saying that, is Hegel divinizing the state (as many critics allege) or politicizing God? If the latter, does such politicization leave intact the religious, theological dimensions of the divine? Or, instead, does this politicization bring about a secularization and de-divinization of the very notion of God? I would suggest that the textual evidence indicates Hegel intends, so to speak, to bring Heaven down to earth in a secularizing, de-divinizing manner (see Johnston 2019).

From 1798's "The Spirit of Christianity and Its Fate" through 1831's "The Relationship of Religion to the State," Hegel consistently indicates that the God of (mono)theism arises from, and is an expression of, human beings and their this-worldly communities. This proto-F Feuerbachian thesis runs like a red thread through the entire span of his intellectual itinerary. "The Spirit of Christi-

anity and Its Fate” contains a line that would fit well in the pages of Feuerbach’s *The Essence of Christianity*—“faith in the divine grows out of the divinity of the believer’s own nature; only a modification of the Godhead can know the Godhead” (Hegel 1975, p. 266). As Feuerbach would put this, “That whose object is the highest being is itself the highest being” (Feuerbach 1966, p. 10).

Then, from the early 1800s through 1831, Hegel regularly claims that the absolute spirit of monotheism’s deity is nothing other than an idealized, picture-thinking way of forms of human “ethical life” (*Sittlichkeit*) representing themselves to themselves. In 1802’s *System of Ethical Life*, God is identified by Hegel with *Sittlichkeit* (see Hegel 1979, pp. 143–45). He here speaks of “the divinity of the people,” “the God of the people” as “an ideal way of intuiting” ethical life itself (ibid., p. 144). Approximately a year later, in the *First Philosophy of Spirit*, Hegel proposes that, “in the organization of a *people* the absolute nature of spirit comes into its rights” (ibid., p. 211). That is to say, the fullest actualization of God is not as the fiction—albeit as a real abstraction (Lacan 1986a, p. 165)—of a supernatural transcendent authority projected into an imagined supernatural Beyond. Rather, this actualization occurs as the reality of an immanent form of communal existence in the earthly *hic et nunc*. Feuerbach similarly connects politics and religion, people and God (2012a, pp. 149–51; 1966, p. 71).

Likewise, the later Hegel of the Berlin period, in resonance with a post-Hegelian refrain about Christianity being the religion of atheism, indicates that Protestantism especially is the religion of secularism. He sees the socio-political secularization of the divine as genuine progress (Hegel 1956, pp. 422–23). This same Hegel pointedly asserts that “there is nothing higher or more sacred,” religion included, than the secular state, with its “Morality and Justice” (ibid., p. 422). For him, sublated religion-as-secular-politics is more valuable and advanced than mere, unsublated religion-as-religion. All of this is affirmed even in Hegel’s contemporaneous *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*

(1985, pp. 373–74). And, just before his death, in 1831’s “The Relationship of Religion to the State,” he argues that, insofar as the essence of religion is humanity’s “*free spirit*,” religion’s maximal realization is to transubstantiate itself into the structures of the secular state (Hegel 1999, p. 226).

Admittedly, Hegel is far from a straightforward, unqualified, no-frills atheist. Yet, as the preceding shows, he is no believer in the actual doctrines of religion-*qua*-religion either. What is more, his privileging of Christianity generally and Protestantism specifically does not signal philosophical endorsement of their theological contents in their literal guises. Like Feuerbach, Christianity for Hegel is, as it were, “the one true religion” because it comes closest to admitting that anthropology is the secret behind all theology. Furthermore, Hegel’s privileging of Protestantism in particular is due to it being the religion most invested in its own secularization (something also underscored by Feuerbach).¹

Feuerbach too, despite his reputation, also is no crude atheist. His irreligiosity is not that of, for instance, eighteenth-century French materialists such as Baron d’Holbach (nor that of more recent examples of d’Holbach’s brand of atheism, such as Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, and Sam Harris). To cut a long story short, Feuerbach’s atheism as secular humanism is a Hegelian *Aufhebung* of (Protestant) Christianity, not an outright negation of theism.

The closing sentence of the introduction to *The Essence of Christianity* declares, “What yesterday was still religion is no longer such to-day; and what to-day is atheism, tomorrow will be religion” (Feuerbach 1989, p. 32). A year later, in “Preliminary Theses on the Reform of Philosophy,” Feuerbach proclaims at greater length:

The Christian religion has linked the name of man with the name of God in the one name “God-man.” It has, in other words, raised the

¹ See De Kesel, 2005, p. 125; Feuerbach 1966, p. 5.

name of man to an attribute of the highest being [höchsten Wesens]. The new philosophy has, in keeping with the truth, turned this attribute into substance, the predicate into the subject. The new philosophy is *the idea realized* [die realisierte Idee]—*the truth* of Christianity. But precisely because it contains within itself the *essence* of Christianity, it abandons the *name* of Christianity. Christianity has expressed the truth only *in contradiction to the truth*. The pure and unadulterated truth without contradiction is a *new truth*—a *new, autonomous deed* of mankind. (Feuerbach 2012b, pp. 172–73; 2013)

Today's atheism is destined to become tomorrow's new religion as the "*realized* [...] *truth* of Christianity." That is to say, Christianity, as theologized anthropology, will be dialectically inverted into anthropomorphized theology, namely, the new religion of secular humanism. The old religion misattributed the virtues of natural, this-worldly humanity to a supernatural, other-worldly God. Feuerbach's "new philosophy" will be transformed into the new religion once human beings start self-consciously celebrating and venerating their virtues as their own (and not those of a superhuman deity). Feuerbach does not forecast or advocate the disappearance of the experiences of awe, reverence, wonder, and the like historically associated with religions. He sublates (*als Aufhebung*), rather than simply negates externally without remainder, Christianity (Bloch 1971, pp. 210–12).

§2 God Is Unconscious, But the Unconscious Is Not God: Lacan's Analytic Atheism

Although Jacques Lacan is not invested in making atheism into a new religion, he places his Freudian analytic atheism in a line of descent tracing back to a Feuerbachian-*avant-la-lettre* Hegel.² He is most explicit about this in *Seminar VII (The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* [1959–1960]).

² See Beirnaert, pp. 128–29; Chiesa 2015, p. 63; Causse 2018, pp. 221, 245.

This seminar contains some of Lacan's discussions of the notion of the death of God. Speaking of this, Lacan notes, "there is a certain atheistic message in Christianity itself, and I am not the first to have mentioned it. Hegel said that the destruction of the gods would be brought about [se complète la destruction des dieux] by Christianity" (Lacan 1992, p. 178; 1986b, p. 209). A couple of sessions later in the seventh seminar, Lacan equates atheism itself with Christianity's barring of the big Other, with Its/His "Law," through staging the death of God Himself on the cross (Lacan 1992, pp. 192–93). This Christianity, with its dialectics oscillating between religion/theism and irreligion/atheism (Causse 2018, pp. 201–203), is identified by Lacan here as "the first weighty historical example of the German notion of *Aufhebung* [premier exemple historique où prene son poids le terme allemand d'*Aufhebung*]" (Lacan 1992, p. 193; 1986b, p. 227).

On a prior occasion, I have dealt critically with an instance, in *Seminar IV (The Object Relation [1956–1957])*, where Lacan approvingly invokes the conception of the Holy Spirit (Lacan 1994, pp. 41–58; Johnston 2013a, pp. 59–77). I would observe in passing that some of Lacan's more pro-Christian moments, such as in the fourth seminar, occur when he is most proximate to Immanuel Kant's critical transcendental idealism (i.e., the Kant who "had to deny knowledge in order to make room for faith" — a Kant Lacan later pointedly repudiates in, for instance, 1974's "The Triumph of Religion").³ When Lacan does not enforce a Kantian-style epistemological limit partitioning reality from the Real, he is less prone to allow for theological-type speculations about the Real-beyond-reality.

That said, Lacan's only other sustained reference to the Christian conception of the Holy Spirit, apart from the one to be found in *Seminar IV*, can be interpreted as reflective of his adhesion to the post-Hegelian atheism-in-Christianity tradition.

³ Kant 1998, Bxxx; p. 117; Lacan 2013a, pp. 80–85.

In the fifteenth seminar (*The Psychoanalytic Act* [1967–1968]), Lacan remarks, “The Holy Spirit is a notion infinitely less stupid [bête] than that of the subject supposed to know” (Lacan 1967–1968, session of February 21, 1968). *Le sujet supposé savoir* is, by Lacan’s lights, the core structural place and absolutely essential function of any and every theism.⁴ So long as one believes in some form of the subject supposed to know, one is not a true atheist. Hence, the Lacan of *Seminar XV*, in playing off *le Saint-Esprit* against this heavenly super-Subject, implies that one can (and should) have the Holy Spirit without God or His pseudo-secular surrogates. And, with the Holy Spirit as the human community left behind after the disappearance of God-the-Father and death of Christ-the-Son, Lacan’s favoring of the horizontal immanence of *le Saint-Esprit* over the vertical transcendence of any divine *sujet supposé savoir* clearly is in line with the Hegelian tradition of Christian atheism (Bloch 1971, pp. 169–70).

Moreover, the fifteenth seminar’s reference to the Holy Spirit indicates that this *Geist*, as at odds with the subject supposed to know, is anything but omniscient. In other words, the this-worldly socio-symbolic order is barred, riven by ignorance and devoid of final answers and unifying certainties. Elsewhere, Lacan attributes this lack of omniscience not only to *le Saint-Esprit*, but even to God Himself. In short, he bars God too.

On several occasions in the 1960s and 1970s, Lacan raises the question of whether God believes in God.⁵ Eventually, during the May 21, 1974 session of *Seminar XXI* (*Les non-dupes errent* [1973–1974]), Lacan finally answers this query: God does not believe in God. In this same seminar session, he immediately spells out the implications of this answer.

⁴ See Lacan 2014, p. 308; 2006a, pp. 280–81; 2001a, p. 337. See also Causse 2018, p. 45, and Johnston 2013a, pp. 22–23.

⁵ See Lacan 1965–1966 (session of May 25, 1966); 2006a, p. 177; 1971–1972 (session of January 6, 1972).

To begin with, this Lacan of the twenty-first seminar equates “God does not believe in God” with “There is something unconscious,” “*Y a d’l’inconscient*” (Lacan 1973–1974, session of May 21, 1974). How should this equation be understood? By Lacan’s lights, as seen, the essence of God resides in the structural function of *le sujet supposé savoir*. Furthermore, the kind of knowledge attributed through supposition to God (or any other transferentially invested subject supposed to know) is the reflexive, self-transparent variety of philosophical and theological traditions. From such familiar traditional perspectives, knowledge is inherently auto-reflexive and self-conscious. When one knows, one knows that one knows. Likewise, when one thinks, one thinks that one thinks. Additionally, when one believes, one believes that one believes.

On a Lacanian assessment, what is really revolutionary about Sigmund Freud’s self-styled “Copernican revolution” is his positing of the unconscious as irreflexive mentation. One is gripped by the unconscious in knowing without knowing that one knows, thinking without thinking that one thinks, and believing without believing that one believes. Lacan’s denial that God believes in God, with its associations to the irreflexivity characteristic of the Freudian unconscious, is another version of “God is unconscious,” which Lacan identifies in 1964 as the “true formula of atheism” (Lacan 1977, p. 59).

But, the unconscious definitely is not God or a substitute for Him. There is no analyst, priest, parent, etc. anywhere to be found who knowingly could provide the decisive final word about the singular, coherent unconscious truth of one’s being. Furthermore, there is no such truth to be found even within and by the subject of the unconscious itself. Admittedly, in the analytic relationship, knowledge of the unconscious resides on the side of the analysand rather than the analyst *qua* subject supposed to know (but not actually knowing, since this knowledge is a transferential supposition of the analysand to be worked

through by him/her). Yet, this does not mean that the analysand is or could ever become *le sujet supposé savoir* in relation to his/her own unconscious and its knowledge.

There are two reasons why the analysand, despite being the lone locus of knowledge of his/her unconscious, cannot be the subject supposed to know in lieu of the analyst or anyone else. First, no matter how much analysis a person undergoes, regardless of how well-analyzed someone is, he/she always still will have an unconscious. No amount of analysis ever results in a complete liquidation of the unconscious, in a becoming-fully-transparent-to-oneself. Analysts do not and cannot produce absolute self-consciousnesses, even through lengthy didactic analyses.

However, leaving things at this first reason risks leaving intact the sense that although the powers to make conscious are limited, some form of complete, self-consistent, and meaningful unconscious knowledge remains beyond these limits. Although I cannot consciously know it (even after years and years of analysis), maybe there still is a unique governing truth of my being. Perhaps my own unconscious is the subject supposed to know. Perhaps “God is unconscious” means my unconscious is God (or God-like) as the hidden omniscient and omnipotent power that makes me who I am and fatefully pulls the strings of my life history.

The preceding motivates and leads to Lacan’s second reason as to why even the analysand’s unconscious cannot qualify as measuring up to the role outlined by the position of *le sujet supposé savoir*. The first reason, as just explained, is that conscious efforts cannot ever make all of the unconscious known to (self-)consciousness. The second reason is, so to speak, that there is no “all” (*pas tout*) of unconscious knowledge to be known, not even in principle.

The unconscious is not its own subject supposed to know. It is not a Whole aware and in command of itself. No one is in charge of you, not even your unconscious. While the unconscious involves knowledges, it is not a synthesized and synthesizing

knower. There is no divine homunculus in heaven, on earth, or between your ears. Not only does the analyst not hold a secret set of keys to your unconscious—your unconscious has no such keys either. And, it does not even have corresponding locks to these non-existent keys, since there is no one-of-a-kind treasure chest of mysteries waiting to be unlocked. Just as God does not believe in God, so too should you not believe in your supposed (unconscious) self. There is nothing there worthy of faith or veneration.

This second reason, having to do with the not-all-ness of unconscious knowledge, is emphasized by Lacan at the same moment in *Seminar XXI* when he denies that God believes in God. After equating this denial with an affirmation of the existence of the unconscious, he proceeds to claim that, “The knowledge of the unconscious is totally the opposite of instinct,” “*Le savoir de l’inconscient est tout le contraire de l’instinct*” (Lacan 1973–1974, session of May 21, 1974). Lacan immediately clarifies that by “instinct” he intends to evoke the vision of a natural harmony (ibid.). Instinct would be, for him, knowledge in the Real as a materially innate *savoir-faire* provided by nature and guaranteeing synchronization between organism and environment. Indeed, a few months earlier during the twenty-first seminar, Lacan describes the instinctual as “a supposed natural knowledge,” “*un savoir supposé naturel*” (ibid., session of February 19, 1974).

This description of the instinctual, through its resonance with *le sujet supposé savoir*, signals that the concept of instinct brings with it an idea of a Nature-with-a-capital-N, an all-knowing and benevolent creator. This Nature as unbarred big Other obviously is a mere substitute for God, just another permutation of the subject supposed to know. It is the expression of the unprocessed theism persisting within speciously secular or atheistic naturalisms. Self-styled scientific atheists, including ones who are members of the analytic community, are non-dupes who err.

Hence, falsely naturalizing the Freudian unconscious along these lines, wrongly identifying it with (repressed) instincts (rather than drives, *Triebe*), brings about an illusory deification of it as an incarnation of a fantasized God-like Nature, *un Dieu comme ça* (a God as id). Authentic analytic atheism entails, among other things, that the unconscious itself cannot be made into another deity or divine avatar through appeals to a still-theistic version of the category of the natural. “God is unconscious” means that there is no God, no unbarred big Other, as a locus of self-transparent omniscience—not even in/as the unconscious itself imagined as a profound nature or knowledge exceeding any and all consciousness.

Likewise, if the satisfactory conclusion of an analysis involves the dissolution of transference as, for Lacan, the fall of the subject supposed to know, then the analysand comes to settle for “some unconscious” (*à la* “*Y a d’inconscient*”). He/she accepts what there is of bits and pieces of unconsciousness as revealed by and within the inconsistencies and tensions of analyzed consciousness. This acceptance of these still-valuable scraps puts an end to awaiting a final Revelation-to-end-all-revelations from The Unconscious as an expected ultimate exclamation point or punchline bringing to a neat close the labor of the analytic process. The analysand ceases anticipating such a last judgment from his/her unconscious as well as from the analyst as its presumed anointed representative. He/she somehow comes to appreciate that there is no transcendent, ineffable Other of the immanent, effable Other, no deep Truth underlying and uniting the tangled knots of unconscious truths that do surface. There is no other shoe yet to drop.

This theme of the interrelated self-opacities of both God and the unconscious arguably traces back to an earlier period of Lacan’s teaching. I am thinking particularly of a comment Lacan makes in *Seminar III (The Psychoses [1955–1956])*. He remarks there, “Our own atheism is [...] linked to this always elusive

aspect of the *I* of the other [ce côté toujours se déroband du *je* de l'autre]" (Lacan 1993a, p. 288; 1981, p. 324). Considering this context and period of Lacan's teaching, "this always elusive aspect of the *I* of the other" should be interpreted as designating neither the Imaginary little-o-other *qua* inter-subjective alter-ego nor the Symbolic big Other *qua* trans-subjective socio-linguistic order. Instead, it designates Real Otherness, namely, the impenetrable opacity of alterity inaccessible not only to the subject relating to this Other, but also to this Other itself.⁶ The atheistic upshot of such alterity Lacan has in mind in the third seminar is the same as with his later "God does not believe in God": The Other, whether as God, parent, analyst, one's own unconscious, or whoever and whatever else, is not a subject of absolute (self-)knowledge, but is, rather, irreflexive, blind, and enigmatic to itself.

Just a few years after *Seminar III*, in the seventh seminar, "this always elusive aspect of the *I* of the other" becomes the Real Otherness of the Freudian *Nebenmensch als Ding*, neighbor as Thing, *das Ding* (see Freud 2001a, pp. 318, 331; Lacan 1992, pp. 19–84). In François Balmès's view, Lacan's Christian-atheistic God is a version of this Thing (Balmès 2007, p. 184). Balmès muses that, "One could [...] say that *das Ding* is a divine name in the times of the death of God" (*ibid.*, p. 185).

But, one has to be careful apropos Balmès's suggestion here. Linking God with the Thing risks implying that Lacan somehow or other reduces Christianity to the dark, threatening deity of the Old Testament and/or to a repressed matriarchal basis (given the equation of *das Ding* with the mother as Real Other in *Seminar VII*). So as to avoid this risk, one must appreciate that any connection between the Christian God and the

⁶ See Lacan 1993a, p. 53; 1994, pp. 168–69; 2017, pp. 472–73; 2013c, pp. 365–69; 1964–1965 (session of May 19, 1965); 2006a, pp. 224–25; 2006b, pp. 689–90. See also Johnston 2013b; 2017, pp. 164–65, 174–76.

Freudian Thing would signify again that *Dieu est inconscient*. Put differently, even the New Testament God is the name for a barred, irreflexive, and de-divinized lack. Nonetheless, this void interpellates those “left behind,” namely, persons who unite together around this absence (i.e., the Holy Spirit as a this-worldly human community).

Seemingly despite all of the preceding, Lacan (in)famously declares in “The Triumph of Religion” that, “The true religion is the Roman one [...]. There is *one* true religion and that is the Christian religion” (Lacan 2013a, p. 66). As Lorenzo Chiesa and Alberto Toscano observe, this can be taken to say that Christianity is the “least false” of all religions (Chiesa and Toscano 2007, p. 118). By way of friendly supplement, I would add to this that, insofar as Lacan explicitly situates himself in a post-Hegelian atheism-in-Christianity current, Christianity’s “truth” resides in what it self-subvertingly reveals unknowingly and inadvertently. On this reading, what makes Christianity truer than other religions is that it stands on the threshold of bringing about an immanent sublation of all religiosity/theism. As Jean-Daniel Causse correctly notes, Lacan’s identification of Christianity as “the one true religion” is not to be taken as praise of it (Causse 2018, pp. 199–201).

Indeed, *Seminar XX (Encore [1972–1973])* provides strong evidence that Lacan’s acknowledgment of Christianity’s truth is a backhanded compliment. Therein, Lacan considers this acknowledgement to be bad news for Christianity *qua* religion—“That it is the true religion [la vraie religion], as it claims [comme il prétend], is not an excessive claim [prétention], all the more so in that, when the true [le vrai] is examined closely, it’s the worst [pire] that can be said about it” (Lacan 1998, p. 107; 1975, p. 98). Later during the same seminar session (May 8, 1973), he adds, “Christians—well, it’s the same with psychoanalysts—abhor [ont horreur] what was revealed to them. And they are right” (Lacan 1998, p. 114; 1975, p. 103).

What is this abhorrent truth? What is this repulsive, scandalous “x” revealed to both Christians and psychoanalysts? I believe that a hint is to be found in Lacan’s 1963 *écrit* “Kant with Sade” when he states, “Christianity has assuredly taught men to pay little attention to God’s *jouissance*” (Lacan 2006c, p. 651). The horrifying worst that both Christianity and psychoanalysis brush up against has something to do with *jouissance*. But what, exactly, is this divine enjoyment? And, what does it have to do with the ostensible truth of Christianity as well as the radical atheism of psychoanalysis?

§3 *No Gods, No Fathers: From a Feuerbachian Freud to a Marxian Lacan*

Freud’s reflections on religion can readily be situated in the same Feuerbachian lineage within which Lacan places himself (De Kesel 2005, pp. 126–27). Simply put, just as Feuerbach reduces theology to anthropology, so too does Freud reduce the God of Judeo-Christian monotheism to the father of the Oedipus complex. Both thinkers bring Heaven down to earth by making the latter the truth of the former.

But, as Karl Marx’s fourth thesis on Feuerbach maintains, “once the earthly family is discovered to be the secret of the holy family, the former must then itself be destroyed in theory and in practice” (Marx 1998, p. 570). Although Lacan situates himself in the Christian-atheist current of a proto-Feuerbachian Hegel, Lacan’s actual position is closer to that of Marx. What holds for Marx *vis-à-vis* Feuerbach’s atheism holds for Lacan *vis-à-vis* Freud’s atheism too. To be more precise, Lacan comes to see Freud as analyzing the monotheistic God into the Oedipal father without, in turn, going through to the end with a critical analysis of the latter. Like Marx’s Feuerbach, Lacan’s Freud leaves too much to “the earthly family” he uncovers as secretly underlying “the holy family.”

Of course, the move of tethering the divinity of Judeo-Christian monotheism to the paternal figure of the Oedipal family drama is absolutely central to Freud's entire atheistic analytic assessment of religion.⁷ And Lacan, in for instance *Seminar XII*, indeed credits this Freud with further radicalizing atheism (Lacan 1964–1965, session of March 3, 1965). Interestingly, Balmès and Jacques-Alain Miller present diverging renditions of Lacan's stance with respect to this Freud. On Balmès's construal, Lacan seeks to invert Freud's analysis of God into father, instead explaining the paternal function as determined by a theological socio-symbolic constellation; God explains father, rather than *vice versa* (Balmès 1997, p. 35). By contrast, Miller's reconstruction has Lacan dissatisfied with Freud failing to dissipate fantasies about fathers after so thoroughly dissipating fantasies about gods (Miller 2004, pp. 27–28, 34–35). Evidence from the twelfth seminar and elsewhere favors Miller on this point.

In “The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire in the Freudian Unconscious” (1960), Lacan himself pointedly cautions that, “We would be mistaken if we thought that the Freudian Oedipus myth puts an end to theology” (Lacan 2006b, p. 688). If there is something religious (i.e., mythical and/or theological) about Freud's Oedipus complex (Causse 2018, pp. 240–41), then the apparent atheism of his grounding of the religious in the familial is merely apparent. But, in what way(s) is the Oedipal *à la* Freud still bound up with religiosity?

The four sessions of *Seminar XVII (The Other Side of Psychoanalysis* [1969–1970]) grouped together by Miller under the fitting title “Beyond the Oedipus Complex” contain Lacan's most developed explanations of the mythical/theological residues clinging to Freud's reflections on the family. Therein, Lacan identifies the Oedipus complex as “Freud's dream” (Lacan

⁷ See Lacan 1986a, pp. 172, 174; Lacan 2013b, pp. 22–23; Askofaré 2006, p. 27.

2007, pp. 117, 137). As he notes in good analytic fashion, “Like any dream it needs to be interpreted.”⁸

Lacan similarly depicts Freud’s Oedipus as a “myth” (Lacan 1993a, pp. 214–15). During this same stretch of the seventeenth seminar, he comments, “One can bullshit [déconner] a lot over myths, because it is precisely the field of bullshitting. And bullshitting, as I have always said, is truth [la vérité]. They are identical” (Lacan 2007, p. 111; 1991, p. 127). Perhaps the fiction in Lacan’s “the truth has the structure of fiction” can be bullshit (*déconnage*) too. More precisely, and as also a “dream,” the Freudian Oedipus complex offers a manifest text (with its myths, fictions, and bullshit) that, when interpreted properly, discloses latent thoughts as this dream’s truths (Grigg 2006, p. 57). Or, in phrasing borrowed from Marx, this complex of Freud’s wraps a “rational kernel” within a “mystical shell.” For Lacan, the mystical shell of Oedipus is anything but atheistic. Yet, Oedipus’s rational kernel, which it shares with Judeo-Christian monotheism, allows for an immanent critique of both the Oedipal as per Freud and the monotheistic. There is something in both the Oedipus complex and monotheism more than these formations themselves, an extimate “x” that can explode these formations from within their own confines. But, what is this “x” according to Lacan?

At the end of the February 18, 1970 seminar session, Lacan begins answering this question. His remarks on this occasion deserve quoting at length:

[T]his recourse to the myth of Oedipus is really quite sensational. It is worth making the effort to elaborate this. And I was thinking of getting you today to appreciate what is outrageous in the fact that Freud, for example, in the last of the *New Introductory Lectures on*

⁸ Ibid., p. 137. See Grigg 2006, p. 51.

⁹ Lacan 1961–1962 (session of December 20, 1961). See also Lacan 2006a, p. 190; 2006d, p. 4; 2006e, p. 11; 2006f, p. 376; 2006g, p. 625.

Psychoanalysis, should think he had cut the question of the rejection of religion off from any acceptable horizon, should think that psychoanalysis has played a decisive role in this, and should believe that it was the end of the matter when he has told us that the support of religion is nothing other than this father whom the child has recourse to in its childhood, and who he knows is all loving [il est tout amour], that he anticipates, forestalls what may manifest itself within him as malaise. (Lacan 2007, p. 100; 1991, p. 114)

Lacan continues:

Isn't this an odd thing when one knows how things in fact are with the father's function? To be sure, this is not the only point at which Freud presents us with a paradox, namely, the idea of referring this function to some kind of *jouissance* of all the women [quelle jouissance originelle de toutes les femmes], when it is a well-known fact that a father barely suffices for one of them, and even then—he mustn't boast about it. A father has, with the master—I speak of the master as we know him, as he functions—only the most distant of relationships since, in short, at least in the society Freud was familiar with, it is he who works for everybody. He has responsibility for the “famil” [...]. Isn't that sufficiently strange to suggest to us that after all what Freud retains in fact, if not in intention, is very precisely what he designates as being the most essential in religion, namely, the idea of an all-loving father [un père tout-amour]? [...] [T]he father is love, the first thing to be loved in this world is the father. Strange vestige [survivance]. Freud believes this will make religion evaporate, whereas it is really the very substance of it that he preserves with this strangely composed myth of the father. (Lacan 2007, pp. 100–101; 1991, p. 114)

He then proceeds to reflect on the Freudian father of *Totem and Taboo* (i.e., the *Urvater* of the primal horde):

[I]t all ends with the idea of the murder, namely that the original father is the one whom the sons have killed, after which it is through the love of this dead father that a certain order unfolds. In all its

enormous contradictions, in its baroque and its superfluosity, doesn't this seem to be nothing but a defense against these truths [vérités] that the abundance of all these myths clearly spells out, well before Freud diminishes these truths in opting for the myth of Oedipus? What is there to conceal? That, as soon as the father enters the field of the master's discourse where we are in the process of orientating ourselves, he is, from the origins, castrated. (Lacan 2007, p. 101; 1991, pp. 114–15)

In the following two sessions of *Seminar XVII* (March 11 and March 18, 1970), Lacan reiterates these points. He again stresses the fictive character of the primal father of *Totem and Taboo* (“not the slightest trace has ever been seen of the father of the human horde”).¹⁰ He reemphasizes that “he who enjoys all the women is inconceivable to imagine,” with fathers, as speaking beings, being symbolically castrated *qua* cut off from any presumed full, absolute *jouissance* (Lacan 2007, p. 124).

All of this calls for some careful unpacking. To begin with, Lacan appeals to certain common-sensical intuitions. For him, if one bothers even to glance for a moment at flesh-and-blood fathers, what one sees is anything but the Freudian *Urvater*: “We have seen orangutans,” but not a human version of this sort of alpha male (*ibid.*, pp. 112–13). Empirical embodiments of the paternal function are miserable schmucks just like all other speaking beings, rather than ferociously potent monopolizers of a total and complete Enjoyment-with-a-capital-E. Each father barely knows what to do with one woman, let alone, like the fantasmatic primal father, all women (“a father barely suffices for one of them”). At least in recent memory, the ostensible *pater familias* is anything but an omnipotent lord—as Lacan declares already in 1938, modernity has come to be marked by the “social decline of the paternal *imago*” (2001b, pp. 60–61). If anything, the modern father is everyone else's servant, frenetically dancing attendance on family

¹⁰ Lacan 2007, p. 113. See also 1994, pp. 210–11; 2018, p. 25.

members as well as bosses, clients, etc. (“it is he who works for everybody”). In an inversion that the Hegel of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* would appreciate, the supposed paternal master is, in reality, a slave (Hegel 1977, pp. 111–19), with Lacan, as regards the master’s discourse, also repeatedly referring to this same Hegel (Lacan 2007, pp. 20–22, 30, 79, 89, 170–71).

In the above-quoted material from the sessions of the seventeenth seminar assembled by Miller under the heading “Beyond the Oedipus Complex,” Lacan invokes “the discourse of the master” as per his theory of the four discourses (those of master, university, hysteric, and analyst) central to *Seminar XVII*. The “master” of the master’s discourse is anything but the all-powerful paternal figure of Freud’s myth of the primal horde. As Lacan says in the preceding, “as soon as the father enters the field of the master’s discourse [...] he is, from the origins, castrated.” How so? What precisely does this mean?

The later Lacan of the early 1970s defines a “discourse” (*discours*) in his sense as a “social link” (*lien social*) between speaking beings (*parlêtres*).¹¹ That is to say, a Lacanian discourse is a specific socio-symbolic structure configuring the positions of subjects caught up in its matrices of mediation. And, the discourse of the master is the “elementary cell” of all the discourses. This is because, for Lacan, the master’s discourse represents the initial, zero-level position of any and every subject as a speaking being. The other discourses (of the university, hysteric, and analyst) are subsequent permutations of this first form of socio-symbolic bond.¹² The discourse of the master is the initial result of the symbolic castration that brings the *parlêtre* as such into existence (Lacan 2007, p. 89).

¹¹ Lacan 2007, p. 152; 2018, pp. 30, 52, 62, 131–32, 160; 1998, pp. 17, 30, 54; 1973–1974 (sessions of December 11, 1973, January 15, 1974, April 9, 1974, and May 21, 1974). See Johnston 2014, p. 68.

¹² Lacan 2007, pp. 20, 69, 102–103, 148–49, 152; 2006h, p. 9; 2001c, pp. 435–36. See also Fink 1998, p. 31; Žižek 1998, p. 75; 1999, p. 28; 2004, p. 133; Johnston 2008, pp. 251–68.

Thus, when Lacan says, “as soon as the father enters the field of the master’s discourse [...] he is, from the origins, castrated,” he is saying that the paternal figure, as a speaking being subjected to language and everything bound up with it, is symbolically castrated like all subjects. He is no exception to this castration. Hence, he too has no access to any purported complete, undiluted *jouissance*, whether of “all women” or of anything else (Verhaeghe 2006, pp. 42–43, 46). Freud’s *Urvater* is pure fantasy. This absence of limitless enjoyment is what the “myth of Oedipus [...] is there to conceal.”

Apropos the fiction of the primal horde in *Totem and Taboo*, Lacan, in *Seminar XVII*, also draws attention to the murder of the primal father by the band of brothers. In Freud’s story, the *Urvater*, the enjoyer of *toutes les femmes*, ends up dead. Deploying a Lévi-Straussian structuralist approach to this story as a myth, Lacan reads the diachronic sequence in which the primal father goes from domineering *jouisseur* to vanquished corpse as indicative of a synchronic identity between unlimited enjoyment and death (Lacan 2007, p. 123). For him, the dead father signifies “the Law” bringing about desire (*désir*) through marking the prohibition/impossibility of absolute *jouissance* (Lacan 2006i, p. 464; 1990, p. 89).

As Lacan observes, “no one knows, no living being in any case, what death is [...]. [D]eath is properly speaking unknowable [inconnaisable].” (Lacan 2007, p. 123; 1991, p. 142) Therefore, *Totem and Taboo*, interpreted as a myth *à la* Lévi-Strauss, indicates that full *jouissance* too is “unknowable” for human beings (Verhaeghe 2006, pp. 40–41). This indeed is the conclusion Lacan reaches:

The fact that the dead father is *jouissance* presents itself to us as the sign of the impossible itself. And in this way we rediscover here the terms that are those I define as fixing the category of the real, insofar as, in what I articulate, it is radically distinguished from the symbolic and the imaginary—the real is the impossible. Not in the

name of a simple obstacle we hit our heads up against, but in the name of the logical obstacle of what, in the symbolic, declares itself to be impossible. This is where the real emerges from [C'est de là que le réel surgit]. (Lacan 2007, p. 123; 1991, p. 143)

For Lacan, the myth of the primal horde with its *Urvater* is the true version of Freud's Sophocles-inspired Oedipus complex (Lacan 2006h, pp. 68–69; Johnston 2005, pp. xix–xxiv, 283). Its core truth is that, as Lacan puts it (in the seventeenth seminar and elsewhere) in a twist on a famous line from Fyodor Dostoyevsky, “If God is dead, then nothing is permitted”¹³ (with this Lacanian line being, in part, a paraphrase of Freud's comment in *Totem and Taboo* that, “The dead father became stronger than the living one had been [...]. What had up to then been prevented by his actual existence was thenceforward prohibited by the sons themselves” [Freud 2001b, p. 143]). Specifically, the murdered *Urvater* as a dead God—for Freud, the primal father is the prototype of the divine father (ibid., pp. 147–49, 154)—signifies that no flawlessly total *jouissance* is possible and attainable.¹⁴ As Lacan states in the just-quoted passage, such enjoyment is Real *qua* impossible.

The Lacan of the seventeenth seminar contends that “the dead father” of non-existent *jouissance* (i.e., the Freudian *Urvater* as the prototype of all gods) is a mythical manifestation of an impossible Real immanent to the Symbolic (Lacan 2013c, pp. 405–406). The Real of inaccessible enjoyment “emerges” (*surgit*) out of, is secreted by, a register within which this enjoyment is nullified by signifier-inflicted castration. So long as there is symbolic castration, humanity will remain haunted by the

¹³ Lacan 2006j, pp. 106–107; 2017, p. 470; 2007, pp. 119–20; 1986a, p. 173; 2013b, p. 25; Miller 2004, p. 36; Balmès 1997, p. 94; Johnston 2005, p. 286; 2014, pp. 219–20.

¹⁴ Lacan 1992, pp. 176–77; 2006a, p. 151; Johnston 2005, pp. xxvii–xxxviii, 333–41.

fantasmatic specter of something along the lines of the primal father (whether as *Urvater*, God, the at-least-one [*au-moins-un*] of the *hommoin-sun/hommoin-zin* who is magically exempt from *jouissance*-barring symbolic castration,¹⁵ etc.).

Also in the same set of sessions of *Seminar XVII*, Lacan draws attention to two oddities featuring in Freud's reductions of the God of religions to the father of both the primal horde and the Oedipus complex. What makes these two features so odd is that they fly in the face of various other aspects of the Freudian framework; they involve Freud coming into conflict with some of his own commitments. The first of these is Freud's insistence on the historical, factual reality of the tall tale of the primal horde and its killing of the *Urvater*. Lacan remarks of Freud that, "he clings strongly to what actually happened, this blessed story of the murder of the father of the horde, this Darwinian buffoonery" (Lacan 2007, p. 112), and that, "Freud holds that this was real. He clings to it. He wrote the entire *Totem and Taboo* in order to say it—it necessarily happened, and it's where everything began" (ibid., p. 113).

Indeed, Freud spends the final paragraphs of *Totem and Taboo* weighing whether or not to treat the narrative of the murder of the primal father as a "wishful *phantasy*," "*Wunschphantasie*" (Freud 2001b, pp. 159–60; 1940, p. 192). Starting with Freud's September 21, 1897, letter to Wilhelm Fliess, he maintains that repressed fantasies can be just as causally efficacious in the psyche as experienced events impressed upon the mind by "the real world" (Freud 2001c, pp. 259–60). In other words, for Freud, psychical reality can be as significant and influential as external reality.

In the concluding moments of *Totem and Taboo*, Freud revisits these considerations about fantasy (Freud 2001b, pp. 159–61). Their relevance for the question of whether the murder of the

¹⁵ Lacan 2006h, pp. 141–61; 2011, p. 46; 1971–1972 (session of June 1, 1972); 2018, pp. 34–35, 179–80; 2001d, p. 479; 1993b, p. 15.

primal father was an actual historical occurrence or a fantasmatic construction projected back into pre-history is made even more appropriate by Freud's long-standing Haeckelian tendency to draw parallels between phylogeny and ontogeny. This tendency leads Freud on a number of occasions to equate "primitives" and neurotics (Freud 2001d, p. 406; 2001e, pp. 247, 249; 2001f, pp. 262–63). Hence, if neurotics can be traumatized by repressed fantasies acting as if they were episodic memories, why not hypothesize that the same holds for the proximate descendants of the primal horde? Considering that the scene of the killing of the *Urvater* is a highly speculative anthropological hypothesis on Freud's part, why not favor viewing this scene as a causally efficacious fantasy?

But Freud abruptly brings *Totem and Taboo* to a close with an adamant insistence on the extra-psychical reality of the primal father's murder by the band of brothers. In this instance, he pointedly rejects his own habit of establishing equivalences between "primitives" and neurotics. Although the latter might be affected as much or more by thinking (as intending, fantasizing, etc.) apart from acting, "primitive men actually *did* what all the evidence shows they intended to do" (Freud 2001b, p. 161; note Freud's italicization of "*did*"). The last line of *Totem and Taboo* is a quotation from Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *Faust*: "in the beginning was the Deed," "*Im Anfang war die Tat*" (ibid., p. 161; 1940, p. 194). In a metapsychological paper dealing with phylogenetic matters not discovered until 1983, Freud reaffirms that this "triumph over the father [...] was realized" (Freud 1987, p. 20). That is to say, the deed of killing the *Urvater* really did transpire as a matter of cold, hard historical fact. Lacan thinks Freud doth protest too much here—and does so even against his own theoretical insights apropos the distinction between psychical and external realities.

As seen, in *Seminar XVII*, Lacan also underscores Freud's striking insistence that the father who lies at the basis of monotheistic religions is full of nothing but love. By Lacan's lights,

this is a “strange vestige [survivance].” More precisely, this is a *survivance* within Freud of theism. Reducing God to the paternal figure is anything but irreligious if this figure himself still is deified as “an all-loving father [un père tout-amour].” Hence, Lacan judges the Freudian mythical father as a far-from-atheistic construct. What adds to the strangeness of this vestige of religiosity in Freud is that much of the rest of what he has to say about fathers in his corpus paints a picture of them as hardly pure love. The relationship to the paternal figure of the Oedipus complex often involves aggression, envy, fear, hatred, jealousy, rivalry, and the like. Strong currents of negative affects pervade the rapport with the Oedipal father. This makes Freud’s equation of father with love in his treatments of religion all the odder.

A few years later, Lacan presses home his critique of Freud as preserving rather than destroying monotheism. In the twentieth seminar, he claims:

Freud saves the Father once again. In that respect he imitates Jesus Christ. Modestly, no doubt, since he doesn’t pull out all the stops. But he contributes thereto, playing his little part as a good Jew who was not entirely up-to-date. (Lacan 1998, pp. 108–109)

Not only does Freud prop up the father figure on the eve of “the social decline of the paternal *imago*” — in so doing, he ends up implicitly placing himself in the same position as Christ. This remains a long way from atheism indeed.

§4 *Will We Ever Be Atheists? Determinate and Absolute Negations of Christianity*

Freud’s myth of the *Urvater*, this exceptional *tout jouisseur*, saves fathers by occluding their unexceptional castration (Causse 2018, p. 248). As Miller, following Lacan, observes, both Christianity and Freud confront but recoil from the paternal figure’s lack of potency and his embodiment of the impossibility of (full)

jouissance (Miller 2004, p. 37). Hence, Lacanian atheism entails affirming the non-existence not only of the subject supposed to know, but also of the subject supposed to enjoy, or, to combine these two, the subject supposed to know how to enjoy (Johnston 2005, pp. 283, 337). This non-existence is the abhorrent truth at the core of both Christianity and psychoanalysis.

Again, Freud, like Feuerbach, demythologizes the holy family by grounding it in the earthly family without demythologizing the latter in turn. Like Marx *vis-à-vis* Feuerbach, Lacan *vis-à-vis* Freud takes this further step of critically analyzing the earthly family itself. Moreover, whereas Feuerbach's God is a projection of humanity's strengths and virtues, Lacanianism diagnoses this projection as defensively masking the opposite, namely, humanity's weaknesses and vices. Whether as the primal father or the divinities of monotheisms, this figure is an Other-Subject whose omniscience and omnipotence are the representative reversals, the symptomatic inversions, of human beings' ignorance and feebleness.

Additionally, as some of Slavoj Žižek's remarks indicate, Feuerbach merely transfers the status of subject supposed to know and/or enjoy from a supernatural heavenly God to a natural earthly human species (*Gattung*). For Feuerbach's not-truly-atheistic "atheism," the big Other really does exist, albeit as the praiseworthy features of this-worldly humanity's *Gattungswesen* (species-being) rather than as an otherworldly deity (Žižek 2003, p. 171; 2019). By contrast, for Lacan's genuinely consequent atheism, *le grand Autre n'existe pas*, not as God, humanity, father, or anything and anyone else.

Truth be told, *Totem and Taboo's* myth of the primal horde is a much less atheistic scenario than that of the Christian crucifixion. In the latter, the transcendence of God-the-Father vanishes (if only apparently and momentarily), with God incarnated as Christ-the-Son losing faith and dying on the cross (Chesteron 1995, p. 145). François Regnault, in his 1985 study *Dieu est inconscient*, emphasizes the Christian God's status as "jealous,

not-all, incarnated, etc.” (1985, p. 43). By contrast, Freud’s primal father is virtually omnipotent, all-enjoying, uninhibited, and mythically dream-like.

As G. K. Chesterton remarks, “Christianity is the only religion on earth that has felt that omnipotence made God incomplete” (Chesterton 1995, p. 145). Perhaps Ernst Bloch is justified in proposing that the immanent critique of religion via Christian atheism is more potent and effective than its external critique through plain old garden-variety atheism (Bloch 1971, p. 233). The evidence examined by me thus far seems to suggest that Lacan might agree with this fellow post-Hegelian.

Yet, I wish to close with a series of questions for the entire (post-)Hegelian atheism-in-Christianity tradition: Does a (self-)barred Christianity, as an atheistic theism, eventually make possible an atheism freed from having to continue kneeling before its religious progenitor? Can *Christian* atheism, as the atheism in Christianity, become *Christian atheism* as an atheism beyond or after Christianity? Is atheism condemned to remaining eternally, in Hegelian terms, a determinate negation of Christianity—and, hence, permanently dependent upon what it negates? Can one move from sublating religion to finally outright negating it? Is Judeo-Christian monotheism the disposable ladder of a thoroughly historical possibility condition for atheism? Or, is it an indispensable logical necessity for making possible all future atheisms?

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