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Freud v. James

I believe that Sigmund Freud viewed religion as having a negative effect on a person's psyche while William James saw religion as having a positive psychological effect.

Sigmund Freud offers many interesting and worthy points regarding the psychological makeup of a person's thinking. Freud's three regions of the unconscious, preconscious and conscious is an effective way of explaining how people act. Specifically how on the conscious level, or ego, we tend to act in accordance with that which is the least offensive or off putting and instead act in a polite manner. Our preconscious, or super ego, is a filtering system that keeps us from acting out or saying something that isn't socially accepted. The unconscious, or id, is where things get really interesting, particularly when it pertains to religion.

Freud seems to view religion as a false security blanket. He views those who are religious like unto a child seeking his/her parent for protection from any kind of fear. In this case religion is just a substitute of the parent protecting the child/adult with the illusion that certain cold realities such as death can be overcome through a set of prescribed beliefs or rituals.

Furthermore, Freud views religion as a form of neuroses, and in some respects I can see why he came to that conclusion. For example, those who flog themselves to rid themselves of sin fit the traits with those who have obsessive quirks. However, I think Freud seems to generalize religion by assuming religious acts such as prayer are abnormal.

Moreover, I think Freud tends to view the unconscious as a place of negative repressed feelings and thoughts. Granted, Freud is perhaps correct on some points regarding people having

dark secrets or thoughts like the Oedipus complex where children have sexual desires or feelings towards their parent. However, while a person can harbor negative or even sexually-repressed feelings or thoughts, a person can simultaneously have positive uplifting thoughts and feelings that allows one to move towards what James calls the Divine, whether that be God or simply one's better self. James asserts that there is a divided self deep down in our psychological thinking, and to label it somehow as being abnormal is false.

James views religion in a pragmatic way – asserting that one cannot dismiss the fact that those who are religious often encounter effective feelings such as a loss of fear, receiving truth and a newness of life. This is what he means by the term healthy-minded. The results from such feelings have a direct impact in the way they treat others, particularly looking beyond oneself in which James calls Saintliness. Regardless of whether or not the loss of fear is an illusion, the fact remains that the loss of fear allows people to positively act in a way that benefits their psychological mindset that allows them to shed off the conscience of evil known or defined according to James as sick-minded. Once a person has passed through or has shed off the sick-minded they are, according to James, twice re-born. Therefore James asserts that God is real because it produces real results.

Overall each of these men presents interesting viewpoints on religion, and I can see both points of views. I see Freud as a sort of reductionist while James is a pragmatist, and I personally admire and respect James. However, some would argue that James' study of Mysticism is too vague because it produces so many variables regarding the Divine, and because there isn't any cohesive authority regarding the practices of Mysticism. Nevertheless, the realms of the unconscious are a fascinating topic to think and ponder about, particularly with regards to religion.