

One cannot help thinking that people generally measure with false standards, that they seek power, success, and wealth for themselves and admire them in others, and that they underestimate what is truly valuable in life. And yet, in any general judgment of this type, one is in danger of forgetting the great variation within the human world and its mental life. There are particular men for whom there is no lack of admiration by their contemporaries, though their greatness is based on characteristics and achievements completely foreign to the goals and ideals of the multitude. One will be tempted to assume these great men are indeed acknowledged only by a minority, while the great majority cares nothing for them. But things cannot be that simple, given the discrepancies between people's thoughts and actions, and given the diversity of their wish impulses.

In his letters, one of these exceptional men calls himself my friend. I had sent him my little book that treats religion as an illusion [*The Future of an Illusion*<sup>1</sup>], and he answered that he was in complete agreement with my judgment on religion, but that he was sorry I had not acknowledged the actual source of religious feeling. He says this is a particular feeling—one which never leaves him, which he has found confirmed by many others, and which he may assume is experienced by millions of people. A feeling he would like to call the sensation of “eternity,” a feeling as of something unlimited, unbounded—“oceanic,” as it were.<sup>2</sup> He says that this feeling is a purely subjective fact, not an article of faith; that no assurance of personal immortality is associated with it, but that it is the source of the religious energy seized upon by the various churches and religious systems, directed by them into particular channels, and indeed consumed by them. One may, he says, call oneself religious merely on the basis of this oceanic feeling, even if one rejects every belief and every illusion.

This claim by my esteemed friend, who himself once praised the magic of illusion in a poem,<sup>3</sup> caused me no small difficulties.

- 
- 1 *The Future of an Illusion* (1927) undertakes an analysis of religion, ultimately consigning religious belief to an infantile attachment to Daddy at the individual level, and to a universal obsessional neurosis at the collective level.
  - 2 Romain Rolland (1866–1924) mentions the “oceanic feeling” in a letter to Freud, dated 5 December 1927.
  - 3 [Freud's note, 1931:] *Liluli* [1919]. Since the publication of the books *La vie de Ramakrishna* [The Life of Ramakrishna, 1929] and (*continued*)

I cannot discover this “oceanic” feeling in myself. It is not easy to carry out scientific work on feelings. One can attempt to describe their physiological signs. Where this is not possible—I am afraid that the oceanic feeling too will defy this kind of characterization—one can attend only to the ideational content that is associatively closest to the feeling. If I have understood my friend correctly, he means the same thing that an original and somewhat unusual writer tells his hero who is about to take his own life: “We cannot fall out of the world.”<sup>1</sup> Thus a feeling of indissoluble connection, of being bound together with all of the external world. I would comment that for me this has more the character of an intellectual insight, though admittedly not without an accompanying tone of feeling such as will not be lacking with other acts of thought possessing similar breadth. In my own person I would not be able to convince myself of the primary nature of such a feeling. However, I cannot therefore deny its actual presence in others. The only question is whether it is being interpreted correctly and whether it should be considered the *fons et origo*<sup>2</sup> of all religious needs.

I have nothing to suggest that would decisively influence the solution of this problem. The idea that humans gain knowledge of their connection with the surrounding world through an immediate feeling, aimed from the outset at that goal, sounds so strange and meshes so poorly with the fabric of our psychology that an attempt at a psychoanalytic—i.e., historical—explanation of such a feeling is justified. Then the following line of thought suggests itself. Normally, there is nothing more certain to us than the feeling of our self, of our own ego. This ego strikes us as independent, unitary, well demarcated from everything else. That this impression is illusory, that the ego actually continues inward, without a sharp boundary, into an unconscious mental entity we designate as the id, for which it serves as a sort of facade—this was first shown to us by psychoanalytic research, which still has much more information to reveal to us about the relation of the

---

*La vie de Vivekananda* [The Life of Vivekananda, 1930], I need no longer hide the fact that the friend mentioned in the text is Romain Rolland.

- 1 [Freud's note:] Christian Dietrich Grabbe [1801–36], *Hannibal* (1835): “Ja, aus der Welt werden wir nicht fallen. Wir sind einmal darin.”  
[Indeed, we shall not fall out of the world. We are simply in it.]
- 2 Source and origin.

ego to the id.<sup>1</sup> But towards the outside, at least, the ego seems to maintain clear and sharp lines of demarcation. Only in one state, an unusual one to be sure, yet one that cannot be condemned as pathological, does a different situation apply. At the height of being in love the boundary between ego and object threatens to become blurred. Against all the evidence of the senses, a person in love declares that “I” and “you” are one, and is prepared to act as if this were true. What can be temporarily suspended by a physiological function must of course also be subject to disturbance by pathological processes. Pathology has shown us a great number of states in which the demarcation between the ego and the external world becomes uncertain or in which the boundaries are actually drawn incorrectly; cases in which parts of the body, even elements of individual mental life—perceptions, thoughts, feelings—appear foreign and seem not to belong to the ego; and other cases in which one ascribes to the external world what clearly arose in the ego and should be acknowledged by it. Thus even one’s ego-feeling is subject to disturbances, and the boundaries of the ego are not constant.

Further reflection indicates that the ego-feeling in the adult cannot have been the same from the beginning. It must have gone through a developmental process, which of course cannot be demonstrated, but which can be constructed with a rather high degree of probability.<sup>2</sup> Infants do not yet distinguish the ego from an external world as the source of the sensations flowing in upon them. They learn this gradually, in connection with various stimuli. A very strong impression is presumably created in them by the fact that some of the sources of excitation, which they will later recognize as their own bodily organs, can send them sensations at any time, while other sources withdraw at times—including the one desired the most: the mother’s breast—and can only be summoned by cries for help. Thus an “object” is first established separate from the ego, as something located “outside” and can only be compelled to appear by a special action. Another force in the separation of the ego from the mass of sensations,

---

1 The id, ego, and superego are English inventions for Freud’s original *das Es*, *Ich*, and *Über-Ich*—literally the It, I, and Over-I.

2 [Freud’s note:] See the many works on ego-development and ego-feeling, ranging from Ferenczi’s “Entwicklungsstufen des Wirklichkeitssinnes” [Developmental Stages of the Sense of Reality] (1913) to Federn’s contributions of 1926, 1927, and later.

that is, in the acknowledgement of an “outside,” an external world, is found in the frequent, varied, and unavoidable sensations of pain and unpleasure that the pleasure principle, in unrestricted dominion, enjoins the individual to eliminate and avoid. The tendency arises to separate from the ego everything that can become a source of such unpleasure, to throw these things outside, and to form a pure pleasure-ego, which is confronted by a foreign, threatening “outside.” The boundaries of this primitive pleasure-ego cannot escape correction through experience. Some things that one would not like to give up, since they provide pleasure, are actually not ego, but object; and many a torment one wants to expel turns out to be inseparable from the ego and of internal origin. One becomes familiar with a procedure by which, through deliberate direction of sensory activity and through appropriate muscular action, one can distinguish between the internal, belonging to the ego, and the external, arising from an outer world. Thus one makes the first step towards the application of the reality principle, which will dominate future development. This distinction, of course, serves the practical goal of defense against perceived or threatening sensations of unpleasure.<sup>1</sup> The fact that the ego, in defending itself against unpleasurable excitations from within, applies just the same methods it uses against unpleasure from without, becomes the starting point of significant pathological disturbances.

In this way the ego separates itself from the external world. More correctly: originally the ego includes everything, and later it separates an external world from itself. Our present ego-feeling is thus only a shrunken residue of a much more comprehensive—indeed, all-encompassing—feeling, which corresponded to a more intimate connection of the ego with the surrounding world. If we may assume that this primary ego-feeling has, to a greater or lesser degree, been preserved in the mental life of many people, it would stand beside the more narrowly and sharply demarcated ego-feeling of maturity as a sort of counterpart, and the ideational contents appropriate to it would be precisely those of unboundedness and connection with the universe—the same ones with which my friend explains the “oceanic” feeling. But do we have the right to assume the survival of what was original beside what later arose from it?

---

1 The language of pleasure/unpleasure is part of the nineteenth-century penchant for quantifying affect, a penchant that Freud maintains in his “economic” analysis of energy.

Undoubtedly. Such a phenomenon is not surprising, whether in the mental sphere or any other. With animals we assume that the most developed species have proceeded from the lowest. But among living life forms, we still find all the simple ones today. The race of the great dinosaurs has died out and has made way for the mammals, but an actual representative of that race, the crocodile, is still living with us.<sup>1</sup> This analogy may be too distant, and is also weak in that the surviving lower species are generally not the actual ancestors of the present-day more highly developed ones. As a rule, the intermediate links have died out and are known only through reconstruction. In the realm of the mind, though, the preservation of the primitive beside what has developed from it through transformation is so frequent that there is no need to demonstrate this through examples. This phenomenon is usually the result of a divergence in development: a quantitative portion of an orientation, of a drive impulse, has been preserved unaltered; another portion has undergone further development.

Here we are touching on the more general problem of preservation in the mind, a problem that has still been hardly worked on, but is so attractive and important that we may attend to it for a while, despite its lack of strong relevance. Since we overcame the misapprehension that normal forgetting signifies a destruction of the memory trace—thus an annihilation—we have tended toward the opposite view, that in mental life nothing once formed can perish—that somehow everything is preserved and can, under suitable circumstances (e.g., through a sufficiently far-reaching regression), be brought to light again. Through an analogy from another field one might try to understand what this assumption entails. Let us take as an example the development of the Eternal City.<sup>2</sup> Historians teach us that the oldest Rome was the *Roma quadrata*, a fenced settlement on the Palatine Hill. Then followed the phase of the *Septimontium*, a union of the settle-

- 
- 1 Freud's claim about the connection between dinosaurs and crocodiles is incorrect, although it could be partially salvaged by speaking of "era" instead of "race."
  - 2 [Freud's note:] Cf. Hugh Last (1923). [Freud refers to Last's entry for *The Cambridge Ancient History*, "The Founding of Rome," for myriad details from the ancient history of Rome. Last, an Oxford University lecturer in Roman history, begins by saying: "Roman history does not begin at Rome" (333). Against all the "dubious," "misleading," and simply "false" claims about "Italian pre-history" circulated in the nineteenth century, Last appeals instead to the recent "sphere of archaeology" for his conclusions.

ments on the various hills; then the city delimited by the Servian Wall;<sup>1</sup> and later still, after all the transformations in the times of the Republic and the early Caesars, the city that the Emperor Aurelian surrounded with his walls. We will not further pursue the changes in the city, but will ask ourselves what a visitor, who we will assume is equipped with the most complete historical and topographical knowledge, might still find of these early stages in today's Rome. He will see the wall of Aurelian almost unchanged, except for a few gaps. In some places he will find portions of the Servian Wall brought to light through excavation. If he knows enough—more than is known by current archeology—he will perhaps be able to mark out in the composite of the city the entire course of that wall and the outline of the *Roma quadrata*. Of the buildings that once filled in these old boundaries, he will find nothing, or scanty remains, for they no longer exist. At most, the best knowledge of Rome during the Republic would enable him to show where the temples and public buildings of that time stood. Ruins now occupy these places: not ruins of those buildings themselves, but of their restorations in later times, after fires or destruction. It is hardly necessary to mention that all these remains of ancient Rome appear as components embedded in the confusion of a great metropolis that has arisen in the last few centuries since the Renaissance. Various ancient portions surely still lie buried in the soil of the city or beneath its modern buildings. This is the manner of preservation of the past that we notice in historical sites like Rome.

As a flight of fancy, we shall imagine that Rome is not a place of human habitation but a mental entity with a similarly long and rich past—an entity, then, in which nothing that has once occurred has disappeared, and in which all earlier developmental phases continue to exist beside the latest one. For Rome, then, this would mean that on the Palatine the palaces of the emperors and the Septizonium of Septimius Severus would still rise to their old height, and that the Castel Sant'Angelo would still carry on its battlements the beautiful statues with which it was embellished until the siege by the Goths, etc. But there is more: on the site of the Palazzo Caffarelli would once more stand—without the need to remove that edifice—the Temple of Jupiter Capitolinus; and this not only in its latest shape, as the Romans of imperial times saw it, but also in its earliest shape, when it still showed

---

1 A defensive barrier constructed around the city of Rome in the early fourth century BCE.

Etruscan forms and was decorated with terracotta antefixes.<sup>1</sup> Where the Coliseum now stands we could also admire the vanished Domus Aurea of Nero; on the piazza of the Pantheon we would find not only the Pantheon of today, as it was left to us by Hadrian, but also, on the same site, the original edifice of Agrippa; indeed, the same ground would bear the Church of Santa Maria sopra Minerva and the ancient temple over which it was built. Here, perhaps, only a change in the viewer's position or angle of vision would be needed in order to call up the one view or the other.

Clearly there is no sense in spinning out this fantasy any further: it leads to the unimaginable, indeed to the absurd. If we want to present the historical sequence spatially, this can only occur through juxtaposition in space: the same space cannot be filled out in two different ways. Our attempt seems to be a form of idle play; it has only one justification: it shows us how far we are from mastering the features of mental life through graphic presentation.

There is one more objection we must address. We are asked why we have chosen precisely the past of a city to compare with the mental past. The assumption that everything past is retained holds also for mental life only on condition that the organ of the mind has remained intact and that its tissue has not suffered injury through trauma or inflammation. Destructive influences comparable to those causes of illness are never absent in the history of a city, even if it has had a less turbulent past than Rome, and even if, like London, it was hardly ever invaded by an enemy. Even the most peaceful development of a city includes demolitions and replacements of structures, and thus, from the outset, a city is unsuited for such a comparison with a mental organism.

We yield to this objection; renouncing a striking contrastive effect, we turn to a clearly more related object of comparison—the animal or human body. But here, too, we find the same thing. The earlier phases of development are in no sense still preserved; they have been absorbed in the later phases, for which they provided the material. The embryo cannot be demonstrated in the adult; the child's thymus gland is replaced after puberty by connective tissue, but is no longer present itself; in the long bones of the grown man I can indeed trace the outline of the child's bone,

---

1 A decorative tile used on the roofs of temples and other buildings, dating 400–300 BCE.

but that bone has disappeared through lengthening and thickening until achieving its final form. In fact, such a preservation of all the preceding stages along with the final form is possible only in the mind, and we are not in a position to present this phenomenon visually.<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps we are going too far in this supposition. Perhaps we should be satisfied to assert that the past in mental life *can* be preserved and must not *necessarily* be destroyed. It is certainly possible that even in the mind some old material—normally or as an exception—is effaced or consumed to such a degree that it cannot be restored or reanimated by any process, or that preservation is generally associated with certain favorable conditions. It is possible, but we know nothing about this. We can only be sure that the preservation of the past in mental life is more the rule than a strange exception.

If we are so thoroughly willing to acknowledge that in many people there is an “oceanic” feeling, and if we are inclined to derive it from an early phase of ego-feeling, the further question arises: What claim does this feeling have for being considered the source of religious needs?

To me the claim does not seem compelling. Indeed, a feeling can only be a source of energy if it is itself the expression of a strong need. For religious needs, derivation from the child’s helplessness and the longing for the father this arouses seems to me incontrovertible, especially since this feeling does not simply continue from childhood, but is permanently retained due to fear of the superior power of Fate. I would be unable to point to a childhood need as strong as the need for protection by the father. Thus the role of the oceanic feeling, which one might say strives for the restoration of unlimited narcissism, is pushed back from the foreground. The origin of the religious attitude can be pursued in clear outlines back to the child’s feeling of helplessness. Something further may lie behind that, but for now it is concealed by fog.

---

1 Actually Freud had already provided a visual model in his essay of 1925, “A Note Upon the ‘Mystic Writing-Pad’” (SE 19: 225–32). There he compares the workings of memory and the conscious and unconscious mind to the *Wunderblock*, a toy that is still available today. With a stylus one writes on a plastic sheet, the words (or pictures) being revealed in wax (or carbon) against the sheet, and then erased by lifting the sheet. The traces of the “writing” remain imprinted in the wax block below, like a palimpsest waiting to be deciphered.



I can imagine that the oceanic feeling later became connected with religion. Being one with the universe, which functions as ideational content of the feeling, speaks to us like a first attempt at religious consolation—another way of denying the danger that the ego feels is threatening it from the external world. I confess again that it is very hard for me to work with these intangible quantities. Another friend of mine, whose insatiable drive for knowledge has led him to the most unusual experiments and has finally given him encyclopedic knowledge, has assured me that through the practice of yoga, by turning away from the external world, by focusing the attention on bodily functions, and by utilizing special breathing techniques, one can in fact call up in oneself new sensations and basic feelings that he claims are regressions to primordial, long overlaid mental states. In them he sees, as it were, a physiological basis of much of the wisdom of mysticism. Connections with various obscure modifications of mental life, such as trance and ecstasy, surely lie close at hand. But I am moved to exclaim in the words of Schiller's diver:

... Es freue sich,  
Wer da atmet im rosigten Licht.<sup>1</sup>

## II

In my essay *The Future of an Illusion*, the discussion was concerned much less with the deepest sources of religious feeling than with what the common man understands as his religion—the system of doctrines and promises that on the one hand clears up for him the riddles of this world with enviable completeness, and on the other hand assures him that a careful Providence will watch over his life and will, in an existence beyond this world, compensate him for whatever has been denied him. The common

---

1 "Let him rejoice / Who breathes there in the roseate light" (Schiller, "Der Taucher" [The Diver], 1797). The idea is that mysticism is akin to drowning in water, a pointed quip at Rolland's term "oceanic." In his copy of *Civilization* sent to Rolland in March 1931, Freud inscribed a playful greeting that reaffirmed the essential difference between rationalist and mystic, land dweller and ocean dweller: "The Landtier to his great Oceanic Friend," *Seinem Grossen, ozeanischen Freund, das Landtier* (in Fisher 1976: 40). Rolland rejected the opposition as false. Johann Christoph Friedrich von Schiller (1759–1805) was a German playwright, historian, and philosopher best remembered for his plays.