Monotheism, the Incomplete Revolution: Narrating the Event in Freud’s and Assmann’s Moses

Ari Ofengenden

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FREUD’S AND ASSMANN’S MOSES

ARI OFENGENDEN

Introduction

The Man Moses and the Monotheistic Religion\(^1\) has traditionally been seen as the most speculative of Freud’s works. Freud wrote the book under the threat of rising Nazi power while suffering from cancer and knowing full well that it would be his last book. Interestingly, Freud does not choose to summarize his views on psychoanalysis, but boldly ventures into the field of biblical history, writing what he calls an “historical novel.” Bold but nevertheless writing in a defensive, almost neurotic style, Freud hedges his claims in a variety of ways, complaining about his own fading powers, highlighting the uncertainty of his findings even as he makes very audacious claims. Influenced by Dostoyevskian monologues, Freud positions himself as desperate narrator attempting the impossible, well aware of the speculative character of his undertaking. Freud’s historical novel was also inspired by his reading of Thomas Mann’s “Joseph and his Brothers,” and undeniably reads like a serialized novel which breaks off at key points in order to heighten suspense.

Freud’s audacious reconstruction of the story of Moses is by now well known. Moses was an Egyptian born priest or nobleman who lived at the time of the monotheistic revolution undertaken by Ikhnaton at 14 B.C.E. Ikhnaton violently negated polytheism, destroyed temples and statues of sacred Egyptian Deities, and was the first in human history to invent and call for the worship of an unseen, unified god by the name of Aten. Freud’s Moses was either a disciple or high priest of the new religion. However, the

\(^1\)The text is almost always translated as “Moses and Monotheism,” though the original is “Der Mann Moses und die monotheistische Religion.” I will be using the original German. See Freud (1999).
monotheistic revolution ultimately met a reactionary backlash and Moses was forced to side with “Semitic tribes” temporarily residing in Egypt, becoming their leader, bringing them out of Egypt, and giving them a new God and new laws. At some point, Moses and his people then joined another group of people who resided in Meribah-Kadesh and who believed in “JHWH” – a local angry volcanic God. In something like a psychic compromise formation (that is, behavior and outcome which results from the conflation of opposing tendencies in a person), the two different groups claimed the story of exodus as theirs but also named their god JAHWE, attributing to him all the characteristics of the angry, spiteful, volcanic God. The people, however resent the discipline and exacting demands that come with this exclusive, unrepresentable God, and – after several attempts at revolt – finally murder “the great man” Moses. After the killing they repress both the man and his exacting monotheism. However, the repressed memory returns, and by the spiritual leadership of the prophets, JHAWA takes on once more the characteristics of Aten, a universal, omnipotent, unseen, ethical God. Consequently, the Jews\(^2\) take upon themselves unprecedented instinctual renunciations for at least three primary reasons. They do so first because their God could not be seen and worshiped in an orgiastic manner. Secondly they do so to maintain his omnipotence in the face of military defeat, loss of power, and exile. They blamed themselves for not following his exacting commandments and made their laws even stricter and harder to follow. Thirdly, the Jews remained in denial about killing the “great man,” leaving their unconscious guilt intact which in turn demands even more strident renunciation. Those who became Christians, Freud concludes, have implicitly accepted that they have killed Moses/God and have had the son Jesus atone for their guilt by his own death. Indeed, Freud rhetorically asks what sin other than murder is atoned by death. Those who stayed Jews, however, have tragically refused to accept their guilt for killing Moses/God, which has been sustained in a displaced form by the claim that they have killed the Christ, and indeed have been made to “pay a heavy pittance for it.” Freud’s ethnogenesis of the Jewish people thus explains the essential features of Judaism and anti-Semitism as it presents three explanations for why the Jews took on new renunciations against sensual instinct.

\(^{2}\)Interestingly, Freud refers to them always as the Jews, not Israelites or Hebrews, probably to stress continuity with the present and to suppress alternative radical transformations that made Hebrews/Israelites into Jews.
Reception of Freud’s Moses

The book, while often considered wholly speculative, has frequently been treated as an example of Freud’s own hermeneutics of suspicion. Bracketing the book’s explicit content—which was deemed overly fantastical—these approaches have concentrated on the social and psychological pressures that lay behind its composition. Both Yosef Yerushalmi and Daniel Boyarin interpret the text through the lens of an implicit attempt at assimilation or “passing.” They claim that Freud stresses predominantly those aspects that make Moses and Judaism masculine, Kantian, and Protestant. They highlight Freud valorization of the noble origins of the “great man”—the unseen, ethical and universal God that he propagated and the renunciation of drives which was demanded of the people.

While these interpretations emphasize assimilatory pressures felt by Jewish Germans at least since the Enlightenment, Ilse Grubrich-Simitis emphasizes Freud’s personal concerns (Grubrich-Simitis 1990). Old and frail by his own account, threatened with exile and Nazi repression of psychoanalysis—his life work—Freud uses the heroic figure of Moses as a defensive identification, a figure from which he draws resolve and comfort. His Moses book thus functions as a kind of edifying daydream of the hero, which vaguely promises that even if he and his immediate disciples are killed and his teachings suppressed this repression will not be successful in the long run and, like Moses, Freud and psychoanalysis will achieve a world historical significance.

However, despite their insights, these personal explanations suffer from being wholly underdetermined. Assimilation projects could be pursued by divergent and complex means, and a fascination with Moses may not be the most straightforward way to approach this project. Freud could have chosen any number of heroes to identify with for his last book, including Hannibal, his childhood favorite, or indeed continue with his basic identification with the Greek Hero Oedipus. Even if we concede that assimilatory pressures, when coupled with the rise of anti-Semitism, can sometimes lead to novel re-examinations and affirmations of the roots of tradition (for example, in Buber’s and Schonberg’s works on Moses), the differences between their treatments are more interesting than their commonalities. Assimilatory pressure as explanation for Freud’s focus on Moses also fails to establish possible connections between Freud’s account, real history, and remembered tradition. Most importantly, perhaps, it also fails to account for the power and fascination of Freud’s text—an attraction that cannot always be explained by similar pressures among its readers.

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3I am using Paul Ricoeur’s term which typifies Freud as the master of hermeneutics of suspicion; see Ricoeur (1970, 30).
4See Yerushalmi (1992) and Boyarin (1997).
5For similarities and differences among these projects, see Goldstein (1992).
Jan Assmann (Or, Monotheism and its Discontents)

A less suspicious and more accepting and elaborating perspective on Freud’s Moses is taken by Egyptologist Jan Assmann. Assmann looks at Freud’s Egyptian Moses as one in a long series of attempts to undo the negative aspects of monotheism. Using ancient Egyptian and classical Hebrew sources, Assmann reconstructs a narrative which is as audacious as Freud’s original story. Assmann first establishes that Akhenaton’s monotheistic revolution was a catastrophic trauma for Egypt and the ancient world. This revolution, Assmann says, was “not only the first but also the most radical and violent eruption of a counter-religion in the history of humankind. The temples were closed, the images of the gods were destroyed, their names were erased and the cults discontinued…. The consciousness of a catastrophe and irreparable crime must have been quite widespread” (Assmann 1998, 26).

The radical counter-religion was first and foremost an inversion of the Egyptian religion, one God instead of many Gods and a strict prohibition of images, which were the only way to connect with the divine in the Egyptian tradition. Since the advent of the monotheistic revolution coincided with a devastating plague, horror at the ‘irreparable crime’ was accompanied by fear of contagion, of death and physical disgust. These reactions first were associated with Akhenaton’s revolution, but soon displaced onto the Jews, thereby forming the core of anti-Semitism. This core of anti-Semitism survived up to the twentieth century in Nazi images of the Jew as disease-carrying rat or insect. As a post-war German intellectual, Assmann thus attempted to create a genealogy of anti-Semitism and its complex relations with the trauma of monotheism. This trauma inaugurates a new religious space—the space of a counter-religion—and the associated feeling of abomination and disgust toward the old religion. In addition, the monotheist revolution severed the very cultural space of the ancient world and created a new type of religion, a “counter-religion”—that is, a religion that negates everything that went before it and views this past as “paganism.”

This “counter-religion” lasted only for 13 years and its traumatic memory was repressed and eventually displaced. Although long forgotten, Atenism was rediscovered only in the early twentieth century. In the interim, the West inherited the memory of monotheism not as Atenism but as the Mosaic distinction. This distinction is represented in the narrative of Exodus itself by the commandments and laws that denigrated Egypt as idolatry, error, and abomination while presenting Israel and Jehovah as truth and justice. Assmann thus claims that Freud’s book on Moses should be interpreted as one in a long series of attempts to undo the Mosaic distinction, a distinction which brought intolerance and violence, a brutal style of othering.

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6 It remains an open question whether Assmann’s interpretation is anachronistic, reading back into Egypt the counter-ideological othering of the 20th century and implicitly viewing Nazism as a reaction to a traumatic “communist distinction” or other modern ideologies that follow from the Mosaic distinction.
taken on by both Christianity and Islam which was then displaced onto to Jews themselves.

Attempts to undo the Mosaic distinction got their initial impetus from Spinoza, who eliminated the fundamental distinction between God and world through postulating a God/Nature as a substance with infinite attributes. Only with Spinoza’s radical immanence could a counter-history take place, one that attempts to create continuity between Egypt and Israel. Spinoza’s substance, which is God and nature at the same time, allows for mediation between polytheistic nature-gods and sublime transcendent monotheistic God. Moses as an Egyptian is a figure of immanence rather than transcendence, a figure of transformation of Egyptian mysteries rather than of revelation. Spinoza eliminated the contrast between polytheism/world/nature in error and monotheism/transcendence in truth. His philosophy ultimately led to a different appraisal of ancient Egyptian culture as Spinozaist and “cosmotheist,” and to persistent attempts to undo the Mosaic distinction. For Assmann, Freud’s book is part of a particular Western discourse on Moses as Egyptian whose hidden agenda is the dismantling or undoing of the Mosaic distinction. As Assmann states:

The agenda of the Moses/Egypt discourse was to deconstruct “counter-religion” and its implications of intolerance by blurring the basic distinctions as they were symbolized by the antagonistic constellation of Israel and Egypt. “Revelation” had to be (re)turned into “translation.” (Assmann 1998, 147)

While critiquing monotheism as counter-religion, Assmann also recognizes the way in which the Mosaic distinction decoupled the religious from the political by enabling an autonomous religious domain via direct contract between God and people. This decoupling circumvents the “channeling” of sacredness through the exclusive channel of political authority, and, in a sense, results in the process of a “democratization” of the sacred. The commandments inaugurate a direct covenant between the people and God, one that creates a space for the religiously inspired critique of political authority as practiced by the prophets. As Assmann states,

By making salvation the sole prerogative of god and withdrawing it from the control of temporal powers, monotheism ensures that precious little remains of sovereignty apart from a king who must prostrate himself before the Torah and study it day and night. Essentially, royalty disappears. (Assmann 1998, 48)

If one combines the two seemingly unrelated effects discussed by Assmann—let us call them, monotheism as counter-religion and monotheism as democratization—one can say that the Mosaic distinction cleaves two simultaneous new spaces. On the one hand, it creates a level of spiritual autonomy from the political ruler because it is a religion “for the people”
almost directly. On the other hand, the Mosaic distinction also constructs a radically rejected other which reinforces the chosen character of the group. Although they appear repeatedly in his writings, Assmann never makes a connection between these two aspects of monotheism, leaving us to wonder regarding their possible dependence.

**Assmann’s Liberal Critique of Revolution**

Contrary to Assmann, one could more positively claim that revolutions empower the masses and win them autonomy in a process of democratization that precisely parallels the creation of a radically negated other. This other is not only outside of oneself (like an ethnic or class based other) but represents both a former self that exists before conversion, and a persisting counterrevolutionary temptation inside the person and in the group. Assmann exemplifies these tensions by emphasizing the violence associated with the Mosaic distinction while making his argument that monotheism exhibits a strong potential for violence—not only against the other, but against the people themselves:

Then Moses stood at the gate of the camp and said, “Whoever is for the LORD—to me!” And the Levites gathered round him. And he said to them, “Thus says the LORD God of Israel: Put every man his sword on his thigh, and cross over and back from gate to gate in the camp, and each man kill his brother, and each man his fellow, and each man his kin.” And the Levites did according to the word of Moses, and about three thousand men of the people fell on that day. (New King James Version, Exod. 32:27-28)

Should your brother, your mother’s son, or your son or your daughter or the wife of your bosom or your companion who is like your own self incite you in secret, saying, “Let us go and worship other gods,” that you did not know, neither you nor your fathers, from the gods of the people that are all around them, the ones close to you or the ones far from you from the end of the earth to the end of the earth, you shall not assent to him and you shall not heed him, and your eye shall not spare him and you shall not pity and shall not shield him. But you shall surely kill him. Your hand shall be against him first to put him to death and the hand of all the people last. And you shall stone him and he shall die, for he thought to thrust you away from the LORD your God. (Deuteronomy 13:7-10)

As Assmann states, “We are dealing here with a new, intensified empathic notion of truth that does not permit any compromise with what it excludes as untrue” (Assmann 2010, 3). One can elaborate on this insight and say that a direct contact with certain truth entails a radical, militant stance that
necessarily creates the other as pagan, infidel, counterrevolutionary. This sense of empathic truth thus leads both to war and terror against counterrevolutionary forces, as monotheism thus creates a new kind of truth.\footnote{In this case, we can fuse Carl Schmitt’s friend-foe distinction with revolutionary traditions and say that radical impulse toward democratization finds its expression in a creation of the political distinction of friend-foe. This fact is true externally as well as internally in that there are many vested interests that must be overcome for the process of democratization to succeed.} As Assmann states, “The truth derives its depth, it clear contours, and its capacity to orient and direct action from this antagonistic energy, and from the sure knowledge of what is incompatible with the truth….the truth to be proclaimed comes with an enemy to be fought. Only they know of heretics and pagans, false doctrine, sects, superstition, idolatry, magic, ignorance, unbelief, heresy…” (Assmann 2010, 4). Assmann’s critique of the Mosaic distinction is actually a liberal critique of a strong sense of political truth—a truth that is unwilling to be translated or altered. We can again understand Assmann as a post-war intellectual responding to Nazism: what seems to bother him most about Nazism is its intolerance and totalitarian belief in itself and its Carl Schmittian conception of the political. As Schmitt says:

The political is the most intense and extreme of antagonism, and every concrete antagonism becomes that much more political the closer it approaches the most extreme point, that of the friend-enemy grouping. (Schmitt 1996, 29)

One can say that, according to Assmann, monotheism introduced the political in the Schmittian sense by bringing the absolute friend-enemy distinction into the cultural/religious sphere. Religion was always political before monotheism, but it was never political in the Schmittian sense in that it did not involve the friend-enemy distinction. Although he would probably disavow this, Assmann’s texts themselves thus hint at level of proximity between monotheism and Nazism in their conception of a total enemy. Indeed, some have commented that his critique ultimately implies “a blame the victim” explanation of anti-Semitism (Wolin 2013, n.p.). Realizing that his critique is likely to offend many, and as part of a scholarly, humanistic, and liberal framework of his studies, Assmann enumerates the virtues of monotheism, even while recognizing the role of violence in its origins:

\[\text{[It]} \text{ is also important to remember for what this price has been paid. Monotheism means exodus, that is enlightenment. It means the liberation of mankind from the constraints of the powers of this world, of the given. It means the discovery of an alternative realm of human commitment and investment beyond the traditional realms of state, society and nature. It means the discovery of inner man and new dimensions of subjectivity. As a final consequence, the distinction between true and false means distinction between God and world. (Assmann 2008, 125)}\]
Here, Assmann valorizes the discourse of Moses as Egyptian that—following Spinoza’s radical philosophy—undoes the difference between God and world. By depicting monotheism in this manner, does Assmann not attempt to defend against would-be criticisms from a world deeply invested in monotheism? How can one resolve the tension between the call of violence in monotheism and its freedom from the world?

Redefining the focus of monotheism may help resolve these tensions. Instead of looking at the Moses distinction as being concerned with the difference between true religion and false religion many traditions see it as a distinction between slavery and freedom, a distinction regarding emancipation, a Moses of “let my people go.” The emancipation of slaves from Egypt, although acknowledged, is peripheral in Assmann’s account of Moses. One can argue against Assmann that that the empathic truth of monotheism—its emphasis on a single god—does not exist as something separate from the an emancipation process, “empathic truth” is a result of the creation of a true collective subject of emancipation and from withstanding the difficult trials, regressions and renunciations of the emancipatory process itself.

One can thus look at the truth of monotheism as inexorably linked with emancipation, reversing the idea that religious truth exists in a Platonic form as an objective thing preceding man and his actions. Emphatic truth should instead be seen as supervening on and a direct result of emancipatory praxis. The ultimate religious content of monotheism can be seen as a direct result of the struggle for liberation. In many ways, this way of formulating the truth of monotheism broadly utilizes Alain Badiou’s philosophy, more particularly his claim that truth is essentially the truth of an event and of praxis (truth procedure). But at the same time this account of monotheism exists in active tension with Badiou’s partiality for Paul over and above any other religious figure or event, since Moses is arguably the more fitting Badiouian militant figure of emancipatory politics (Badiou 2003). Indeed, when introducing Paul, Badiou negates Paul’s constituting event (Christ resurrected), which he calls a fable (Badiou 2003, 5-6). Christ resurrected also does not correspond to any of the truth conditions which Badiou recognizes (art, science, love, politics) as the basis of any truth event (Badiou 2009). “Exodus” whether a fable or loosely based on historical truth is at its core a political, emancipatory event which fits Badiou’s political truth conditions much better than “Christ resurrected.” When the event of Exodus is invoked, actual liberation is invoked with it. The violent political transformation from slavery to freedom is an instance of Badiou’s own conception of the political, that is a revolutionary politics in a way in which Paul’s demand for a conversion to a life in Christ is not. Exodus thus forms a better model for emancipatory politics and can even be used as the basis for extension and critique of Badiou himself. Exodus, for instance allows us to critique Badiou’s individualism, that is his insistence on explicating the relationship between a single person...
and the truth event, rather than see the truth event as something collective.\(^8\) Indeed his stress on individualism is difficult to reconcile with his commitment to Marxism. All Marxisms both orthodox variants who think in terms of class war, ideology and revolution as well as reconstructed Marxism such as Habermas’ communicative reason, stress that both truths and events are collectively produced. More in line with this radical emancipatory tradition is the story of Exodus where all truths and events are essentially collective.\(^9\)

Such a collective orientation helps us valorize monotheism as an ideology arising from collective liberation struggle. In this sense, the essence of monotheism its spiritual basis, otherworldliness and ethical drive is common to all subsequent collective liberation struggles—whether for nations, the working class, ethnic minorities, black and LGBT rights, etc.

Such an approach posits that liberation struggles, even if they consider themselves wholly secular, have a theological core, an irrational belief in the worth of persons, and a similarly unfounded belief and hope in the future. Both the worth of the individual and future hope are ultimately grounded in neither experience nor reason. Experience reveals ever-changing forms of subordination, while reason often justifies authority and sovereignty. Both the intrinsic worth of the individual, and hope in a better future are unseen, non-empirical attributes or dispositions which sought to find an otherworldly grounding in the unseen and disembodied will of God. The typical virtues needed for rebellious emancipation—righteous anger, single mindedness, and willingness to use violence—are also projected on and anchored in the God of Exodus. In this interpretation, the jealous God of the “Old” Testament possesses exactly the characteristics needed for liberation.

Liberation as the focus of monotheism challenges Assmann’s perspective. Assmann stresses the very long term developments of the differentiation of the political realm from the religious realm, the separation of church and state. For him, Pharaoh’s religion was identical with the state, while the religion of Israel creates a new found capacity for the critique of the political most dramatically exemplified by prophecy. At the same time, he negatively evaluates the new, intolerant truth of this counter-religion. However, although Assmann focuses on how monotheism may have opened a field of discursive political critique via the power struggle between church and state, Exodus does not primarily signify the freedom to critique political leadership through direct contact with transcendental values. The Moses narrative is not about abstract freedoms that endure through millennia, but about concrete freedom—gaining freedom in a specific situation. It is first and foremost action, a rebellion against the total sovereignty of Egypt. After

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\(^8\)Indeed a critique of individual faith (exemplified by Paul) vs. communal faith exemplified by both Moses and Jesus is the main argument of Martin Buber’s book *Two Types of Faith*; see Buber (1962, I:651-782).

\(^9\)A plausible conclusion for Badiou’s preference for Paul rather than Moses might be that he is so off put by particularism and any kind of identity politics that he is unwilling to recognize a classic emancipatory Event.
all, the first event critical to the Exodus narrative does not occur when Moses speaks to the Pharaoh, but when he kills an Egyptian foreman:

And it came to pass in those days, when Moses was grown, that he went out unto his brethren, and looked on their burdens: and he spied an Egyptian smiting an Hebrew, one of his brethren. And he looked this way and that way, and when he saw that there was no man, he slew the Egyptian, and hid him in the sand. (Exodus 2:11-12)

Remarkably, the Bible does not glamorize the revolt. Moses here is dissimilar to the conventional hero, distant from the allure of the violence of the Greek heroes. Small and unheroic, looking “this way and that way,” Moses starts a process that will eventually emancipate his people from exploitation and small-scale ethnic genocide.\(^{10}\) The narrative does not represent this process as part of longue durée of history (in the sense that Assmann envisions); this process does not involve realizing fixed liberal freedoms, even if they have perhaps been created as a byproduct of social or political changes (e.g. Weber posits that Entzauberung [disenchantment] and capitalism stem from Judeo-Christianity and its Protestant manifestations). The agents of the Jewish rebellion not only sought concrete freedoms, but also articulated a religion whose initial impetus was emancipation. More pessimistically, we can perhaps view Exodus as an initial negation of religious/political sovereignty that created a power vacuum then filled with a new kind of authority. This dynamic of political opening and closure is quite typical of revolutions.\(^{11}\) Overall, then, the period between leaving Egypt and receiving the commandments embodies a series of singular potentialities. The commandments suture the brief split between politics and religion, especially because they serve to ground a political religion based on a divinely given constitution.

This alternative description of revolt better captures the complexities of and difference between the Moses narrative, Freud’s text, and Assmann’s interpretation. In Freud’s primal horde scene that which he summarizes in Moses and Monotheism, he envisions primitive man living in a family horde under an authoritarian father or chief. At one point, the brothers conspire to murder the father and create a fraternal democracy, a “brotherhood of man” (where, of course, women are still excluded from the social contract). But this emancipatory opening is soon closed down by the beginning of the worship of the dead father as Totem and a new religious ideology emerges, which, for Freud, lays the foundation for religion in general.

For Freud, rebellions and revolutions do not create durable freedoms, because, after the rebellion, the revolutionary actors internalize the figure

\(^{10}\)The fact that this event may or may not have taken place makes absolutely no difference in my account, since what is important is the values and predispositions that inhere in the narrative.

\(^{11}\)Of course, both the French and Russian Revolutions follow this pattern, but also more recent events like the Iranian Revolution and the Arab Spring.
that they have killed. The content of their revolution, the religious ideology, cultural sacred “glue” which holds their bond together is the totemic cult of the dead father, the very thing they have sought to displace. It is only by retrospective examining of the past that one is able to differentiate between the initial moment of liberation and the second moment of closure. The lesson of this psycho-political history is—as every Freudian psychohistory illustrates—that what persists throughout time is a troublesome, traumatic, neurotic and guilt-ridden but also energetic and vital continuity with the past. The patient—and the Jewish people—become attached to an event in the past which continues to haunt them, creating in them guilt and furnishing them with inexorable demands that separate them from the rest of humanity. It is not mainly intolerance toward the other that characterizes Judaism, but, rather, a “neurotic” self-absorption, a narcissistic “chosenness.” Just as the neurotic loses a sense of reality and psychic conflicts often undermine accurate perceptions of external reality, so too does Jewish identity carry the special burden of internal guilt—oblivious to the rest of the world and narcissistically involved in its own pains and pleasures.

One can also reformulate the communalities and differences between Freud’s and Assmann’s views of monotheism by seeing both as ascribing to monotheism of dual character. For Freud, monotheism entails drive renunciation (Triebverzicht)—a process of giving up sensual pleasure for a higher unseen God and “unknown ethical heights.” However, this positive component could not be internalized simply as it is. Drive renunciation contradicts the fundamental law of the psych—the pleasure principle, which leads to the sensual fulfillment of our drives. In Freud’s scenario, in order for this drive-renunciation to be internalized, a murder had to be committed. Put differently, internalization happens only as a consequence of guilt and attendant reparations. Without the internalization of the negative charge of guilt over the killing of Moses, monotheism would not, against the natural inclination for pleasure, have survived (Freud uses the German term Durchsetzen, broken through).

In contrast to Freud’s reading, Assmann’s interpretation of monotheism emphasizes its intolerant exclusivity that decouples politics and religion while at the same time highlighting the trauma of Amara—the plague that coincided with the forceful imposition of monotheism. One can view Assmann as retrojecting, displacing to the past key components of Freud’s Moses (especially the murder of Moses), and, in the process, making Moses even more Egyptian than Freud ever did. For Assmann, monotheism and its associated trauma (i.e. the plague) happen simultaneously, while Freud splits the event of monotheism into three distinct intervals: its invention by Aten, the killing of Moses, and the final internalization. Most importantly, as Freud examines the consequences of monotheism for the neurotically “chosen character” of the Jewish people, his ultimate view of monotheism is positive. Conversely, as Assmann examines the larger consequences of monotheism
in Christianity and Islam, his views on monotheism as an intolerant counter-religion are mostly negative.\textsuperscript{12}

The Critique of the Critique

Given the complexity of the effects of monotheism and the world’s investment in it, it is no wonder that Assmann’s critique of monotheism itself came under heavy critique—the most interesting of which are secular. These critiques often start with what Assmann himself acknowledges: monotheism decouples man from his immediate life-world. In monotheism, man is no longer immersed in the world, viewing nature and himself as a play of natural forces, but transcends and, indeed, instrumentalizes nature and society in the name of an abstract and otherworldly entity.

Indeed in his lectures on philosophy of religion, Hegel foreshadows the defense of monotheism articulated against Assmann. Characterizing the second stage of religion (after the Greek religion of nature), Hegel writes:

> The universal characteristic of this [second] stage is the free subjectivity that has satisfied its [definitive] craving or impulse. It is the free subjectivity that has attained lordship over the finite generally, over the natural and finite aspects of consciousness, over the finite whether it be physical or spiritual, so that now the subject is spirit and the spirit is known as spiritual subject. [the subject is] related to the natural and the finite in such a way that the natural is only instrumental. (Hegel 2006, 329)

Like some thinkers of the enlightenment, Hegel stresses the denaturalization of nature, where nature itself is de-deified and becomes instrumental. Hegel ascribes this process to monotheism. The subject of monotheism becomes identical with spirit and does not think of itself as nature. Hegel brings this idea to its end, saying that the subject distances itself from the natural aspects of its consciousness by becoming instrumental in and for itself.

Freud elaborates upon some of these attributes delineated by Hegel, such as the way in which monotheism releases subjects from the natural and the outward. Indeed, psychoanalysis itself may be said to mimic monotheism in the way in which it seeks freedom from the compulsions of inward nature and strives for “lordship…over the natural and finite aspects of consciousness” (Hegel 2006, 329). These structural similarities led Eric Santner to rebuke Assmann for presenting Freud as a post-monotheistic thinker. Santner

\textsuperscript{12}One can also suspect that at today’s political constellation, an attack on monotheism as intolerant counter-religion in the name of liberalism is a veiled attack on Islam. Critically, one can say that Assmann is displacing the intolerance of Nazism back to Judaism but also “forward” to today’s radical Islam.
attributed “global translatability” to polytheism and “universal consciousness” to monotheism. Noting the structural similarities between monotheism and psychoanalysis, Santner claimed that, by decoupling myself from my environment and by the resulting unnaturalness of my subjective position, monotheism and psychoanalysis potentially open one to the strangeness of both myself and the other. Thus, instead of a cosmological, horizontal translatability between different gods and between different peoples, there is a new universality that emerges after one grasps the common strangeness of the “natural” empirical self in the “unconscious.” The moral voice within—whether positively articulated as conscience or negatively as super-ego—cuts through horizontal exchangeability articulated through the translation of one God for another, helping one realize the universal identity of subjects in relation both to a moral voice and to desire. In Santner’s reading, what is most significant about monotheism is not its oneness, but the resultant subjectivity that differs from the different natural vitalities made divine in polytheism. Monotheism thus delineates and reveals a psychic universality that creates the conditions for radical openness to the strange within us and therefore for the stranger outside of us. Santner reformulates the injunction to love thy neighbor, saying, “love thy neighbor with an unconscious.” Such a neighbor does not share with me a mutual enchanted cosmos whose mutual anchoring points are the gods of nature, but a neighbor who I understand as sharing with me the basic coordinates of an estranged, even split subjectivity. This proposition troubled Assmann, who answered Santner with a negativity and irony worthy of Freud’s treatment of the original religious injunction (“love thy neighbor”).\footnote{There is an interesting ambivalence in psychoanalysis itself regarding this injunction, since being a psychoanalyst involves being attuned to a stranger with a subconscious, but psychoanalysis views the human being in general as selfish pleasure seeking.} Assmann replied to Santner by equating the internal strangeness of the unconscious within to the Pagan within, turning the injunction to love into the injunction to hate:

By denouncing the pagan within me, monotheism opens my eyes to “the pagans.” Self-hate and hatred for others intermesh, and hatred for others is no less menacing for having its roots in self-hate. (Assmann 2010, 123)

Here, it is clear that Assmann and Santner diverge over the meaning of “strangeness” under the paradigm of monotheism. Positively, strangeness creates a sense of inwardness that allows partial autonomy from world, enabling spiritual freedom and potential critique of the political world. Conversely, this strangeness involves negating the other. Synthesizing these approaches, one could say that the de-deification of nature results in the negation of the other who has not yet undergone the same process. At the same time, however, this process also comes with the realization that this other is also ultimately structured like oneself. In other words, monotheism
entails a fundamental ambivalence toward the other: it conceives of pagans as universally and essentially similar to believers, but at a stage in which they have not yet realized this same insight.

**Cosmopolitanism and Anti-Semitism**

In contrast to standard distinctions between universalism and cosmopolitanism, one could affirm the Mosaic distinction as both universalist and cosmopolitan. Indeed, even though it is still couched in terms of Jewish particularity, the Mosaic distinction serves as an important step toward cosmopolitanism. Strangely, modern anti-Semitism reveals this aspect of monotheism when its object of hatred is precisely the cosmopolitan aspect of the Jewish people—that is, hostility towards the Jew as capitalist or communist urbanites.

By making reference to the anti-Semitic hatred of Jewish cosmopolitanism, one can critically approach Assmann’s take on monotheism. Assmann senses that his critique of the Mosaic distinction can be taken as a form of anti-Semitism. Therefore, he apologetically claims that demands for the emancipation for Jews (from the Enlightenment onwards) were often accompanied by a critique against the Mosaic distinction. As a second argument, he asserts that many Jews opposed this very distinction—including Spinoza and Freud himself. However, as we have seen, Freud’s position regarding the Mosaic distinction is perhaps more positive than negative. It is also clear that the motivation for undoing the Mosaic distinction among Jews could just as well be a form of internalized self-hate as much as emancipatory cosmopolitan dismantling of boundaries. In a sense, one can say that Assmann is trying to dissimulate a certain enlightenment cosmopolitan anti-Judaism, since he cannot view Judaism itself as cosmopolitan. We are left to wonder what really animates Assmann’s anti-Judaism.

**The Two Enlightenments**

Like Freud’s two Gods, two Moses, and two peoples, we can also say that there are two modernities underlying the conflict in Assmann’s typology of discourse on monotheism. The first is universalist, abstract, rationalist, revolutionary, intolerant—say, modernity according to Robespierre. The second is relativist, cultural, liberal, tolerant, and translatable—say, modernity according to Herder. In his writings on Moses the Egyptian, Assmann claims to work through the traumatic results of monotheism, a counter-religion that coincided with a plague. However, perhaps this discourse is really about the later trauma of modern political revolutions—starting with Robespierre but
continuing, in the conservative view, with both communism and National Socialism.

One could say that the critique and even well sublimated hostility toward monotheism may stem from a displacement of guilt over the Holocaust. Assmann almost implies that the historical process that started with monotheism found its end in National Socialism. Indeed, Assmann negatively depicts the Mosaic distinction in a variety of ways. Even the title of the book—“distinction” or “Unterscheidung” in the original German—connotes a sense of “discrimination.” Given apprehensions toward “distinctions” and toward revolutionary change, it is no wonder that Assmann valorizes the continuity that the figure of Moses as the Egyptian attempts to establish. Nevertheless, Assmann may underemphasize the need for distinctions for creating dramatic change. Assmann is trying to historicize and relativize dramatic change in the name of continuity with the Egyptian past where, in fact, there is a radical break whose religious term is revelation and whose secular term is revolution. To examine the nature of historical discontinuity more closely, it is worth quoting Marx’s *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*:

> Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living. And just as they seem to be occupied with revolutionizing themselves and things, creating something that did not exist before, precisely in such epochs of revolutionary crisis they anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service, borrowing from them names, battle slogans, and costumes in order to present this new scene in world history in time-honored disguise and borrowed language. Thus Luther put on the mask of the Apostle Paul, the Revolution of 1789-1814 draped itself alternately in the guise of the Roman Republic and the Roman Empire, and the Revolution of 1848 knew nothing better to do than to parody, now 1789, now the revolutionary tradition of 1793-95. In like manner, the beginner who has learned a new language always translates it back into his mother tongue, but he assimilates the spirit of the new language and expresses himself freely in it only when he moves in it without recalling the old and when he forgets his native tongue. (Marx n.d., 5)

Marx diverges from Assmann on almost all accounts. While Assmann views continuation with the past as expressing tolerance, Marx—out of the urgency of transforming an exploitative world—views the past as “weighing like a nightmare on the brains of the living.” Every revolution is conservative in that it takes part of its legitimacy from the past. The creation of continuity, while praised by Assmann, is mocked by Marx. While both use metaphors of translation, they do so for opposite ends. While Assmann is enthusiastic
about translation as a symbol for liberal virtue, Marx looks for freedom and expressive power in a new medium, hoping for a radical break with the past and the institutionalization of a new medium in a new world.

Furthermore, in contrast to Assmann’s depiction of Freud, there are, in fact, key resemblances between Freud’s conception of rebellion and Marx’s notion of revolution. Like Marx, Freud ironically discusses the continuities that inhere in rebellion. He also claims that revolutions are not wholly revolutionary, for they do not create a “new world,” since the revolutionaries internalize the figure they have killed. The content of their revolution ultimately comes from the sources they have displaced. After all, the brothers of the horde created a fraternal democracy, a “brotherhood of man,” but the cultural sacred glue that held this bond together was the haunting figure of the dead father. Indeed, Freud’s account of the monotheistic revolution is not primarily a deconstruction or mediation on the impure Egyptian source of Judaism, about translation and tolerance, but about a traumatic continuity with the past—“a nightmare on the brains of the living.” Thus, it is not the fact that Moses was an Egyptian that serves as the traumatic core of the text, but the murder of Moses and its aftermath. Indeed, the aftermath of guilt and internalization forms the core of the text—an essential process according to Freudian psychoanalysis. While this continuity is ambiguous, it enabled monotheism to survive precisely due to the killing of its founder.

In the end, it is productive to dwell on the similarities between daydreams and The Man Moses and the Monotheistic Religion. Indeed, Grubrich-Simitis interpreted the text as a daydream in which the powers of Freud’s hermeneutics of suspicion were turned against Freud himself—a development that ultimately deflated the historical import of the text. A more charitable interpretation would be that Freud’s conception of history was nevertheless prescient. It was, indeed, the case that, although Nazism has repressed psychoanalysis and has murdered most German speaking psychoanalysts, the movement itself not only survived but thrived after World War II. In his “Creative Writers and Day Dreaming” (Freud 1989, 436-443), Freud makes us smile at our own fantasies, not only those of permanence and influence. He ironically refers to the hero typical of popular literature, stating, “If, at the end of one chapter of my story, I leave the hero unconscious and bleeding from severe wounds, I am sure to find him at the beginning of the next being carefully nursed and on the way to recovery.” At the same time, however, Freud assures us that nothing we experience goes to waste and that even physical annihilation, repression, and murder paradoxically create internalization and ultimately survival. While Freud’s relationship with real heroes and leaders may be complex and ambivalent, perhaps dreams and ideas—like psychoanalysis and monotheism—are his true heroes, for no day-dream is just a dream.
References


