

Adolf Grünbaum on religious delusions

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Abstract. Grünbaum claims it is possible that all belief in God is a delusion, meaning a false belief which is engendered by irrational psychological motives. I dispute this on the grounds that in many cases belief in God is engendered by purely cultural factors, and this is incompatible with its being engendered by psychological ones. Grünbaum also claims that saying a culturally engendered belief cannot be a delusion makes social consensus the sole arbiter of reality. I dispute this on the grounds that we can say that socially engendered beliefs fail to be delusions because they fail to meet the psychological criterion, rather than because they are true.

This paper is written in response to a recent article by Adolf Grünbaum, in which he considers Freud's psychoanalytic explanations of religion.¹ Grünbaum is critical of these explanations but, in my view, not critical enough. My arguments will have a broader application than Grünbaum's article, however – they will apply to psychological explanations of religion in general.

I

PSYCHOLOGICAL EXPLANATIONS OF RELIGION

There is a long tradition of thinkers who believe it is possible to apply a common explanatory template to all the different manifestations of religion around the world. For example, Marx tried to apply a single economic template, Durkheim a sociological one, and so on.² An influential member of this tradition is Freud, who in such works as *Totem and Taboo* and *The Future of an Illusion*, claimed that religions shared important features with neuroses. According to Freud's theory, these shared features included origins. Very briefly, he believed that religious beliefs originated in an immature mind responding to a traumatic event, leading to repression and the formation of 'symptoms' – i.e., religious beliefs and practices. The formative events are supposed by Freud to have occurred on a collective level, far back in the prehistory of mankind, and to be subsequently 'recapitulated' in the life of every of every religious individual. Thus, for Freud, religious beliefs are indicative of neurosis on both the individual and the collective levels.

¹ 'Psychoanalysis and theism', in Adolf Grünbaum *Validation in the Clinical Theory of Psychoanalysis* (Madison, Connecticut: International Universities Press, 1993), 257–309.

² These and other examples (including Freud) are examined in Peter Clarke and Peter Byrne *Religion Defined and Explained* (London: St. Martin's Press, 1993).

This theory has been severely criticized from many angles. Chief among these criticisms are the following:

(1) The features of religion which the theory, if true, would explain – e.g., belief in a father-like God – are in many religions either absent or not very important.³ Thus, the theory *at best* applies only to a subset of the class of religions.

(2) The theory relies very heavily on anthropological and historical hypotheses, many of which have subsequently been shown to be poorly supported by evidence.⁴

(3) The model for explaining neuroses which Freud applied to religion is itself evidentially ill-founded.

In Chapter 7 of *Validation in the Clinical Theory of Psychoanalysis*, Grünbaum considers Freud's psychoanalytic explanations of religion. In essence, Grünbaum's position is the same as (3) above. He is sceptical about many of the details of these explanations, because they are based on clinical explanations which, he believes, are insufficiently warranted by evidence. However, he accepts Freud's claim that many religious beliefs are *delusions* – i.e., false beliefs which are engendered by irrational psychological motivations. For example, Grünbaum claims that belief in the doctrine of the virgin birth bespeaks 'a strong desire to *dissociate* motherhood from sexuality'⁵ and may be inspired by 'a guilt-ridden, jaundiced view of sexuality'.⁶ Other religious beliefs he considers to be held due to wish-fulfilment.⁷ I do not dispute Grünbaum's claim that religious beliefs are, in some individuals, engendered by the irrational psychological motives of which he speaks. What I wish to dispute is two further claims he makes: that it is possible that *all* belief in God could be engendered by irrational psychological motivations; and that if one holds that culturally engendered beliefs are not delusions, one thereby makes social consensus the sole arbiter of reality.

My argument will, however, have a broader application than Grünbaum's paper, or Freud's theory. What I wish to call into question is the very idea that it is possible to give purely psychological explanations of all religious beliefs, or even all instances of a particular religious belief (such as belief in God). My argument will go beyond the criticisms of Freud listed above. It would still apply to any psychological theory of religion even if all religions did share a single feature such as belief in God. That is not to say that I do believe all religions in fact share such a common feature. I believe that Clarke and Byrne are right to be sceptical about the possibility of finding one.⁸ However, my argument does not rely on this scepticism. Conversely, it would still apply if the theory confined itself to religions which shared such a feature.

³ See Clarke and Byrne, 8 and 201.

⁴ See Edwin R. Wallace *Freud and Anthropology* (New York: International Universities Press, 1983).

⁵ Grünbaum, 296.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 297.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 298.

⁸ Clarke and Byrne, 3–11.

It would also apply even if the anthropological and historical hypotheses and the general psychological models utilized by the theory were perfectly sound. Freud was not the only person to offer a psychological explanation of religion. Jung did so also, and Clarke and Byrne convincingly argue that he is closer to Freud in this matter than is often supposed. Freud did not claim that his account of religion gave a complete explanation of all manifestations of religion. In *Totem and Taboo*, he says:

There are no grounds for fearing that psychoanalysis, which first discovered that psychical acts and structures are invariably overdetermined, will be tempted to trace the origin of anything so complicated as a religion to a single source. If psychoanalysis is compelled – and is, indeed, in duty bound – to place all the emphasis upon one particular source, that does not mean it is claiming either that that source is the only one or that it occupies first place among the numerous contributory factors.⁹

However, he did believe that irrational psychological motivations were operative in the minds of all religious believers, and part of the causal background of all religious beliefs. So although Freud does not make reductionist claims about religion, he does make universalist claims. Jung, despite his friendlier attitude to religion, takes a similarly universalist approach. A non-universalist psychological claim is made in *The Pursuit of the Millennium* by Norman Cohn. Cohn believes that the mediaeval millenarians suffered from paranoia.¹⁰ My points will also apply to claims of this type. Grünbaum's two claims provide a useful focus for my argument.

II

GRÜNBAUM'S FIRST CLAIM

Grünbaum makes the first claim explicitly on page 284: 'we can *allow* that all cases of belief in God may perhaps be inspired by conscious favoritism for consoling beliefs, combined with any repressed wishes that do turn out to have such psychogenetic credentials'. What he is saying is that it is possible that all belief in God may be held because it fulfils wishes – such as, presumably, the wish to be cared for, to feel safe, etc. – rather than because of rational justifications such as evidence or argument. He considers these wishes normal and such as would be avowed by many perfectly sane people. He says: 'it is rather a commonplace that people seek to avoid anxiety, and that they therefore tend to welcome the replacement of threatening beliefs by reassuring ones'.¹¹ He quickly adds 'which is not to say, however, that it is obviously true'.¹² Nonetheless, as the quotation above clearly indicates, he does not think it is impossible in principle that all belief in God could be so

⁹ Sigmund Freud *Totem and Taboo* in James Strachey (ed.) *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (London: Hogarth Press, 1955), vol. 12, 100.

¹⁰ Norman Cohn *The Pursuit of the Millennium* (London: Paladin, 1962).

¹¹ Grünbaum, 265.

¹² *Ibid.*

engendered. Note that there is a difference between, on one hand, merely having such wishes as the wish to be cared for, etc., and on the other, letting one's beliefs be swayed by those wishes. The first may be perfectly normal and rational, but the second is a case of irrational psychological motivation. Grünbaum goes further and says that all belief in God may be inspired not only by these normal, openly avowed wishes, but by repressed wishes, i.e., ones which people having them would not avow even to themselves. Among the repressed wishes which Grünbaum considers may have helped bring about belief in God, are the classical Freudian Oedipal and obsessional ones. Grünbaum considers that Freud did not produce sufficient evidence to prove the existence of these wishes: 'far from having good empirical support, at best these obsessional and oedipal hypotheses have yet to be adequately tested, even prior to their use in a psychology of religion'.¹³ Nonetheless, Grünbaum thinks Freud's case is only not proven; he still thinks it is possible in principle that all belief in God is motivated by such wishes, together with the less controversial un-repressed ones. There may be some cases where belief in God is so motivated. It is the move from *some* to *all*, even considered as a possibility, to which I wish to object.

The obvious objection is that surely, in many cases, belief in God is engendered by purely cultural factors – i.e., it is passively accepted by an individual because it is a generally held belief in the society in which that individual grew up. It would seem that a belief acquired in such a way cannot be said to be engendered by irrational psychological motives. It seems obvious that the categories 'culturally engendered' and 'irrationally psychologically motivated' are mutually exclusive. If it is true that in many cases belief in God is purely culturally engendered, the only way to uphold Grünbaum's claim is to deny this mutual exclusivity. So Grünbaum's claim that belief in God may always be irrationally psychologically motivated can only be true if *either* it is possible that belief in God is never culturally engendered, *or* a belief's being culturally engendered is compatible with its being engendered by irrational motives.

The first option does not seem remotely plausible; in many cases, belief in God must have been acquired by individuals as part of their education from parents, teachers, etc., and since then, simply not questioned. Alternatively, it may be accepted simply because someone who is generally regarded as an expert in those matters obviously accepts it. This latter possibility is still a cultural factor, because I am talking here about someone who is generally regarded as an expert, not someone who is so regarded by a single other individual or fringe group. For someone to be generally regarded as an expert, just means that the public at large trusts that person's opinions in a certain field. It does not, of course, say anything about whether or not that

¹³ *Ibid.*, 275.

person's opinions really are trustworthy. For many people, doctors, scientists, historians, counsellors etc., are experts in this sense. In many societies, religious leaders are too. One might want to say, then, that in the cases of ordinary, unreflecting religious believers, their belief in God is a product of cultural background, not of psychological factors. Then, since irrational motives are just a particular class of psychological factors, the belief cannot be a product of irrational motives.

This, however, assumes that 'being a product of cultural factors' and 'being a product of psychological factors' are mutually exclusive. Someone who wants to defend the claim that all belief in God, even that of ordinary unreflecting believers, may be irrationally motivated, only has to deny this mutual exclusivity. There is evidence that Grünbaum does deny it. For example, he criticizes the Oxford *Psychiatric Dictionary*'s definition of delusion for saying that 'culturally engendered concepts are not considered delusions'.¹⁴ He comments: 'Evidently, no matter how inordinately primitive, superstitious or anthropomorphic the belief, it does not earn the Oxford label "delusion" if it is *shared* in its cultural milieu'.¹⁵ It appears from this complaint that Grünbaum thinks it should be permissible to classify a belief as delusional solely in virtue of its being 'inordinately primitive, superstitious or anthropocentric', regardless of whether or not it is culturally engendered. Further, he commends Freud because the latter 'does not relativize his notion of delusion to social reality'.¹⁶ There are three ways in which one might try to evade the dichotomy of culturally acquired versus irrationally motivated.

(i) One is to say that the social ways of acquiring beliefs which I have described are (or can be) reflective of irrational motives on the part of the individual who thus acquires them.

(ii) Another is to say that a belief of mine being irrationally motivated does not depend on my having acquired it as a result of *my own* irrational motives. On this view, even though my belief in God is not engendered by my irrational motives, it is nonetheless engendered by irrational psychological motives because the people from whom I acquired the belief (or the people from whom they in turn acquired it, etc.) acquired it because of *their* irrational motives.

(iii) A third possibility is that the beliefs are engendered by irrational psychological motives, but they are not the irrational psychological motives of any individual. This view requires that whole groups may have irrational psychological states, which do not require that any of the individuals in that group be irrational – just as a person's being mentally ill does not require malfunctioning of individual neurones. I will try to further explain this slightly obscure notion later.

¹⁴ Robert J. Campbell (ed.) *Psychiatric Dictionary* 5th edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), 157, quoted by Grünbaum, 286. Henceforth 'OPD'. ¹⁵ Grünbaum, 286.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 287.

I hope it is clear that these three options exhaust all the possibilities if one wants to say that a given belief is irrationally motivated. Either it is irrationally motivated because of *my* (the person who holds the belief's) motivations (option i), or because of *someone else's* motivations (option ii), or because of motivations which are not the motivations of *any individual* (option iii). I will take each of these three options in turn.

(i) It may be that to accept beliefs simply because they are accepted by most others in one's society is itself irrational (in the psychological sense). Or, to leave beliefs which were acquired in one's childhood unquestioned is irrational. I might conform because I crave others' approval.

However, if it was correct to say that to accept beliefs simply because they are accepted by most others in one's society is itself irrational in the psychological sense, there would be as much reason to call the belief of lay people in science irrational, as their belief in religion. If conformity to beliefs without evidence is *by itself* supposed to be indicative of irrational motives, then by definition this is not in the least affected by the content of those beliefs.

Some might want to say that belief in God – at least if He is seen as a benevolent, loving God, as is usual in Christianity – flies in the face of blatantly obvious facts, such as the amount of evil and suffering in the world. This line of argument might continue, acceptance of the belief in the face of such obvious facts can only be because of deliberate self-blinding, which in turn suggests irrational psychological motives. This point is not answered by saying that theologians and philosophers have proposed solutions to the problem of evil, because those solutions tend to be highly intellectually refined, and certainly less obvious than the existence of the problem itself. In other words, from the point of view of 'common sense' it ought to be obvious that there are good reasons for doubting the existence of God. Even assuming this to be true, however, this does not suffice to call belief in God irrationally motivated, because many scientific theories fly in the face of similarly 'obvious' facts. In modern societies, everyone learns in school that the Earth goes around the Sun, that matter is made of tiny particles, etc., in spite of obvious appearances to the contrary. How many people would know how to justify these beliefs, other than by appeal to scientific authority?

Furthermore, using such passive acceptance as evidence of irrational motives ignores the necessity of taking a great many beliefs on trust, which is imposed on individuals by the limitations of time and other resources. Such gullibility as this may be deplorable from the point of view of an ideal epistemologist, but in a complex world where people are busy with day-to-day concerns, it is unavoidable. Even experts have to accept the opinions of other experts on areas outside their expertise – which means most areas.

We would also have to consider the individual's level of intelligence. The person may have been converted to a religion because they were unable to see flaws in a preacher's arguments which would be obvious to someone else.

It may be the case that unconscious wishes blinded the person to those flaws, but it may be simply lack of intelligence.

Consider the belief that bringing electrical appliances into the bath is dangerous because of certain properties of electricity. We could, in this case, easily test the belief that it will kill the person in the bath, if we could find a willing volunteer. But we never actually do this – we simply take the belief on trust. There are many scientific theories which lay people explicitly or implicitly accept, and which we would have no idea how to set about testing. This is not to say that the justifications for these theories do not exist, but it does mean that, if holding and acting upon a belief which we cannot or do not justify is irrational, then virtually everyone is irrational. Clearly it is necessary to make many assumptions in order to function in everyday life. But does this mean that any old assumptions will do? Clearly not, but most ordinary, sane people have no choice, given the busyness of their lives, but to accept the opinions of ‘experts’ on many issues. That certain opinions of ‘experts’ in certain societies can be challenged by present-day scientific evidence, can hardly be given as evidence that acceptance of those opinions by non-‘experts’ is a sign of irrational motives. This is not to say that belief in God and belief in the heliocentric or atomic theories are *epistemologically* equivalent, but that in many cases they are *psychologically* equivalent. It is precisely their psychological status that is at issue here.

A more subtle variant of this option is this: what moved me to accept a belief suggested to me by someone else was that the belief satisfied some deep emotional need of mine. This does not require that the passive acceptance of beliefs on trust is always indicative of irrational psychological motives. If we accept this possibility, the belief in question is culturally acquired, but *my* holding it is due to individual psychological factors. Grünbaum (following Freud) appears to favour this view. He suggests that certain deep-seated emotional needs, which virtually everyone has, are catered for by religious beliefs.¹⁷ For example, let’s say that virtually everyone has deep-seated needs to feel protected, loved, etc., and that believing in God goes some way towards meeting these needs. So, these needs unconsciously motivate my accepting the belief in God which I find ready-made in the society in which I grow up. However, if there is no other option open to me, then it makes no sense to say that my holding the belief is motivated by unconscious wishes or whatever. A belief may *coincide with* unconscious wishes, but to say that I hold it *as a result of* those wishes, when my holding the belief was determined by cultural factors, is nonsensical. It would be like saying that, because I am glad I have arms, my having arms is as a result of my wishes. It may seem that I have exaggerated the necessity of accepting culturally engendered beliefs here, but nonetheless for ordinary believers, especially in societies where alternative viewpoints are simply not available, there is realistically

¹⁷ See Grünbaum, 272, especially the quotation from Freud.

no choice but to accept them. It has to be accepted that many religious beliefs are acquired by individuals due to social factors, and not psychological ones.

(ii) The second option requires that the beliefs were acquired by someone as a result of *their* irrational motives, and subsequently acquired by me culturally. If we allow this we can say that such beliefs fulfil the criterion of being ‘irrationally motivated’.

A case could be made that, at least sometimes, deep-seated wishes motivated theologians, mystics, visionaries, and other extraordinary religious types. It may further be the case that the religious beliefs of ordinary people derive, albeit indirectly, from these extraordinary types. This may lead us to conclude that the religious beliefs of ordinary people are irrationally motivated after all. So, strictly speaking, if this were the case, we would have to say that one of the criteria for those beliefs being delusional has been fulfilled. If the beliefs are also false, then they are delusions according to the definition. This leads to the odd conclusion that a person who is psychologically perfectly rational (i.e., perfectly sane, well-balanced etc.) could nonetheless be subject to delusions.

But supposing I ask the opinion of a scientist on a question within his acknowledged area of expertise. Unbeknownst to me this scientist has, for irrational motives of his own, a pet theory which relates to the specific question I ask. According to the understanding of delusion just articulated, if I accept his word I am deluded, rather than just misinformed. We would have to say that *my* belief in what the scientist tells me is irrationally motivated. My point here is that, in so describing my belief, we seem to be assuming that the psychological motive of some prior person in holding a belief, which I got from that person, is ‘the’ psychological motive for the belief. That in turn seems to require that, whenever a belief is acquired, we treat the motives for the belief as being acquired along with it. If we allow this, why do we not allow that someone who learns a scientific theory from a scientist also acquires the epistemological justification for that theory? I assume that, at least in some instances, that epistemological justification is the scientists’ motive for holding the theory. In any event, there seems no reason why we should allow one type of reason for a belief to be transmitted, but not the other. This is why I think we should not classify beliefs as irrationally motivated by means of this strategy.

In any event, saying that religious beliefs fulfil the criterion of being ‘irrationally motivated’ because they were irrationally motivated at some time in the past, assumes that they *were* irrationally motivated at some time in the past. We still have to consider the question of what epistemological resources were practically available to the people who originally developed the belief. Many theological assumptions and arguments may have been reasonable given the resources available in, say, mediaeval times. Grünbaum appears to accept that, even in the case of someone individually adopting a

belief, rather than culturally acquiring it, it may be due to inadequate epistemological resources, and not irrational motives. He shows this when he says that ‘the belief that the earth is flat may be induced mainly by inadequate observations, rather than by wishes’.¹⁸ In fact, he goes further and says that even an epistemological justification which is inadequate can be a sufficient motive for a belief. That is, it may be that this inadequate justification, and not an irrational motive, motivated the belief:

Let us grant Freud that theists have produced no proofs for the existence of God that are cogent, either severally or even collectively. Then there still remains the motivational question whether some of the faithful, when giving assent to theism, had not, in fact, *been decisively motivated by supposed proofs, rather than deep-seated wishes*.¹⁹

It seems, then, that if I am convinced by a poor argument to agree with a view, then my agreement with this view need not have been irrationally motivated. This raises the question – how poor does the argument have to be before we can say that, for example, wish-fulfilment played a decisive role in my accepting its conclusion? Further, does my level of intelligence play a part in answering this? I will leave these questions aside, however.

Inadequacy of observational data is not the only consideration here. A further consideration is availability of alternative theories. I am not talking here about the claim I made earlier, that many ordinary religious believers do not, and probably could not, question the generally accepted view. What I am saying here is that it is reasonable, even for a reflective person, to accept the best currently available theory that explains the phenomena. For example, in a pre-Darwinian world, the argument from design may have led a perfectly rational person to conclude that there is a God. Even Richard Dawkins – no friend to religion – allows this when he says: ‘I could not imagine being an atheist at any time before 1859, when Darwin’s *Origin of Species* was published’.²⁰ MacIntyre makes a similar point in *Against the Self-Images of the Age*, when he says:

We must at once grant that if a contemporary scientist adopted the attitude to the classification of the animal species which ... was exhibited by the writer of Leviticus we should at once have to suppose him at least prima facie guilty of irrational behaviour. But notice that in ascribing irrationality to him we should be pointing to the incoherence and incompatibility between the beliefs and criteria which he already possessed and his new behaviour. It is not just that his behaviour would be at odds with what we believe to be appropriate; it would be at odds with what we know him to believe to be appropriate. But in the practices codified by the writer of Leviticus, there is no such incoherence; those who engaged in such practices were not trying to be Linnaeus and failing. The point of their enterprise was quite different.²¹

¹⁸ Grünbaum, 260.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 283, emphasis added.

²⁰ Richard Dawkins *The Blind Watchmaker* (London: Longmans, 1986), 5.

²¹ Alasdair MacIntyre ‘Rationality and the explanation of action’ in *Against the Self-Images of the Age* (London: Duckworth, 1971), 251–252.

However, MacIntyre's point is not quite the same as Dawkins's. What MacIntyre is suggesting is that *some* (not all) norms of rationality are culturally relative; Dawkins is merely saying that in the absence of adequate alternative theories, it was at some periods in the past rational to believe things which we no longer believe today. I do not know whether Grünbaum would accept MacIntyre's stronger claim. But this stronger claim is not necessary to my argument that, at many times in the past, the only alternatives to believing in God, even for a thoughtful person, would have been to produce a new theory or to simply suspend judgement. We do not have to call someone irrational in the psychological sense for failing to do either of these.

(iii) A final recourse is to say that a belief's being irrationally motivated does not mean that it is irrationally motivated *in the mind of any one individual*. This in turn requires that irrational motives – and therefore things like beliefs, wishes etc. – can be ascribed not only to individuals but to groups. Furthermore, it requires that a group's being irrational in this sense does not depend on any individuals in that group being irrational. This means that somehow we would have to ascribe beliefs and desires to groups, which are not simply the sum of the beliefs and desires of the members of the group. For irrationality in the psychological sense presupposes beliefs and desires, albeit irrational ones. Perhaps sense can be made of this notion of a 'collective mind'. However, it seems far more likely that psychological categories such as belief, wish etc. can only be applied to individuals. Freud at least was fully aware of the dependence of his psychoanalysis of religion on the notion of a collective mind. Towards the end of *Totem and Taboo*, he says: 'I have taken as the basis of my whole position the existence of a collective mind, in which mental processes occur just as they do in the mind of an individual.'²² Grünbaum, however, never mentions this issue.

Leaving the possibility of group psychology aside for the moment, what my arguments lead to is that for a belief to have been psychologically motivated at all (and a fortiori for it to have been irrationally psychologically motivated), the person who holds the belief must have somehow or other – even if unconsciously – *chosen* to hold it. This is because my holding a belief due to psychological factors requires that it was open for me not to hold it. This in turn requires either that my belief is in some way idiosyncratic, or that the society I live in is divided on the relevant issue in such a way that cultural factors alone are not sufficient to determine my views. Imagine, for example, growing up in a society where among my family, my teachers, my peers etc. there is a mix of theists, atheists and agnostics. In such a situation, my believing (or my not believing!) in God would probably have to be a matter of choice – albeit perhaps an unconscious choice. For many people in

²² Freud *Totem and Taboo*, 157.

western societies today, this is probably the situation. But equally there are many societies, and there were even more in the past, where this is *not* the situation – adherence to one religion is pretty much universal. In such cases, a belief must be in some way idiosyncratic before we can say it was engendered by psychological rather than cultural factors. This does not mean that the content of the belief has to be idiosyncratic – it may only be the intensity with which a person holds the belief.

Grünbaum strongly resists the idea that a belief has to be idiosyncratic to be a delusion. He asks: ‘how does the sharing of an avowedly delusional belief “fundamentally alter” its content? If a Protestant in Northern Ireland whips up a frenzied group of his coreligionists to have a hysterical fear of Irish Catholics, how is the agitator’s phobic belief basically changed thereby?’²³ He is of course right that the content of a belief is not altered by being shared, but the fact of a belief being shared may indicate that it is held for cultural, rather than psychological, reasons. So, while the agitator’s own belief may be phobic, his followers may have been convinced by arguments he produces, even if they are not very good arguments (we have seen that Grünbaum allows this possibility), or simply by the agitator’s generally being respected in the community. If this is so, then the beliefs of those followers, though they may be identical in content to the agitator’s, are not phobic, if phobic is taken to mean ‘engendered by irrational fears’.

Further, in his objections to the OPD’s definition of delusion to which I already referred, Grünbaum says: ‘we are not told how many others in a given society need to share an idea, if it is to be part of what the dictionary calls “social reality” [i.e., non-delusional, culturally engendered belief]. Does it have to be a majority?’²⁴

But there is no hard and fast line here. A belief held by one person alone and in the absence of evidence or reasoning, is almost certainly psychologically motivated. So too are the beliefs of a cult if they are unsupported by evidence or argument, and its members chose to join rather than being brought up in it. At the other extreme, a belief that is shared by virtually everyone in a society which has no dealings with other societies, is almost certainly *not* psychologically engendered for most people in that society. A belief does not have to be confined to one person to be psychologically engendered; there is such a thing as *folie à deux* (and perhaps *folie à trois*, *à quatre* etc.). But the closer we get to a society where belief in God is universal, the less likely is it that belief in God on the part of an individual in that society is indicative of psychological motives on that individual’s part. This point also applies to Cohn’s claim that the mediaeval millenarians were paranoid. This can at best only hold of those who somehow *chose* the belief, so it cannot apply for example to those who grew up in millenarian communities.

²³ Grünbaum, 287.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 286.

Grünbaum quotes W. W. Meissner as distinguishing between ‘blind acceptance’ of religion and a ‘rarely attained level of religious maturity’.²⁵ Meissner believes that Freud’s theories only apply to the former. However, if my argument so far has been correct, ‘blind’ religious believers are exempt from Freud’s diagnosis. Having said all that, it must be emphasised that idiosyncrasy is a necessary condition for calling any belief irrationally psychologically motivated, not a sufficient one. A belief may be rationally motivated, even if idiosyncratic (and even if false).

I admit, however, that it is possible that we can ascribe beliefs and desires to groups, not just to individuals. The ‘mass hysteria’ manifested at football riots and so on may be a case in point. However, mass hysteria is a passing phenomenon and there is no reason to believe that it is the habitual state of any society. I cannot disprove the claim that there may be such a thing as group psychology in a sense which would support Grünbaum’s claim, however. I can only point out that it is, to say the least, a highly controversial notion. So my conclusion is that unless one accepts this highly controversial notion, it is not possible that all belief in God is engendered by psychologically irrational motives.

III

GRÜNBAUM’S SECOND CLAIM

Grünbaum further claims that if one holds that culturally engendered beliefs are not delusions, one thereby makes social consensus the sole arbiter of reality. This is clear in the objections he makes to the entry on ‘delusion’ in the fifth edition of the OPD. Grünbaum quotes from this entry as follows:

While it is true that some superstitions and religious beliefs are held despite the lack of confirmatory evidence, such culturally engendered concepts are not considered delusions. What is characteristic of the delusion is that it is *not* shared by others; rather it is an idiosyncratic and individual misconception or misinterpretation.²⁶

Grünbaum comments on this: ‘it allows a false belief to qualify as a delusion *only* if it is held idiosyncratically, *and it makes social consensus the sole arbiter of reality*’.²⁷

He contrasts this OPD definition of delusion with Freud’s. For Freud, delusions constitute a subclass of *illusions*. An illusion, according to Freud’s definition of the term, is a belief in which ‘wish-fulfilment is a prominent factor in its motivation’.²⁸ For a belief to be an illusion according to this definition, it is not necessary that it be false. However, it is not sufficient for the belief to merely coincide with the fulfilment of a wish – it must be

²⁵ W. W. Meissner *Psychoanalysis and Religious Experience* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), 15, quoted by Grünbaum, 273.

²⁶ OPD, 157, quoted by Grünbaum, 286.

²⁷ Grünbaum, 285, emphasis added.

²⁸ Freud *The Future of an Illusion*, 31. Grünbaum quotes this definition, 259.

completely or largely motivated by a wish. Grünbaum observes that: ‘Freud calls a belief an illusion, just when it is inspired by wishes *rather than* by awareness of some evidential warrant for it. Hence, as he uses the label, it is psychogenetically descriptive but epistemologically derogatory’.²⁹ A *delusion*, in Freud’s terminology, is a false illusion with a particular type of psychogenesis – one rooted in the same kind of unconscious mental processes as are neuroses. This definition renders the term ‘delusion’ psychologically, as well as epistemologically, derogatory – it entails that the person in the grip of a delusion has some of the characteristics which distinguish a neurotic from a normal, (rational, well-adjusted etc.) individual.

According to Freud’s definition, then, a delusion must fulfil three criteria: *wish-motivation* (it must be wholly or primarily motivated by a wish), *falsehood*, and *psychopathology* (it must have been caused by the same unconscious factors as give rise to neuroses). The OPD adds a fourth criterion: *idiosyncrasy*. To be fair, their definition only says that non-idiosyncratic beliefs do not *normally* count as delusions, but even if they had not made this qualification, Grünbaum’s claim, that they are making social consensus the sole arbiter of reality, would not hold.

Grünbaum quotes from the fourth edition of the OPD that a delusion is ‘maintained by one in spite of what to normal beings constitutes incontrovertible and “plain-as-day” evidence to the contrary’.³⁰ He considers that this statement is not in conflict with Freud’s concept of delusion. The conflict only arises, he thinks, with the introduction of a ‘sociological demurrer’: ‘further, the belief held is not one which is ordinarily accepted by other members of the patient’s culture or subculture (i.e., it is not a commonly believed superstition)’.³¹ However, this sociological factor is already implicit in the consideration of ‘what to normal beings constitutes incontrovertible and “plain-as-day” evidence’. On many subjects, not just religious ones, what is ‘plain-as-day’ varies from one society to another.

If we accept Freud’s general theory of neuroses, then their symptoms, including any beliefs which they engender, are disguised attempts to fulfil wishes. This means that, for Freud, if a belief fulfils the criterion of psychopathology, then it automatically also fulfils the criterion of wish-motivation. He more or less takes it for granted that religious beliefs are false. In attempting to establish that they are delusions, then, his main efforts go into establishing that they are psychopathological. If a belief happened to be true, but we showed that it was both wish-motivated and psychopathological, it would suffer from the same epistemological and psychological derogation as a delusion. We may not accept enough of Freud’s general theory to grant that any belief which is psychopathological is automatically wish-motivated,

²⁹ Grünbaum, 259–260.

³⁰ Leland E. Hinsie and Robert J. Campbell (eds.) *Psychiatric Dictionary* 4th edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), 191, quoted in Grünbaum, 285.

³¹ *Ibid.*

but even so, showing that it is psychopathological would on its own still be psychologically derogatory. Grünbaum is very sceptical about Freud's general theory, but he seems happy to accept the characterization of religious beliefs as akin to those of neurotics. He also believes that religious beliefs are false, and that they are motivated by wishes, albeit not necessarily the same wishes as those posited by Freud. So Grünbaum accepts that they fulfil all Freud's criteria for qualification as delusions.

I wish to say that we can grant Grünbaum his premise (which was also Freud's conviction) that social consensus is not the sole arbiter of reality, without granting that the non-idiosyncratic beliefs of (say) mediaeval Christians were delusions according to Freud's definition.

What Grünbaum appears to be worried about is that in saying that a culturally engendered belief is not a delusion, we are somehow granting that belief a kind of reality. So, he thinks, in doing so we are being culturally relativistic about reality. A short answer to this is implicit in what I have already said; in the whole of my argument to the effect that culturally engendered beliefs are not delusions, the question of whether or not the beliefs correspond to reality has not been raised. I have argued that a culturally engendered belief in God is not a delusion, on the grounds that culturally engendered beliefs are not irrationally psychologically engendered, *not* on the grounds that they are in any sense true. (I take it that Grünbaum is a realist, so he would not object to my using the terms 'truth' and 'reality' more or less interchangeably.) My claim that culturally engendered beliefs are not delusions does not depend on saying that the culturally engendered beliefs in any sense correspond to reality. So one can acknowledge that frequently people hold beliefs for cultural reasons, and that their doing so is not irrational in the psychological sense, without thinking that 'social consensus is the sole arbiter of reality'.

In the article I have already referred to, MacIntyre has argued that liberal historians of the nineteenth century, in describing the witch-hunters of earlier centuries as irrational, were confusing rationality with truth.³² MacIntyre also points out that there is an opposite mistake which some twentieth-century historians make in wanting to abandon ascriptions of rationality or irrationality to the beliefs of other cultures at all. This is a mistake, he argues, because whether we describe a belief as rational or irrational makes a difference to how we explain it. If we call it rational we commit ourselves to the view that it is explainable by reference to 'appropriate intellectual norms and procedures'.³³ But if we call it irrational, this is just to say that it fails to meet such norms, which means 'that the belief is held as the outcome of antecedent events or states or states of affairs which are quite independent of any relevant process of appropriate deliberation'.³⁴ It seems that Grün-

³² MacIntyre, 248.

³³ *Ibid.*, 247.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

baum, in trying to avoid the second type of error, may have slipped into the first. He wants to avoid being relativistic about truth and also, I think, about rationality. However, the claim that I have singled out implies that we are faced with just two alternatives. Either:

(1) We have to call (for example) the belief in God a delusion, which by definition implies that it is irrational in the psychological sense, or

(2) We have to say that a belief's being held by the majority of people in a society is a sufficient condition for calling that belief true. (Actually, he says that on the OPD definition of delusion social consensus is the sole arbiter of reality, so the view he is attacking allegedly makes social consensus both a necessary and a sufficient condition for truth. However, I will focus on the 'sufficient' aspect.) There are, however, two other alternatives:

(3) A belief may be false but rational.

(4) A belief may be both false and irrational without being held due to irrational psychological motives.

If we can show that false beliefs which are held due to social conformity fit either of these two possibilities, then we have shown that those beliefs are not delusions, since they fail to meet the 'psychopathology' criterion.

Possibility (3) would be the case if, for example, the belief formed an integral part of what, given the limitations of evidence, lack of alternative theories, etc., was the best explanation of things at the time. If Dawkins is right, belief in an artificer-God, prior to Darwin, would be an example. Any belief which flowed smoothly from this belief would also qualify, even if these 'secondary' beliefs did no actual explanatory work. For example, belief in an all-powerful God might lead smoothly to belief in the possibility of miracles, even in someone who had never actually witnessed an event that seemed to require a miraculous explanation.

Irrationality just means failing to meet appropriate norms. One may want to assert that some or all of these norms are culturally-independent, and that belief in God, or religious belief in general, always fails to meet these culturally-independent norms. There is evidence that Grünbaum is not so rigid as to think that the standards of rationality are such that anyone applying them in any circumstances will reach the same conclusions regarding everything. At least this seems to be implied when he says, as I have already quoted, 'the belief that the earth is flat may be induced mainly by inadequate observations, rather than by wishes'. (This may not be the best example: belief that the sun goes around the earth might be better.) I take it that he would accept that inadequate observations can at least sometimes be due to limitations in the available technology, rather than to any failure of rationality on the observers' part: they may simply have accepted what the evidence available to them most clearly suggested. Given the same circumstances, anybody might conclude that the earth is flat: *prima facie*, it appears flat. One can say this without falling into the obvious absurdity of

saying that when enough people started believing the earth was round, it became round. I don't think anybody actually believes this. However, some pragmatists and coherentists want to separate the notions of truth and reality, so they might say that at one time it was true that the earth was flat. Nonetheless, one can distance oneself from such a view, and say as loudly as one likes that in the Middle Ages it was false that the earth was flat, without saying that people who believed the earth was flat were thereby irrational.

However, Grünbaum might claim that no faulty observation could lead someone to believe in God without the influence of irrationality. He could simply disagree with Dawkins, and say that at no time did evidence warrant believing in God. This is a very difficult issue to adjudicate – Grünbaum could perhaps cite the arguments of Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* in support of the view that atheism, or at least agnosticism, made sense even before Darwin. He could also perhaps point to those early church fathers who said '*Credo quia absurdum*'. Let us allow, then, that belief in God fails to meet certain timeless standards of rationality. If this is so, then possibility (3) is ruled out for belief in God. He could then go further and say that if a belief is passively accepted due to social influences, this means that it is not based on appropriate rational norms. We might counter this by saying, with MacIntyre, that some norms of rationality are culturally relative. This does not quite address the issue, however, since we are not now talking about those who base a belief on norms which were considered appropriate at the time. Such people would be reflective believers, albeit they might be accused of failing to reflect on the norms by which they justify their beliefs. What we are talking about is believers who accept beliefs simply because they are generally held. One might argue that social consensus is one appropriate norm of justification, albeit one that does not take precedence over such other norms as the principle of non-contradiction, or the acceptance of overwhelmingly strong evidence. However, Grünbaum might deny even this.

In this event, we still have possibility (4): a belief may be irrational but due to causes other than psychological ones. The causes in question could be social – such as passive acceptance of generally held beliefs. As I have already argued, such passive acceptance is not in itself indicative of irrational psychological motives. This would mean that the person's belief is explained by causal factors, rather than rational norms. But the causal factors in question are social ones, rather than psychological ones.

If one is unhappy with the claim that some norms of rationality are culturally relative, one is still left with the possibility that a belief can be both false and irrational, while not indicative of irrational psychological motives on the part of the individual holding the belief. The belief *may* be due to irrational psychological motives on the part of whoever originated the belief. Even so, I have already argued we cannot say that it is irrationally psycho-

logically motivated on the part of the passive acceptor, unless we accept some kind of ‘group psychology’. If one does say that some norms of rationality are culturally relative, or that social consensus is itself one such norm, then one can say that a belief may be both false and rational. If any of these options are admitted, then one has to admit that a belief which is held purely due to social influences is not indicative of irrational psychological motives, and a fortiori, not a delusion. This can all be said without making social consensus the sole arbiter of reality.

In conclusion, I believe that in saying that Freud’s psychological explanations of religion are insufficiently warranted by evidence, but in principle possibly true, Grünbaum has let Freud off too lightly. My view is that there are good positive reasons for believing that Freud’s explanations of religion are false in many cases, rather than just not proven.³⁵

³⁵ I would like to thank Professor William Lyons for his helpful comments on earlier drafts of this paper.