

Freud, Sigmund. *Civilization and Its Discontents*. Translated by Joan Riviere. The International Psycho-Analytical Library, No. 17, Ernest Jones, ed. London: The Hogarth Press LTD, 1930.

Sigmund Freud (1856-1939 A.D.) was an Austrian neurologist who specialized in treating mental illness. Freud founded psychoanalysis, which was a comprehensive theory of human psychology and psychological pathology. His therapeutic work grew from the technique of free association. Freud's innovative work spawned a host of competing theories.

I: Many people, it seems, seek power and money to the detriment of life's more enduring riches. Freud could be wrong in this, because people come in such vast diversity of sentiments. Freud has written a book asserting that religion is, at its fundament, an illusion. [*The Future of an Illusion*, 1927.] A famous friend agrees, but notes his persistent experience of eternal transcendence, which he calls oceanic, limitless, and without boundary. Freud has no such experiences, but that does not invalidate his friend's experience. The friend's experience, which many share, deserves psycho-analysis.

Our sense of self (the *ego*) is outwardly definite, but inwardly undefined, sliding toward the *id*, which is unconscious mentality. Outwardly, the ego defines itself sharply; only love is a non-pathological exterior experience that parallels this interior admixture of *id* and *ego*. In love, the lover loses track of boundaries between himself and the beloved. In pathology, the *ego*-exterior boundary is frequently disturbed. The *ego*-exterior boundary develops over time, starting with infant and breast. It is better to see that originally the *ego* included all within and without, but in the course of development the *ego* separates from the exterior world. Pathologies arise when portions of the inner world are detached from the *ego*, say an arm or vision. The incipient "primary *ego* feeling" of connection to all perseveres in some individuals into maturity. When cities or animals mature, past structures erode and are replaced by new. In the mind, however, all past developments persevere unchanged over time (possibly). New ones arise alongside (within) them. Visual images of mental development are, thus, inherently inadequate. The oceanic experience of transcendence perseveres from an early stage of *ego* development, when the *ego* had not yet distinguished between itself and matters external to itself.

Religion derives weakly from this experience of transcendence, but more powerfully from the infant need for paternal protection. Religion derives from feelings of helplessness; obscure motives may lie further back in development's time. Mysticism, trance, and ecstasy may relate to these primordial mental states, but one cannot be certain.

II: The ordinary man's religion explains life's riddles and reassures him that today's injustices will be compensated in eternity. This religion is infantile, unsupported by everyday experiences of reality. Ordinary religion arises because life is grindingly painful, requiring anesthetic. We divert ourselves, find other pleasures, and intoxicate ourselves. Religions give answer to man's persistent question: What is life's meaning? The answers correlate to the religion of the asker.

Freud notes that human behavior demonstrates only one fundamental human wish: to become and remain happy. This is accomplished by removing pains and seeking pleasures. The pleasure-principle seeks intense rewards, but is frustrated. We are constitutionally unable to feel intense pleasure for long periods. The world better supports unhappiness: our bodies deteriorate, the exterior world holds many dangers, and relations with other people are fraught with pains. This quest to find pleasure and avoid pain creates ethical systems. Some urge limitless gratification; those prove undone by pains after over-indulgence. Some seek isolation, to avoid the pains of people. Others join forces to confront external dangers by manipulating the environment. Others seek intoxication, changing the conditions of mentality. Others seek to inhibit interior needs and drives or to redirect them to sublimating behaviors (say, to intellectual work). Work, generally, causes the pleasure-principle to mature into a reality-principle in people by redirecting impulse gratification to productive cooperation. Art consoles those sensitive to it; in art, illusion distracts one from life's misery. When one joins in mass delusion with others in an attempt to reset the conditions of existence, one enters religion. Like religion, those who love and expect loving

responses are deluded, but deluded in a particularly productive manner. Some seek solace in beauty.

We cannot be happy. Nor can we cease seeking to be happy. We find compensations that approximate happiness, and these come from different sources. We best discover happiness when we adapt to the external world, and then use our powers to acquire pleasure. For those young people who fail this approach, neurosis creates substitute coping. For neurotics who fail of consolation, habitual intoxication or psychosis await. Religion forestalls individual neurosis by mass mental infantilism. Most can probably find a modicum of happiness by a less onerous path.

III: Freud repeats that, so far, his argument is that people find it hard to be happy because their bodies fail, nature is hostile, and our social relations are dysfunctional. We can do little with respect to the first two, but there is no reason why our social relations cannot be restructured to assure the common weal. Still, our lack of success in this regard hints that some unknown mental barriers exist. Some view civilization itself as the cause of human unhappiness. They imagine, wrongly, that primitive life was happier, less neurotic. They are also disappointed because our scientific control of our environment has not made us happier. Each advance, in alleviating one problem, creates new hardships.

“Culture” consists in the advances and group habits that set man apart from animals by insulating mankind from environmental danger and organizing human relationships. 1) Culture makes tools and dwellings that augment innate human abilities. In this regard, man is godlike, but still not happy. High cultures divert all resources to serve men, create and preserve beauty, value cleanliness (soap indicates high civilization) and order, promote intellectual, scientific and aesthetic endeavors, and regulate all manner of human relations.

Community life emerges when groups agree to suppress some individual gratifications. These rules constitute law, and their application justice. Culture restricts individual freedom. Individuals object and rebel. Resolving these conflicts is a cultural imperative. Cultures evolve as its demands are internalized. Cultural evolution parallels the libidinal development of the individual (as, for example, infantile anal eroticism becomes the traits of thrift, order, and hygiene). Instincts are sublimated or suppressed.

IV: What causes and guides the evolution of cultures? When some man noticed that working made life better, it became obvious that if all worked, life might be very much better. Families emerged from this insight about cooperation and the permanent need for genital satisfaction. So, cultures emerge from the compulsion to work together and from the need of humans to pair bond and rear children. In love, a man makes genital eroticism central, and attaches, to a dangerous degree, his happiness to a woman. Rejection, defection, or death imperil such a man’s well-being. Greater resiliency emerges when people make the object of love not a person, but all persons, abandoning the sexual purpose of love for a tender attitude toward all. Many view this sentiment as the peak of human development. Freud demurs, because such love fails to discriminate in the value of its objects. Not every person should be loved. Further, all such “aim-inhibited love” remains, subconsciously, sexual. Friendship emerges from aim-inhibited love, love diverted to non-sexual purposes. Love and culture resist one another. Close families decline to join larger communities whole-heartedly. Women lose their men to cultural endeavors, while they maintain focus on the family and sexuality. And culture restricts sexual love: the incest taboo, childhood sexuality, homosexual prohibitions, bestiality interdiction, and the requirements of monogamy and offspring legitimacy. In general, culture mandates identical sexual lives for its participants. Civilized sexuality is “seriously disabled.” (Freud speculates in a footnote that man is inherently bisexual, with male and female needs in every individual. Psychoanalysis of bisexuality needs to be more strongly connected to a theory of instincts.)

V: Neurotics cope poorly with society’s sexual restrictions. Satisfied sexual partners are never left alone. Culture seeks to tax the energy of sexual liaisons, diverting the force to creating friendship (aim-limited libido) among societal members. So, culture feeds off the energy of sexual couples.

Culture says to love your neighbor as yourself. Why? What good does such an attitude do me? This dictum places strangers on an even plane with intimates, thus robbing friends and

family of my attention. And consider the admonition to “Love your enemies.” What could be more unnatural? Freud cites Heine’s story about wanting a humble dwelling, good food, fresh flowers, and the joy of six or seven enemies hanging from trees visible from his windows. Men are not retiring, peaceable animals, seeking love and aggressive only in self-defense. Humans covet an aggressive cruelty, ready to burst forth in violence, theft, rape, enslavement, humiliation, torture, and murder. Man is a human wolf. Human aggression warrants society’s intense demands. Society reserves to itself violence for dealing with violence. Legal punishment deals only with grosser aggressions; subtle degradations escape attention. Hence, society has not come far in suppressing human cruelty. Communists blame private property for corrupting a human nature otherwise pacific. Freud argues that removing private property might eliminate one way humans abuse one another, but that is all. Humans cannot cease being cruel; it is written on their hearts indelibly. Smaller communities channel human cruelty away from the members by hating outsiders, even though they are strongly related to them. This is “narcissism in respect of minor differences.” Primitives had more freedoms, but for only the short time until their deaths. Society demands sexual attenuation and diversion of violent impulses as its price for security.

Freud has criticized civilization heavily. It may improve with criticism and effort. Culture may also, however, discover that inherent difficulties will never yield to efforts at improvement. America should take heed.

VI: Freud believes what he has said so far is obvious. Instincts are two: 1) those that preserve the life of the individual (ego), and 2) those that preserve the species (libido). Sadism is a libidinous object instinct. Neurosis emerges in the conflict of the ego and libido; ego prevails, but at great loss and pain. Narcissistic libido emerges from the ego, and can return to the ego. Freud explains the death instinct, and its tendency to mix with love impulses, to become sadism. In sadism, the death instinct shines most clearly. Freud acknowledges collegial opposition to this theory, but dismisses it. Violence is an innate human instinct, and constitutes the greatest threat to culture. Men are bound to one another by common work and sexual energy (Eros); they are driven apart by their inherent aggression (Death). This struggle is human life. Civilization is human psychology writ large, a struggle for existence in which the opponent hides within.

VII: Why do animals exhibit no cultural struggle? No one knows. Civilization subdues human cruelty by directing its energy against the ego in the form of conscience. The super-ego condemns the ego’s aggression, eliciting guilt and a wish for punishment. The origin of guilt is obscure. One depends upon others for much. To alienate them is to lose their love. Evil is whatever threatens one with love-loss. For many, conscience is merely social anxiety; they do not act badly in their own view, but merely fear discovery. The super-ego internalizes the cultural voice; this is conscience. The virtuous man is most accusatory of himself. Good fortune reduces his self-condemnation, but ill fortune invites a torrent of penances. Fate is a parent substitute. When matters go badly, the “parent” is angry and threatens love-loss. So, guilt arises from fear of authority and later from fear of the super-ego. When one resists an aggressive impulse, that renunciation empowers the super-ego, which demands yet greater sacrifices. Remorse is not guilt, but a conscience stricken by unwarranted behavior. Guilt expresses the interior struggle between impulse satisfaction and the death instinct.

VIII: Culture evolves through heightening guilt. Progress demands forfeited happiness. Normal people do not understand the “unconscious sense of guilt.” Freud clarifies his use of terms: super-ego, ego, conscience, guilt, dread, need for punishments, masochism, sadism, remorse. Freud reviews confusing aspects of the sense of guilt—that it arises from committed acts and those uncommitted as well. The super-ego condemns not only bad behavior, but also the intention of bad behavior, committed or uncommitted. Eros and death instincts battle. But the relation of guilt and consciousness is more complex than a dyadic battle. It remains a mystery. Freud proposes that a tentative working hypothesis of his now be accepted as proved: diversion of erotic impulses creates an aggressive response, which is turned against itself by the super-ego. Only aggression is turned into guilt. Neurosis is replacement satisfactions for thwarted sexual desires. Perhaps sexual impulses thwarted become neuroses, and the associated aggression becomes guilt. There exists a parallelism between the individual being incorporated into a

community, and a community incorporating an individual into itself. A difference lies in this: individuals seek pleasure; the community seeks wholeness. In the individual, these two processes conflict with one another. Freud speculates that this conflict may be resolved in the future with further cultural oppressions. Cultures too develop super-egos, the impact of influential personalities in their various excellences, which affects the course of cultural development. These persons are frequently killed. Ethics is the standard set by the cultural super-ego. Ethics is therefore therapy. In individual therapeutic practice, the therapist frequently negotiates with the patient's super-ego, seeking a reduction in prohibitions. So, too, with the cultural super-ego. Its standards tend to account little for the inability of normal people to boundlessly inhibit their impulses. Loving one's neighbor as oneself is impossible.

Has society, has all humanity, become neurotic under the strictures of the push toward civilization? It may be possible to develop a pathology of communities. Freud is not trying to evaluate civilization. Culture may well be a failed experiment. Of this Freud is certain: mankind pursues happiness by fashioning arguments to support its fancies. Freud cannot be a revolutionary; he lacks the courage. The critical question for man is whether he will conceive a cultural path that subjugates the human passion for cruelty and masochism. Our present circumstances should give pause. We have dramatically increased our capacity to wield death. Desire, death's eternal opponent, will match death's capacities. Will mankind survive their cataclysm?