Kant, Freud, and the ethical critique of religion

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Abstract This paper engages Freud’s relation to Kant, with specific reference to each theorist’s articulation of the interconnections between ethics and religion. I argue that there is in fact a constructive approach to ethics and religion in Freud’s thought, and that this approach can be better understood by examining it in relation to Kant’s formulations on these topics. Freud’s thinking about religion and ethics participates in the Enlightenment heritage, with its emphasis on autonomy and rationality, of which Kant’s model of practical reason is in many ways exemplary. At the same time, Freud advances Kantian thinking in certain important respects; his work offers a more somatically, socially, and historically grounded approach to the formation of rational and ethical capacities, and hence makes it more compatible with contemporary concerns and orientations that eschew the pitfalls of ahistorical idealist orientations.

Keywords Religion · Reason · Ethics · Psychoanalysis · History · Culture · Universalism · Critique

In an illuminating passage from his lecture series, Problems of Moral Philosophy, Theodor Adorno notes that Freud’s mature works contain ideas that counteract stereotypical views of psychoanalysis. Adorno is particularly concerned with the ability of psychoanalytic theory to clarify the formation of our ethical capacities, and to do so in a way that does not understand ethics simply as a by-product of conflicts between parental authorities and libidinal drives. In his words, “It is worthy of note that Freud, who started out as a critic of the so-called process of repression, that is, as the critic of the renunciation of instinct, subsequently became its advocate.” Adorno explains this seeming contradiction by noting of Freud that “the distinction that he made was between two kinds of renunciation of instinct. On the one hand there is repression … [and] alternatively, there is the conscious renunciation of instinct, so that even man’s [sic] instinctual behavior is placed under the supervision of reason.” Most...
significantly for the purposes of my present argument, Adorno further observes that “this is similar to what happens in Kant’s ethics…”

I want to extrapolate upon Adorno’s brief but provocative comments, and engage Freud’s relation to Kant, with specific reference to each theorist’s articulation of the interconnections between ethics and religion. I will argue that there is a constructive approach to ethics and religion in Freud’s thought, and that this approach can be better understood by examining it in relation to Kant’s formulations. In essence, I will illustrate that Freud’s thinking about religion and ethics participates in the Enlightenment heritage, with its emphasis on autonomy and rationality, of which Kant’s model of practical reason is in many ways exemplary. At the same time, Freud advances Kantian and Enlightenment thinking in certain important respects; his work offers a more somatically, socially, and historically grounded approach to the formation of rational and ethical capacities, and hence makes it more compatible with contemporary orientations that eschew the pitfalls of idealist orientations. Freud’s empiricist approach to reason necessarily includes elements of continual testing, hence, incompleteness and corrigibility, that counteract idealism’s focus on the a priori status of reason and ethics. These views are most fully articulated in Freud’s essay, “The Question of a Weltanshauung” in the New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis. Freud is adamant in seeking to differentiate psychoanalysis from any form of Weltanshauung, because he understands this as “an intellectual construction which solves all problems of our existence uniformly on the basis of an overriding hypothesis, which, accordingly, leaves no question unanswered and in which everything that interests us finds its fixed place.”2 Clearly, Freud is eschewing any claim to completeness or finality, or what theorists such as Levinas call totality. Thus, although Kant and Freud share an emphasis on reason, as opposed to non-rational beliefs, as the vehicle of human betterment, their respective models as to the origins and nature of reason differ considerably. Here, my arguments will focus on this disjunction particularly with respect to practical reason. I build primarily upon their respective approaches to moral conscience, and address their shared focus on religion as interpreted and evaluated according to ethical criteria. The notion of renunciation, as highlighted by Adorno, is a crucial aspect of the shared ethical concerns underpinning these projects. Because both Kant and Freud engage in an ethically based critique of religion, their analyses can in some ways be seen as internal to religious thought, broadly construed. Of course, both Kant and Freud also deploy epistemological critiques of religion, and categories such as illusion and delusion are important to their respective analyses. However, the heart of the matter is in each case ethical and humanistic: assessing religion against the criterion of furthering the well being of others.

The two thinkers are not obvious allies, and Freud often seeks to differentiate psychoanalysis sharply from what he understands to be the disembodied rationalism of Kantian ethics. Therefore, in response to the possible ambiguities arising from this juxtaposition, I want to situate Freud’s contributions within certain essential tensions evident in Kant’s treatment of religion and ethics. These are tensions between a universally conceived practical reason, on the one hand, and attention to historical, cultural, and individual specificity on the other. I approach Kant’s analysis of religion in a way that preserves its critical focus on reason and ethics, still so crucial when approaching questions of the meaning and significance of religious traditions today. At the same time, I want to draw from Freud to avoid Kant’s problematic model of the transcendental subject, seemingly able to access universally valid ethical principles in a self-contained manner. The issue here, as many commentators have noted, is that Kant’s approach to establishing norms and principles is generally too static, too

1 Adorno (2000, p. 137) (emphasis added).
2 Strachey et al. (1964a (Vol. SE XXII), p. 158).