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The European Journal of Psychoanalysis

May 28, 2024

<https://www.journal-psychoanalysis.eu/articles/sigmund-freud-and-the-case-of-moses-man/>

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Sigmund Freud and the Case of Moses Man: On the Knowledge of Trauma and the Trauma of Knowledge

Summary:

Freud's last major work, on Moses and monotheism, can be read as his ultimate case-study, in which the clinical focus is on the case of "Man" and the problem of becoming human. Humanity is characterized by the indelible stamp of mental trauma, which cannot be dissociated from the acquisition of language. Of the three components of trauma that Freud distinguishes, the "archaic heritage", also designated as "original knowledge", is the most important one, because it epitomizes the material reality of the unconscious, transmitted from one generation to another via the trans-subjective, symbolic structure of language. This "original knowledge" becomes traumatizing in confrontation with the experienced inadequacy of every attempt at owning it. The implications of this perspective for psychoanalytic practice are vast: instead of interpreting the material reality of the unconscious, the analyst needs to produce an intrinsically fraught construction, which has no other basis in reality than a set of logical connections between historical circumstances and current events.

Few works by Freud have managed to attract such a diversified range of scholarly attention as *Moses and Monotheism* (Freud, 1939a[1937-39]). Hebraic historians, Biblical scholars, theologians, anthropologists, cultural theorists, political commentators and philosophers have all periodically unravelled the intricate fabric of Freud's last major achievement, in many cases with a view to exposing some of the fundamental flaws in its controversial argument, yet occasionally also in order to emphasize its lasting significance for the psychoanalytic study of myth and religion (Paul, 1996; Bernstein, 1998; Santner, 2001), the development of a radical identity politics (Said, 2003) and the psycho-biographical and psycho-historical investigation of Freud's ambivalent relationship with his own Jewishness (Yerushalmi, 1991; Grübrich-Simitis, 1994). Whether outright dismissive, mildly sceptical or unequivocally favourable, critics of *Moses and Monotheism* have thereby invariably drawn attention to the difficult circumstances under which the book was written, conditions which Freud himself employed intermittently as an explanation and excuse for its unusual structure and delayed publication: the rising tide of anti-Semitism in Germany and Austria, the ailing body of a cancer-stricken old man, the traumatic losses associated with forced exile, the progressive estrangement from determining professional and situational variables. This dynamic relationship between the contents and structure of Freud's book on the one hand and the personal and social conditions of its composition on the other—a historical contextualisation which few Freud texts have received—has simultaneously operated as a sufficient reason for pardoning the repetitive nature of Freud's assertions (Jones, 1957, p. 362; Strachey, 1964), aggrandising their shocking and potentially disastrous implications (Ellenberger, 1970, p. 862), and applauding the extreme courage of Jewish genius in the wake of personal predicament and political adversity (NN, 1939). By virtue of its inter-textuality and despite its recurrent historicist motifs, Freud's *Moses* has also enthralled leading figures in French post-modernist philosophy, who have highlighted its importance for

the writing of history, the conceptualisation of suffering and the preservation of experience. As Ruth Leys has put it: “[I]n the work of Lyotard, Lacoue-Labarthe, Nancy, Derrida, and others the book [Moses and Monotheism] has recently become a privileged site of investigation into the problematic of trauma, memory, and history so central to discussions of the Holocaust and the postmodern condition” (Leys, 2000, p. 276). In this avalanche of scholarly production at least one type of commentary has been remarkably scarce. Indeed, one will have noticed that my enumeration of the various disciplinary professions that have zoomed in on Moses and Monotheism did not include the psychoanalyst. This is not to say that none of the prominent “Moses-scholars” are psychoanalysts-indeed, many of them are-but rather that the contents of Freud’s book has largely precluded sustained clinical psychoanalytic discussion, even amongst those commentators who are practicing psychoanalysts. The reason for this absence seems so obvious that it should not elicit surprise or disappointment: Freud’s Moses is a psychoanalytic contribution to the study of the origin and function of religion, with particular reference to Jewish monotheism, which has no direct bearings on clinical psychoanalytic practice. Viewed from this angle, Moses and Monotheism is an example of psychoanalysis applied to social institutions, much like Totem and Taboo (Freud, 1912-13a) and “The Future of an Illusion” (Freud, 1927c).

I do not wish to dispute, here, the value of this outlook, nor do I intend to involve myself in the debate concerning the validity of Freud’s methodology and the accuracy of its results. Although I find Freud’s claim that Moses was an Egyptian quite persuasive on intellectual grounds, I lack the expertise to investigate its textual and historical adequacy. This is even more the case for Freud’s Sellinian contention, based on a set of clues discovered in the book of Hosea, that Moses died in the wilderness at the hands of his own people (Sellin, 1922). Although I can see why Freud wanted to embrace Sellin’s hypothesis, my knowledge of Hebrew and Biblical exegesis is too poor for me to assess whether it is justified. Instead, I want to nuance the commonly accepted idea that Moses and Monotheism is Freud’s last great work of applied psychoanalysis by trying to open another perspective on the contents of the book, which might help situate its importance for clinical psychoanalytic practice. In brief, I wish to defend the thesis that Moses and Monotheism deserves to be read alongside Freud’s five major case-studies (Dora, Little Hans, the Rat Man, Schreber, the Wolf Man) and thus constitutes an important clinical and technical source for the direction of the psychoanalytic treatment. If I were to formulate this thesis more provocatively, I would actually propose that Moses and Monotheism is the mother of all of Freud’s case-studies, the one that not only explains but also addresses psychoanalytically what Dora, Little Hans, the Rat Man, Schreber and the Wolf Man have in common. As such, Moses and Monotheism would be the case of all cases, the common thread of hysteria, phobia, obsessional neurosis and paranoia, the one ring to rule them all . . . In his Seminar XVII, *L’ envers de la psychanalyse*, Lacan launched the deceptively simple question “How, why did Freud need Moses?” (Lacan, 1991[1969-70], p. 160). In his recently published “Religion, Psychoanalysis”, Jacques-Alain Miller answers by saying: “Freud needed a great man to make monotheistic religion rational. He needed a great man to make the primacy of One God rational . . . For the sovereignty of the signifier “one”” (Miller, 2004, p. 11). I am not sure whether I completely understand Miller’s point, here, but I tend to agree that Moses serves the purpose of rationalising the emergence of a “one-ness”, which does not so much constitute a point of departure but rather a site of convergence, a locus of self-sameness and conformity, a place which unites and unifies.

Claiming that Moses and Monotheism is the ultimate Freudian case-study may appear as utterly bizarre, if not to say quite perverse. It seems hardly possible to let Moses (the Water Man) occupy a position similar to that of the Rat Man and the Wolf Man, not because “the man Moses” does not have any “mental issues”, on the contrary, but because Freud only seems to use Moses as a springboard for developing a theory on the origin and development of monotheism. So who or what would be the focus of Freud’s case-study? Whose case is at stake? And how could this “case” possibly pervade all of Freud’s other case-studies? The riddle is that of the Sphinx and the answer is that of Oedipus: what we are dealing with in Moses and Monotheism is the case of the “human being”, of “man”, the “speaking being”. In this way, Moses and Monotheism deals with the phylogenetic and ontogenetic development of the human species, or what Freud designated as “Geschichte der Menschwerdung” (translated by Strachey as “the history of hominization”) (Freud, 1939a[1937-39], p. 75). Instead of analysing a specific “type” of human being-the hysterical, obsessional or paranoid variety-Freud concentrated much more fundamentally on the human condition as such, the dynamics of “becoming human”, which affects the natural and cultural development of the human species as

much as it governs the development of the child into adulthood, and which permeates the life of the pathological subject as much as it concerns the life of its so-called “normal” version.

From this vantage point, *Moses and Monotheism* is not really about Moses, the liberator of the Jewish people, the law-giver and the founding founder of monotheism, but indeed about “the man Moses”, that is to say about Moses as “man”, as “human being”, as someone endowed with certain qualities and characteristics that define humanity. *Moses and Monotheism* is as much about Moses as it is about any other “human being”, regardless of religion, culture, nationality, constitution, structure, sex and pathology. In this way, *Moses and Monotheism* is indeed also about the case of Freud himself, yet quite differently from *The Interpretation of Dreams* (Freud, 1900a) and *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* (Freud, 1901b), because it does not deal with formations (products, outcomes) of one man’s unconscious, but with the formation (emergence, installation) of the unconscious in man. It does not come as a surprise, then, that in the last pages of his book Freud is visited again by the haunting spectre of the collective unconscious, which he only manages to dispel by distinguishing, rather awkwardly, between contents and property: “I do not think we gain anything by introducing the concept of a ‘collective’ unconscious. The content of the unconscious, indeed, is in any case a collective, universal property of mankind” (Freud, 1939a[1937-39], p. 132). What is collective about the unconscious is not its content, which is actually highly singular, at least for Freud, but its function, as an active repository for repressed representations.

If *Moses and Monotheism* is Freud’s ultimate case-study, a psychoanalytic account of the “case of Man”, regardless of rats and wolves, then the question is “What is Man suffering from?” What kind of original, primal experience seals the fate of Man as a “clinical case”, phylogenetically as well as ontogenetically? Freud’s answer in *Moses and Monotheism* is as surprising as it is categorical: the fate of Man is sealed by trauma. At an individual level, Freud restricts himself initially to “the genesis of human neuroses” (*Genese der menschlichen Neurosen*) (*ibid.*, p. 72), yet his argument gradually develops into a generic account of *Menschwerdung*. The trauma has three characteristics: (1) it takes place in early childhood, “from the time at which a child is beginning to talk” [aus der Zeit der beginnenden Sprachfähigkeit]; (2) it is generally forgotten and only breaks through “infantile amnesia” by means of “screen memories”; (3) traumatic impressions are generally of a sexual and aggressive type, and inflict a narcissistic injury upon the ego (*ibid.*, p. 74). Although he concedes that some traumatic experiences may immediately elicit a symptomatic disturbance, Freud argues that the infantile trauma is generally followed by a period of latency, during which it lies dormant, and only triggers a pathological condition later in life, as a result of a second disruptive event. Apart from Freud’s proposed universality of trauma, the description is fairly straightforward here, or at least does not appear as unexpected and contrived. The delayed effect of a traumatic experience and the idea that, as a rule, two traumatic events are necessary for neurosis to break out, the second one re-activating “through deferred action” the force of the first, is a staple of Freudian psychoanalysis.

The same cannot be said, however, about Freud’s account of the re-emergence of trauma at a social level, for at this point he had recourse to the obsolete Lamarckian notion of a cross-generational transmission of memory-traces (and especially, of course, the traumatic memory-trace of the murder of the primal father) in the so-called “archaic heritage” (*archaische Erbschaft*) (*ibid.*, pp. 98-100). Freud’s decidedly non-scientific argument, “in the teeth of unanimous rejection on the part of responsible biologists” (Gay, 1990, p. 35), is troubling not only because it is based on a demonstrably false principle of inheritance, but also because it suggests that humanity (it is by no means clear that Freud wants to preserve his thesis for the religious kind) is intrinsically endowed, constitutionally affected, inescapably born with the experience of trauma. Freud’s “man” appears here as a fundamentally traumatized subject. And the trauma is much more primal than Rank’s “birth anxiety”, Heidegger’s *Geworfenheit*, the existentialist “ontological insecurity” or, indeed, Oedipus’ famous lament of *mè phunai* (better not being born), because it operates before and beyond the emergence of a new human being into the world, as a trans-individual remnant of an original crime. The mechanism of the dual traumatic aetiology is supplemented here with a third factor, which is much less “accidental”, much more “structural” than the other two. If a sexual-aggressive experience of early childhood, initially forgotten yet subsequently re-activated by another event during adolescence or adulthood, can be said to have been “encountered” and “acquired”, then this is not true for the trans-generational memory-traces that make up the “archaic heritage”—these traumatic traces are constitutional, hereditary, inherited, despite their being rooted in an “acquired” factor.

I have no intention to defend Freud’s Lamarckism, nor anyone else’s for that matter. There is no doubt in my

mind that Freud's postulate of the survival of memory-traces relating to the murder of the primal father (and the ensuing guilt, sublimation and repression of the drives) is as much of a "phylogenetic phantasy" as his infamous "Overview of the Transference Neurosis" (Freud, 1987[1915]), in which he famously posited that neurotic misery originates in mankind's adaptive responses to environmental changes during the Ice Age. Yet my scepticism does not mean that I believe Freud's notion of an "archaic heritage" to be completely useless, if only because there are aspects to it that withstand the critique of Lamarckism. Here is one of the arguments Freud adduces to justify the existence of an "archaic heritage" (an argument, it should be said, which he himself dismisses as insufficient): "There is, in the first place, the universality of symbolism in language. The symbolic representation of one object by another . . . is familiar to all our children and comes to them, as it were, as a matter of course. We cannot show in regard to them how they have learnt it and must admit that in many cases learning it is impossible. It is a question of an original knowledge [ursprüngliches Wissen] which adults afterwards forget . . . Here, then, we seem to have an assured instance of an archaic heritage dating from the period at which language developed [aus der Zeit der Sprachentwicklung]. But another explanation might still be attempted. It might be said that we are dealing with thought-connections between ideas-connections which had been established during the historical development of speech [der historischen Sprachentwicklung] and which have to be repeated now every time the development of speech has to be gone through in an individual" (Freud, 1939a[1937-39], p. 99). However strongly one may feel about the nonsensicality of Freud's notion of "inherited memory-traces", his point about the universality of symbolism and the historical transmission of linguistic connections in this passage is much more palatable, and may even be held to anticipate Chomsky's thesis of a "universal grammar" or Pinker's "language instinct". Yet Freud's sudden "linguistic turn", here, almost literally repeats a point he had made within the context of his psychoanalytic account of individual trauma: "Impressions from the time at which a child is beginning to talk stand out as being of particular interest" (*ibid.*, p. 74, italics added). Both the primal trauma (the allegedly inherited one) and the second trauma (the first "encountered" one) thus occur with reference to language or, more precisely, at the moment when language takes hold of the subject.

To the best of my knowledge, the only scholar who has drawn attention to this connection between trauma and language acquisition in Freud's *Moses and Monotheism* is Paul Verhaeghe, in the last chapter of *Does the Woman Exist?* (Verhaeghe, 1997, pp. 221-228). Relying extensively on Lacan's distinction between the Real, the Imaginary and the Symbolic, Verhaeghe argues that the murder of the primal father is nothing but a metaphor for the way in which language (the symbolic chain of signifiers) kills the immediacy of the thing. Hence Verhaeghe's claim that what "Freud discovered here [in *Moses and Monotheism*] was nothing less than the becoming of a subject, that is, the transition from a "biological" and "natural" being to a "cultural" and speaking human being, the transition from the Real of the complete body to the Symbolic of lack and desire" (*ibid.*, p. 227). I generally agree with this reading, yet it does not entirely solve the issue of the relationship between the secondary, "acquired" (accidental) trauma and the primary "inherited" (constitutional) one. Verhaeghe contends that language is acquired in two stages: first as a binary alternation between absence and presence (the maternal stage) and then as a regulated system of linguistic law (the paternal stage) (*ibid.*, p. 227). Apart from a rather non-Lacanian, developmental mechanism that is implied here, I find it difficult to grasp how the second stage differs from the first one. Given the fact that Verhaeghe explicitly attributes the first stage to maternal agency and the second one to paternal (phallic) intervention, I also fear that this schema may still be perceived as an exemplification of the paternalistic, patriarchal, phallogocentric ideology governing psychoanalytic accounts of subjectivity-although Verhaeghe constantly reminds his readers not to misunderstand Freud's work in this way.

Pursuing the idea that trauma, as the core problem of the "case of Man", is intricately linked to the acquisition of language, we may perhaps situate the relationship between the "inherited" and the "acquired" trauma in a different way. Freud designates the "archaic heritage" as an "original knowledge" which cannot be learnt, a series of thought-connections that are being repeated "every time the development of speech has to be gone through". It is relatively easy to recognize in these words a description of the unconscious, as an unlearned yet operative knowledge which expresses itself without the intervention of any knowing agency and which escapes the influence of any form of knowing, conscious control. In other words, what we are dealing with here, at the most primal level of trauma is the intervention of the material reality of the unconscious, the emergence of a seemingly well-rounded, yet headless body of knowledge, that is indeed transmitted from

one generation to another via the trans-subjective, symbolic structure of language. The “acquired” trauma, on the other hand, is unambiguously attributed by Freud to the time at which a child is beginning to talk, that is to say to the time of its active participation in language and its subjective engagement with speech. By contrast with the previous, headless intervention of an original knowledge, the child is not simply reproducing something that falls beyond its control, but creatively produces something that it endeavours to own. Yet whereas the unconscious is a never-failing, constantly active knowledge without a knowing agency, this embodied discourse of conscious communication is exactly the opposite: an appropriated knowledge that never succeeds in fulfilling its promise of conveying an adequate, accomplished body of thought. And it is between these two poles-I hesitate to define them as “stages”-of language acquisition that resides the original trauma which seals the fate of human suffering.

The poles may be defined alternatively as the “unknown known” (the unconscious knowledge which we know nothing about but which nonetheless comes back to haunt us, especially when we least expect it) and the “known unknown” (the knowledge we have about what we do not know and therefore cannot adequately transmit). The terminology is intentionally Rumsfeldian, with the caveat that in his prize-winning speech of March 2003, the American defence secretary actually “forgot” about the “unknown known”, claiming that the main threat to freedom-loving countries would come from the “unknown unknowns”, “the things we don’t know we don’t know”. Of course, as Slavoj Žižek has pointed out, “the main dangers are, on the contrary, the ‘unknown knowns’, the disavowed beliefs and suppositions we are not even aware of adhering to ourselves” (Žižek, 2004, p. 10). As I stated earlier, however, subjective trauma does not coincide as such with the appearance of these “unknown knowns”, although the acephalic nature of the knowledge in question is of course sufficient to say that the knowledge is traumatized, wounded, intrinsically suffering. The traumatized knowledge of the unconscious, which may suddenly erupt in full force and disrupt our comfort zone, only becomes a traumatizing knowledge in confrontation with the “acquired” experience of the inadequacy of every attempt at “owning” it through the active, conscious production of knowledge. Put differently, subjective trauma only makes itself felt when the sudden meaningless, thought-shattering eruption of an event is confirmed through the failure of any conscious attempt at understanding, signifying and thinking it. The more knowledge the subject produces in order to rationalise, master and contain the eruption of an “unthinkable” material reality, the more powerful the “unthinkable” becomes in its defiance of conscious knowledge; the more knowledge of trauma the subject produces the more traumatic the “original knowledge” becomes.

This account of the traumatized and traumatizing knowledge underpinning the human condition has far-reaching consequences for the direction of psychoanalytic treatment. And this is where I wish to pick up the thread of Moses and Monotheism as Freud’s clinical-psychoanalytic case-study of Man. As in his other case-studies, Freud does not restrict himself in his Moses-study to a simple exposition of the life history, anamnesis and pathogenesis of his subject. Here, like elsewhere, he proceeds to an explanation of what psychoanalytic theory can contribute to our understanding of the case, whilst simultaneously paying attention to those aspects of the clinical material that pose particular challenges to established doctrine. What differentiates Moses and Monotheism from the other case-studies, however, is Freud’s general avoidance of any type of psychoanalytic interpretation. Freud does not “interpret” the Biblical books of Moses, nor does he come up with psychoanalytic clarifications of the history of the Jewish people. The classical paradigm of interpretation, which moves from an obscure manifest content to the repressed latent thoughts that animate it, seems very far removed from the general methodology Freud adopted in Moses and Monotheism. When developing his case-study, Freud no longer has recourse to the classic psychoanalytic technique of interpretation, but opts for the much more radical operation of psychoanalytic construction. In order to grasp the relevance of this point, it suffices to juxtapose Freud’s approach in Moses and Monotheism with the contents of “Constructions in Analysis” (Freud, 1937d), Freud’s last exclusively technical paper which was notably written and published during the time he was working on the Moses-study. Whoever wonders about the nature and rationale of Freud’s methodology in Moses will find a set of revealing answers in this short clinical contribution, which also repeats some of the terminology of Part 2 of the third essay, such as the crucial distinction between material and historical truth. “Constructions in Analysis” can not only help us understand how Moses and Monotheism is a case-study, but also clarifies how Freud goes about applying psychoanalytic theory to the “case of Man”.

In confrontation with the man Moses, the history of the Jewish people and the development of monotheism,

Freud does not interpret-he constructs. In response to the triple traumatic mechanism responsible for the inherent suffering associated with the human condition, Freud does not supply a new body of psychoanalytic knowledge-he dismantles an already existing, totalizing epistemological framework in order to make room for an intrinsically incomplete “lesser knowledge”. Indeed, whereas an interpretation may always potentially steer a certain knowledge in the direction of a new, better, more accurate and truthful knowing, Freud’s technique of “construction” by definition defies the installation of an alternative totality. As he put it in “Constructions in Analysis”, “every such construction is an incomplete one, since it covers only a small fragment of the forgotten events” (Freud, 1937d, p. 263). And further on: “We do not pretend that an individual construction is anything more than a conjecture which awaits examination, confirmation or rejection” (ibid., p. 265).

The incompleteness of Freud’s construction about Moses the Egyptian, his murder by the Hebrews and the subsequent conflation of Akhenaton’s sun-god with the volcano-god Yahweh at Kadesh is therefore not accidental, a theoretical limitation of Freud’s own genius, but fundamental. Whereas Verhaeghe seems to deplore the fact that Freud was not able to articulate definitively the relationships between the real, symbolic and imaginary avatars of the paternal figure (Verhaeghe, 1996, pp. 222-224), I believe that this lack of a definitive articulation is an essential characteristic of Freud’s construction. Because of this incompleteness, Freud can keep his psychoanalytic construction intact and prevent it from developing into a new all-encompassing religion. If the construction were to develop into a new religion, it would not be capable of bringing to a halt the relentless repetition of the original trauma, which is endlessly rehearsed in the various rituals of religious doctrine. Hence, Freud does not replace one particular religion (a totalizing Weltanschauung which captures the original trauma of the human condition into a full body of knowledge, thus ensuring its perennial return) with another religion, but tries to reduce the repetitive nature of its historical transmission through the production of an intrinsically fraught construction. This construction requires repetition in its own right, yet precisely because of its eternal dynamic incompleteness, rather than by virtue of its static inertia. And this is what the text of *Moses and Monotheism* perfectly illustrates. As in so many of Freud’s works, the narrative structure of the book duplicates the central theses of the argument; the process of writing enacts what the contents of the book transmits to the reader. One should not be distracted here by Freud’s recurrent apologies and excuses for the repetitiveness of the text, nor by Strachey’s commentary on the difficult socio-political circumstances under which Freud worked on his Moses-study. The repetitiveness of the text reflects the repetitive, non-progressive formulation and re-formulation of a construction designed to capture and convey a certain historical truth and determining historical realities, over and against the relentless re-occurrence of the original material truth of the subject’s traumatic movement between the “unknown known” of the unconscious and the “known unknown” of conscious, meaningful discourse.

It bears repeating that with his construction, Freud does not produce any additional knowledge of the original trauma, but rather formulates a knowledge that is in itself traumatized again because it lacks completion and has no other basis in reality than a set of logical connections between historical circumstances and current events. As such, Freud’s *Moses and Monotheism* is not only the most fundamental and far-reaching of Freud’s case-studies, but also the paradigmatic document for the most advanced accomplishment of psychoanalytic theory and practice. For the various reasons that I have mentioned above, Freud does not end up with religion again as the most comforting answer to the suffering of Man, but expresses his faith in a creative, non-total and non-totalizing piece of non-knowledge whose only equivalent is the psychotic delusion. Indeed, Freud divulged at the end of “Constructions in Analysis”: “The delusions of patients appear to me to be the equivalents of the constructions which we build up in the course of an analytic treatment” (Freud, 1937d, p. 268). Better to be deluded than to be religious, at least if the delusion is offered by a psychoanalyst . . .

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Notes:

1 All but one of the texts in this section were presented at NOMOS International Conference “Freud’s Moses and the Traumatized Human Subject. Ramifications for Culture and Education”, October 16-17, 2004, at Columbia University, New York City. Published on-line at www.CERobins.com