

# I Growing Up, Freud, Science

Sample chapter from Harry J. Gensler's Reasoning about God, New York, Routledge Press, 2022, pages 6-11.

We'll begin by listening to the fictional student Skepticus explain his objections to religion. He'll talk about his early years, when he was raised religious, and how in high school he gradually lost his faith. In college, he found science and how Freud explained why people find God so attractive. As you read Skepticus's passage, first try to understand it in a sympathetic way, and then try to find problems with it. We'll later consider objections.

## I.1 Skepticus: Growing up

Hello, my name is Skepticus. While my family was religious, I gradually gave up religion as I grew older and more mature in my thinking.

When I was young, my parents taught me to believe in the tooth fairy, Santa Clause, and God. They did this to make me feel better. At first, I found these ideas interesting and attractive; later, I asked questions. What does the tooth fairy look like? How does the tooth fairy put money under my pillow without waking me up? One night, I felt a tug on my pillow and saw Mom put a \$5 bill where my baby tooth was. While I thought this was strange, it took me time to figure out that there really was no tooth fairy. Later still, I got angry at being duped. Why couldn't my parents just tell me the truth instead of telling me fairy tales that they think will make me feel good – but in the end just make me feel bad?

With Santa Clause, I knew what he looked like: plump, red outfit, big white hair. I sat on his lap and told him what gifts I'd like if I were a good little boy; I didn't think it strange that his busy schedule let him come to my department store. Here my intellectual problem was how Santa could bring gifts to every house on the planet on Christmas Eve. Let's say there are a billion houses to visit in 24 hours; this gives Santa 0.000086 seconds to bring gifts to each house – which is impossible! So Santa was a lie too – and a lie that encouraged us to be good little boys and girls who would be so happy to get presents for good behavior.

God was harder to evaluate. In high school, my friends and I had intellectual doubts and felt awkward about having to go to church with our families. I was gradually drifting away from religion and God.

## I.2 Skepticus: Freud and science

In college, I became a chemistry major. I came to love science and scientific method, where you experiment to find out what's true or false; what makes you *feel good* is irrelevant. I found an objective way to discover truth about the world. I read thinkers

who argued for a science-based approach to life instead of a religious one. I was impressed by Sigmund Freud (1856–1939).

Freud (1927: ch. 6) made three main claims about religion:

1. We have no right to believe when there isn't strong evidence.
2. Religion is an illusion and a neurosis.
3. Science is the only path to knowledge; we have no right to believe anything on the basis of our feelings.

(1) *Need strong evidence.* Chemistry gives strong evidence while religion doesn't. I'd go further and say that *we shouldn't accept what isn't proved*. There's no proof or disproof for the existence of the tooth fairy, Santa Clause, or God; so we shouldn't believe that such things exist. Believing in such things is childish and irresponsible.

Beliefs based on strong evidence can become a common property among people; such beliefs hold for others as well as for us, and we can safely communicate them to others. We all grow stronger by such solid beliefs. But beliefs formed on flimsy evidence are evil; they harm our ability to know and communicate truth to others, which is what separates us from savages. Forming beliefs on flimsy evidence has long-term bad consequences.

(2) *Religion is an illusion and a neurosis.* Religion, as an *illusion*, is a *belief based on wishful thinking*; we believe what makes us feel good, because it fits what we'd like to be true – even though there's no evidence. Religious beliefs arose in ignorant, primitive times, before modern science. As Freud says:

We shall tell ourselves that it would be very nice if there were a God who created the world and was a benevolent Providence, and if there were a moral order in the universe and an after-life; but it is a very striking fact that all this is exactly as we are bound to wish it to be. And it would be more remarkable still if our wretched, ignorant and downtrodden ancestors had succeeded in solving all these difficult riddles.

Freud's *projection of a father figure* leads us to God. A child's life can be difficult; children can fear harm, abandonment, and death. Our human fathers, while they sometimes protect us, are very limited. So we dream up a perfect, make-believe father in the sky – a God of supreme knowledge, love, and power – and this father will protect us perfectly. We believe in this God because he makes us feel good. Such a belief is childish and irresponsible.

Religion, as a *neurosis*, is a *harmful mental disorder*; it separates us from reality and makes us miserable. Religion is a mental disease and has us believe in a dream-world of wishful thinking. The cure for religion is Freud's theory of the mind (which replaces religious beliefs) and psychotherapy (which replaces religious practices).

(3) *Science, not feelings, is the only path to knowledge.* Forming our beliefs on the basis of our feelings is childish and irresponsible. Once humanity has achieved science and scientific method, these should be our guide to discover a reality outside of ourselves.

What I most like about Freud is how he nicely explains how religion arose (through

childish wishful thinking) and points to science as an adult replacement. Freud was a key step in my growing up and rejecting religion in favor of science. I expect that more and more people will give up religion as they get educated and learn about science.

There's much more to say about all this, but we'll have to wait for later.

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Before going on, reflect on your reaction to Skepticus's passage. Do you see any problems with it?

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### 1.3 Analysis: Good and bad skepticism

Rethinking what we were taught is an important part of growing up. Maybe we'll radically change what we were taught about religion – moving to more religion, less religion, or a different approach. Or maybe we'll accept what we were taught, but make it more authentically ours. My book is intended to help us to make such choices in a more reflective and rational way. I believe that reflection and rationality should help to lead us to belief. God intends reason to support faith.

My fictional student's name "Skepticus" isn't meant to be derogatory. There's *good skepticism* and *bad skepticism*. *Good skepticism* is *critical thinking*; we need it to do philosophy well. The core of good skepticism is being able to find problems in a flawed view that at first sounds very reasonable. This book should help you develop good skepticism. The student passages will often be flawed, and you'll be challenged to think deeply and look for problems. You should get better at *good skepticism* (critical thinking, finding problems with a view) as you work through this book.<sup>1</sup>

Skepticus, although his passage may at first sound reasonable, makes some illogical moves. He needs to develop good skepticism toward his own core ideas. He needs to ask, "What exactly are my core ideas saying? How would they work in practice? Do they have crazy implications? Are they consistent?"

Here are three of Skepticus's flawed core ideas:

1. We shouldn't accept what isn't proved.
2. We shouldn't believe anything on the basis of our feelings.
3. Science is the only path to knowledge.

(1) *Need proof*. This view has problems. Consider "*We shouldn't accept what isn't proved.*" This statement itself isn't proved. So then, if it were true, we shouldn't accept it. So the statement is *self-refuting* – it's inconsistent with itself. Skepticus's first core idea violates what I see as reason's first principle: *Be consistent*.

There's also an infinite-regress problem. Suppose you prove conclusion A by premises B and C, which you also accept – then you need to prove B and C using

<sup>1</sup> My ethics textbook (Gensler 2018) follows this same pattern – *fictional student passages* followed by a *deeper analysis* – but it's about ethics instead of religion. Since you're encouraged to find flaws in the student passages, I hope you'll use these to grow in your critical thinking (good skepticism). But don't expect poor Skepticus to similarly grow in his critical thinking as the book progresses; you'll need him to keep making mistakes that you can try to uncover.

further premises D and E, then you need to prove these, and then further premises, endlessly. So Skepticus's principle would be impossible to satisfy.

*Need proof* conflicts with responsible scientific practice. In medical trials that follow good scientific method, we often get *probable conclusions* but not clear-cut *proofs*. Consider medical trials about Covid vaccines; the idea that *we shouldn't accept what isn't proved* would have us reject most of these trials (which give only probably conclusions) and harm our effort to fight the virus. Skepticus needs to get clearer on how science actually works.

*Need proof* clashes with how we live. We all have controversial unproved beliefs (about politics, sports, weather, philosophy, and so on); there's nothing wrong with this. If I'm sick, believing that I have a good chance to recover (even without proof) may motivate me to recover; and so believing in a recovery may help it to come about. But yes there are areas in life where we need to be very careful; if I'm going to hike in a narrow slot canyon, where a sudden rainstorm could fill the canyon and drown me, I'll try to find a very good weather report.

*Need proof* is unbalanced and leads to *excessive skepticism*. William James (1842–1910) thought truth-seekers need two different norms (1896): "Believe truth" ("Believe as many truths as possible") and "Avoid error" ("Believe as few falsehoods as possible"). We can maximize true beliefs by believing every idea and its negation; we can minimize false beliefs by believing nothing. Both norms are harmful and unbalanced; we need a balance between the two. Skepticus's "We shouldn't accept what isn't proved" is too skeptical; it prevents us from accepting important truths that have strong probability but not proof. James prefers a moderate-risk approach; this would gain many more truths at cost of only a few more errors.

William James applied this to believing in God. Suppose this is an important issue but there's no proof either way (for or against God). What should we do? Skepticus says, "Don't believe, there's no proof." But James says, "We have a right to believe, at our own risk, even if there's no proof." Here, he thought, we must and rightfully may follow our *feelings*; and his *pragmatic method* favored views that help us to live better (which he, unlike Freud, saw as favoring belief).

(2) *We shouldn't believe anything on the basis of our feelings*. James saw a role for feelings; we need to combine thinking and feeling in forming our beliefs. Consider veteran scientists whose thoughts and feelings have been trained by years of scientific study and research; they'd likely use both together in appraising hypotheses.

James would say that Skepticus's *need proof* idea comes from his *fear of being wrong* (a feeling). James has this fear too, but he also has a *fear of losing truths* by accepting a *bad skepticism* that sets the standards for belief-acceptance unreasonably high.

Science rests in part on feelings (including hopes). From a theoretical side, we need a confident hope that our sensing and thinking can generally be trusted to bring knowledge (and aren't just a big hallucination or dream). From a practical side, our feelings (including reasonable hopes) drive much medical research, as we hope to learn more to help us fight cancer. Against Skepticus, we need thoughts, feelings, and actions to work together.

(3) *Science is the only path to knowledge*. Do we know this? Then it would have to be known by science – but how can this be? Please show me scientifically that *science is the*

*only path to knowledge*. Since there's no way to do this, (3) is self-refuting. So Skepticus's core ideas (1) and (3) violate what I see as reason's first principle: *Be consistent*.

Science and religion are friends. Science arose in part from believing that a supreme God created the world to run by rational, knowable laws (so lightning is caused by divine laws, not by gods throwing lightning bolts). Most Nobel Prize winners are Christians (search the Web for "What percentage of Nobel Prize winners are Christians?"). Pope Francis was a college chemistry major and later used his science background to energize humanity against climate change. And science departments thrive at Christian schools.

"*Science is the only path to knowledge*" is an enemy of religion. But science itself isn't an enemy of religion.

## 1.4 Analysis: Freud wasn't so scientific

Freud used to be a huge force in psychology and against religion. Over the years, his influence decreased. Psychologists came to see much of his thinking as based on armchair speculation instead of data. Many of his views (like the Oedipus complex and highly sexual nature of young children), have little or no evidence.

Do religious beliefs arise by the projection of a father figure, as Freud claims? This wouldn't explain polytheism or animism, or why religion works similarly whether or not children experience a father. Freud underemphasizes how well families deal with childhood distresses. And there are other explanations of how religious beliefs arouse, like a built-in thirst for God (Augustine), mystery-awe-fascination (Otto), mystical experiences (James), and instinctive reactions triggered by experiencing nature (Calvin and Plantinga); these are often used to *defend* belief in God.

Many doubt the effectiveness of Freudian psychoanalysis. Seeing your analyst is expensive, time consuming, and has few results.

Freud was wrong in thinking that religion is a *neurosis*, a *harmful mental disease*. Recent research shows that religion hugely promote our health and happiness, which is the opposite of being harmful. We'll go further into this in the next chapter, which is about "Is religion harmful?"

Skepticus expects that more and more people will give up religion as they get educated and learn about science. But according to Gallup polls, the religious nature of America's population has changed little over many decades (Glynn 1997: ch. 2 and Iannaccone 1998). Roughly 94% of all Americans believe in God, 90% pray, and 71% believe in life after death (although the numbers depend somewhat on how we ask the questions); the numbers have remained relatively stable over the years.

American intellectuals (like scientists and college professors) tend to be more skeptical about religion than the general population. At one time, only 1% of the American Psychological Association believed in God; my psychology students told me that this had gone up to 30% and perhaps higher. Big factors here are Freud's declining influence and strong evidence for religion's positive life benefits.

Over the last fifty years, science has become friendlier toward religion and God. Often criticisms of religion are based on older science (like Freud), while newer science better supports religion; we'll see this again and again in further chapters.

## 1.5 Analysis: Augustine versus Freud

Augustine (354–430) spent much of his life searching for God, showing both good and bad skepticism, until he became one of the greatest Christian thinkers. He summed up his faith journey: “You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.”

Freud and Augustine both thought humans find God attractive. Freud thought there’s no God, so this attraction is false and illusory. Augustine thought the opposite; there’s a God, and God created us to find our completion in him. God made us to hope for a world of justice and love, a world of meaningfulness and purpose, a world of eternal life with God, a better world where God fulfills us completely. Alasdair MacIntyre (2009) put it eloquently:

Finite beings who possess the power of understanding, if they know that God exists, know that he is the most adequate object of their love, and that the deepest desire of every such being, whether they acknowledge it or not, is to be at one with God.

While not everyone experiences this magnetic attraction to God as strongly as Augustine, some of this may well be part of us all (today too, see Fulwiler’s 2014 charming conversion story).

Freud’s *father figure* explanation is separable from his atheism. Freud could have believed in a God who uses this *father figure* mechanism to get us to believe in him; indeed, Christians pray to God as “*Our Father* who art in heaven.” Let me generalize this point. When atheists, to discredit religion, propose some mechanism (whether psychological, evolutionary, or whatever) that leads to belief in God, ask yourself, “Could this mechanism be part of God’s plan to help people believe in him?” If so, then the proposed mechanism needn’t discredit belief in God.

## 1.6 Analysis: Family issues

I’ve been a university professor most of my life; this book focuses on struggles that college students have with faith and how philosophy can help. But this chapter also raises family issues, like these, where I’m less sure what to say:

- Should parents teach children to believe in the tooth fairy and Santa Clause?
- How should parents respond when their children have faith problems? Should they try to defend faith, or perhaps help their children understand both sides and make their own decision? Should they suggest that their children read this present book (or something else)?

Parents need to think about such questions.