

Civilization and Its Discontents



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF SIGMUND FREUD

Sigmund Freud was the creator of psychoanalytic theory, and one of the twentieth-century's most influential thinkers in the fields of psychology and sociology. Born in Austria to Galician Jewish parents in 1856, Freud trained to be a doctor at the University of Vienna, graduating in 1881. Freud studied the brain, including cerebral palsy and aphasia, before developing methods of treating psychological ailments through what he called "the talking cure," which consisted of a combination of "dream analysis," "free association," and intensive questioning into the patient's familial relations. Freud married Martha Bernays in 1886 and with her had six children. There were rumors as well that, after 1896, Freud had an ongoing affair with Martha's sister, Minna Bernays. Meanwhile, Freud's career flourished, in both private practice and as a professor. Freud's ideas proved to be enormously influential, including his notions of repression and the unconscious, and his concepts of "the Oedipus complex" (describing a son's desire to kill his father and wed his mother); "anal retentiveness" (regarding obsessive organization in early childhood) and the "ego," "id," and "superego"—which Freud described as the three components of the mind. Freud fled Austria in 1938 to escape the Nazis, and died a year later in England. His ideas remain important in psychology and many other fields, such as literary studies. Many of his students, including Carl Jung, also went on to influential careers in psychology, though many of their ideas diverged from their former teacher's over time and they developed their own schools of thought.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The First World War, from 1914 to 1918, produced an immense loss of life in the supposedly "civilized" European countries of France, Germany, the United Kingdom, and the remnants of the Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman Empires. For a great many, including artists and intellectuals across Europe, the "Great War" was an indication of the bloodshed and savagery of which "modern man" was capable. The First World War involved 20th-century weaponry—destroying on a previously unimaginable scale—but unfolded according to 19th-century tactics, wherein soldiers rode on horseback or walked on foot, and fired weapons that required some minutes to reload. In a sense, the War was an anachronism from the beginning, and the only thing "modern" about it was the senseless loss of life it occasioned. After the War, in the 1920s, the US saw a period of rapid economic expansion, as did parts of Europe, although this expansion was predicated not on

stable economic gains but a series of financial "bubbles," often deriving from unstable and quickly-inflating currencies. Germany, subjected by the Allies to harsh penalties after "the Great War," was hit particularly hard when these bubbles collapsed, and the 1930s saw that country transition from the democratic rule of the Weimar Republic to Hitler's National Socialist (Nazi) party. Freud was writing precisely during this time of major European intellectual, political, economic, and social transition, when thinkers wondered urgently about the fate of national entities, of elected governments, and of financial institutions. Freud's line of questioning—will civilization survive? and for how long?—was then neither abstract nor idle, but essential and pressing.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Freud's work is best viewed alongside other efforts, in the 19th and 20th centuries, to understand human beings living together in a society. This desire for understanding led to an explosion of research in what came to be termed the "social sciences," or the objective, dispassionate, and often quantitative comprehension of how humans relate to one another. In her studies of the sexual and personal practices of Polynesian families, Margaret Mead (1901-1978) helped further the field of descriptive anthropology, with which Freud's work shares a guiding spirit, if not an explicit methodology. Emile Durkheim's descriptive and quantitative studies of European society, most famously on suicide and crime, helped promote and expand social inquiry in the second half of the 19th century. Karl Marx's (1818-1883) study of "capital," or the means of economic production, helped to solidify the field of "political economy," or the manner by which economic realities come to shape political decision-making. Lastly, Max Weber's (1864-1920) investigation of "the Protestant ethic" sought to trace the relationship between religious principles and economic stratification in European societies. From each of these works, Freud derived an objective, fact-based, and often oppositional, or counter-intuitive, method of investigation. Freud, like these thinkers, sought to describe human society "from without," that is, avoiding some of the ideas about society that that very society produced. *Civilization and Its Discontents*, then, is an attempt by an individual within civilization to see, and know, civilization objectively, rather than subjectively.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Civilization and Its Discontents (Das Unbehagen in der Kultur)*
- **When Written:** Late 1920s

- **Where Written:** Vienna, Austria
- **When Published:** 1930
- **Literary Period:** The European interwar period: the end of “the Lost Generation” (although Freud himself worked well outside that literary group)
- **Genre:** Social Psychology
- **Setting:** Europe, between World Wars I and II
- **Climax:** Freud identifies “the sense of guilt as the most important problem in the development of civilization” and “shows that the price we pay for our advance in civilization is a loss of happiness through the heightening of the sense of guilt.”
- **Antagonist:** There is no single antagonist, although organized religion, specifically Christianity, are believed to foster guilt in modern man.
- **Point of View:** First-person

EXTRA CREDIT

Original Title in German. The German title of the work, *Das Unbehagen in der Kultur*, might be rendered more literally as “The Uneasiness in Culture.” This gives, perhaps, a different spin on the work, making it seem that the “discontentment” of the standard English title is perhaps more pervasive than it would seem in its original version.



PLOT SUMMARY

Sigmund Freud begins his long essay, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, by describing his inability to understand what he calls “religious feeling.” Freud is not religious himself, though he has good friends who are. Freud believes that religion is central to how societies function – even societies that no longer consist of orthodox believers. Freud attempts, in his essay, to understand how people relate to their societies, how societies are formed, and how individual psychic forces interact with larger, group-level forces. Freud isolates the individual’s ego, superego, and id – the self, the regulating self, and deep, base desires – as the three forces inherent on the personal level. He wonders how these forces are manifest on the social level.

Freud’s essay moves organically – that is, not in a strict order, but by association of related ideas. Freud wonders how religions function in society, and sees in religion a kind of generous, selfless love – at least, this love as an ideal. Freud wonders whether societies are held together by this selfless love, and by its related religious feeling, but states that these instances of generosity alone cannot constitute a society.

Freud then addresses how human beings come to join themselves to others. They do so, Freud argues, by means of sexual love within family groups. Men and women couple and produce children, and these children have “interrupted” sexual relationships with their parents, which cannot be

consummated. These relationships depend both on the love-drive (eros) and the death-drive (thanatos) – a combination of deep, powerful sexual attraction, and a desire, too, to destroy that which is closest and most important to us.

Freud believes that, because societies are groups consisting of smaller groups, the family unit, that societies themselves must behave according to the love- and death-drives. This means that societies are held together both by selfish desires for liberty, on the individual level, and selfless desires for protection and group stability, on the broader social level. Freud believes that other methods of explaining social organization, like the Christian **Golden Rule**, only explain part of the problem – the group part. Freud’s model accounts also for the individual liberties of society’s members – who wish to both be free to live as they choose, and also desire the help, protection, and love of others.

At the end of the essay, Freud relates his work, indirectly, to the political conditions of the time of its writing. In Europe in the 1930s, the oncoming threat of Communism and Fascism – of different forms of “collective” society – cause Freud to wonder whether civilization is in fact in decline. Freud concludes the essay with an open question: whether societies, like people, can be “neurotic,” or overcome by an excess of anxiety regarding their base impulses to love and destruction.



CHARACTERS

Sigmund Freud – Sigmund Freud was the originator of psychoanalytic theory, and one of the twentieth-century’s most influential thinkers in the fields of psychology and sociology. Trained in medicine, Freud studied the brain before developing methods of treating psychological ailments through “the talking cure,” which consisted of a combination of “dream analysis,” “free association,” and intensive questioning into the patient’s familial relations. Freud’s studies introduced into popular culture a great number of terms and ideas, some technical, others used more generally, including: “the Oedipus complex” (describing a son’s desire to kill his father and wed his mother); “anal retentiveness” (regarding obsessive organization in early childhood) and the “ego,” “id,” and “superego”—which Freud described as the three components of the mind. Freud’s work, though grounded in psychology, has implications across several fields. His notions of repression and the unconscious are important to literary scholars well into the twenty-first century, and his understanding of the brain prompted investigations in modern neurology. Freud died in 1939, on the cusp of the Second World War.



THEMES

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coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



PSYCHOANALYSIS AND THE UNCONSCIOUS

Sigmund Freud was a psychologist, therapist, and intellectual concerned with the forces at work in the human mind. His theory of “psychoanalysis,” which he developed over the course of his lifetime, has many aspects—but can be summed up, primarily, as the descriptive study of a system of internal checks and balances that regulate emotion and action.

Freud believed that the mind could be divided into the ego (the “I”), the id (deep, sometimes perverse, desires) and the superego (the warden or overseer, keeping id and ego in check). In Freud’s theory of mind, humans generally are aware of the desires that drive their behaviors, but oftentimes they aren’t—and that makes these latter impulses unconscious. Freud argued that unconscious drives shape human beings’ lives—who they are and why they do what they do.

Civilization and its Discontents is a thought-experiment by Freud: an essay attempting to determine whether the same unconscious impulses that Freud saw as driving individual’s behavior could also be used to describe the formation of human civilization. Freud puzzles out whether civilization is itself a “good” or “progressive” thing: whether it makes human beings happier, healthier, and freer than an ideal “state of nature” before, or outside, civilization.

Freud concludes that the very same processes and antagonisms operating in the individual mind are the forces shaping whole civil societies. Thus Freud argues for—though he does not use the term—a “social psychology,” or a way of explaining society based on the accumulated effects of individuals’ minds.



INDIVIDUALITY VS. SOCIAL BONDS

Civilization’s primary conflict, which Freud outlines in the essay, is that between the will of the *individual* and the will of the *group*, the society in which that individual lives and works. Freud notes that all individuals, even those in prehistoric civilizations, exist in societies. Thus their freedoms, or supposed freedoms, must be understood in the context of what a society *allows* them and *requires* them to do. Freud argues that, in the past, more “primitive” societies had weaker central governments, and allowed greater personal latitude for certain kinds of acts. Sexual acts, or instances of violence, tended to be handled within families, which were ruled by powerful father-figures. But Freud complicates this picture by “fast-forwarding” to

Western society of the past several hundred years. He notes that outright critics of “civilization” as such, who claim that society impinges on their individual freedoms, neglect the fact that societies also keep humans safe—which is itself a kind of freedom. The “deal” brokered between the individual and the society, then, is one of exchange. Individuals give up a certain amount of autonomy, and as a result, they gain the protection of the group.

This set of arguments is not necessarily psychoanalytic, however. Freud makes the above theory his own by connecting it to his ideas of the ego and super-ego, which, Freud states, create the same “structure” within an individual as exists within a society. That is, the “ego” accepts an internalized, government-like “monitor” in the form of the super-ego, which keeps the ego from merely gratifying every wish, desire, act of aggression, or instance of satisfaction it craves. The super-ego thus similarly keeps the ego from being totally free, by placing checks on it. But the super-ego also protects the ego, by ensuring that a person recognizes the desires of others. In other words, people’s super-egos stop them from being utterly selfish, thus enabling cooperation and reciprocal benefit within a society.



LOVE, SEX, AND HAPPINESS

Freud outlines a complex and interrelated system of love, sex, and happiness, based on a drive he calls Eros. Eros is one of two fundamental drives—the other is Thanatos, or death. Eros is also understood, in psychoanalysis, as a manifestation of the Pleasure Principle—quite simply a desire for self-gratification, for what “feels best.” Eros, however, goes beyond the “minor” definition of the Pleasure Principle (an avoidance of pain), and becomes, instead, more active—the seeking, in another person, of a love-object, of the satisfaction of physical and mental desires. In other words, we love because we want to have sex, and we love, too, because we want to *be loved*, to be protected, desired, and respected.

Love, in Freud’s conception, is not always connected to sex. But Freud believes that sex is a powerful component of love, and that, in relationships where we say we love but do not have sex, we have in fact *sublimated* (essentially, “pushed down”) the desire for sex and transformed it into a different aim—that of friendship, or family attachment. This is one of Freud’s more controversial theories, and he argues for it implicitly in this book, and more explicitly elsewhere.

The upshot of all this is: for Freud, love and sex often lead to happiness, but need not necessarily do so. Love begets happiness when the love-relationship is strong and productive, but when it ends, it results in a deep despair. Similarly, sex includes within it the forms of aggression that cause us to want not only to be joined to another, but also to defeat, overpower, or master another. Thus, for Freud, love/sex/happiness might

be seen, together, as part of an erotic drive—one that exists, always, in concert and opposition with Thanatos (the death drive).



SUFFERING, AGGRESSION, AND DEATH

Freud acknowledges that the death drive is one of the most difficult aspects of psychoanalytic theory to understand. Humans naturally feel that they want to continue to live, and to feel pleasure (Eros). The death drive, then, is an urge in human beings to destroy an object outside the self. The death drive is manifest, therefore, in what might be termed the “love-hate” relationship. Freud claims that these relationships are actually quite common—that humans frequently wish to destroy, to overpower, and to master another.

Freud believes that the death drive manifests itself both in individual and in social terms. In the individual, the death drive forms part of the regulatory mechanism of the super-ego, which seeks to master the ego, the self, especially those parts of the self that seek to love, or to have sex with, another person. Thus the super-ego causes the individual a great deal of suffering—making the love-relationship a complex one, since it is connected with pain and the prospect of more pain, should the love not last.

Within a society, the death drive causes social groups to assert dominance, and aggression, over and against other social groups, especially those that are geographically nearby. Geographic nearness is often a reflection of cultural or social nearness, in Freud’s system—this is something he calls the “narcissism of small differences.” In other words, societies, too, have super-egos, and when they see another society close to “themselves,” they wish, like the individual super-ego, to control and master that other group.

Freud essentially concludes his essay by arguing that societies use the death drive, on the individual and the group level, to create guilt, which then manages people’s actions—“keeps them in line”—controls them. Freud offers up the possibility, too, that because societies have egos and superegos, just like individuals, then societies might also be able to become psychologically “sick,” or “neurotic,” like some individuals—that their egos and superegos might be out of balance. Freud merely poses this as a mode for further inquiry—he does not answer his own provocative question in this essay.



RELIGION, DELUSION, AND BELIEF

Freud believes that religion, belief, and delusion (or misplaced belief) play an important role in individual and social regulation. In essence, religion helps individuals to feel guilty about certain things, and codifies this guilt in different ways as a means of regulating human actions for the good of larger social groups. The ultimate

example of this, as Freud sees it, is the Christian “**Golden Rule**,” which is found in similar form in many other cultures and religions. Freud believes that the Golden Rule is fundamentally illogical, because humans have little reason to “love a stranger as oneself,” and even less reason to “love an enemy as oneself.”

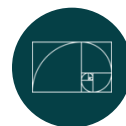
This Rule has become a part of individual and social moral codes because it is a socially-advantageous formulation, however—it allows individuals and societies to regulate human aggression, and to direct that aggression inward, into a sense of guilt for failing to live up to an impossible moral ideal—rather than outward, against another person or group of people. Freud argues that all religions channel human aggression inward, into the position of the super-ego, which mimics the kind of control the state wishes to have over people—in order to manage individual wants and prevent people from killing each other, having sex with each other indiscriminately, or otherwise destroying society.

Thus civilization and its development are utterly bound up in the development of the super-ego, and the guilt that the super-ego wields over the ego. Without these psychological forces, there can be no society, and without society, there can be no psychological forces. Freud argues that the two arenas, individual and social, are entirely intertwined. In summation, it would make no sense to say that religion—or civil society—is “good” or “bad.” Instead, one can only describe these phenomena as outgrowths of the forces of regulation at play within the human mind—forces Freud believes to be natural, “built in” to humans at the biological level.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



THE GOLDEN RULE

Although not always a symbol in itself, in general usage, the Golden Rule is, for Freud, an indication of the errors of the Christian value system, and of Western morality in general. The Golden Rule, as Jesus formulates it in the Gospels, says that one ought to “do unto others what one would want others to do unto oneself.” This forms the basis of a communal and selfless moral and social system, at least in its ideal religious conception. But Freud, throughout *Civilization and Its Discontents*, believes that societies are not founded on this kind of generosity alone. Instead, all “civilized” groups of men and women are bonded by the competing impulses of the individual (the selfish) and the social (the selfless). In addition, societies must wrestle with the competing human desires of love (eros) and death (thanatos) – the first of which causes people to join in sexual and romantic relationships, and the second which spurs people to destroy those relationships, and

the social structures surrounding them. This theory of drives, which underlies Freud's system of psychoanalytic social psychology, is, according to Freud, a more accurate representation of human behavior than the demanding and ultimately impractical Golden Rule.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Norton edition of *Civilization and Its Discontents* published in 2010.

Chapter 1 Quotes

☞ At the height of being in love the boundary between ego and object threatens to melt away.

Related Characters: Sigmund Freud (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 26

Explanation and Analysis

Freud's far-reaching text includes an analysis of what it means to be in love. For Freud, love is both an instance of joining with another person—of causing the individual to exist in a social network—and a heightening of the feeling of personal loneliness. For Freud, love is also bound up in sexual activity, wherein two bodies join and become "one."

The distinction between "ego," or the "I" moving through the world, and the "other" is also a very important idea for Freud, and it will be taken up throughout this essay. Love is one way of testing the limits of the self, and of placing that self near enough to another self to realize just how far apart those two persons, and minds, might be.

☞ Our present ego-feeling is, therefore, only a shrunken residue of a much more inclusive—indeed, an all-embracing—feeling which corresponded to a more intimate bond between the ego and the world around it.

Related Characters: Sigmund Freud (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 29

Explanation and Analysis

Freud gives a kind of "historical" account of an individual's development from childhood to adulthood. He argues that for children, ideas of the "self" and the "other" are more fluid and confused, leading to feelings of love that border on the universal. This love, at least in theory, produces happiness, a feeling of "belonging" in the world.

As an individual grows up in a modern society, however, this feeling is superseded by various psychological and social forces. It is then the stated aim of Freud's investigation to track just how human beings, with their desire for love, enact that love in a society with others. And that enacting of love is not without its complications—especially its relationship to longing, lacking, guilt, and death.

☞ The fact remains that only in the mind is such a preservation of all the earlier stages alongside of the final form possible.

Related Characters: Sigmund Freud (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 34-35

Explanation and Analysis

Here Freud creates an important metaphor of the mind as a kind of city, its image taken both from architecture and from Darwinian evolutionary theory. According to Freud's idea of the subconscious, the mind never completely eradicates the feelings or experiences it has had in the past—indeed, it could not eliminate memories even if it wanted to.

Instead, the mind creates new memories—new "buildings" of thought—on top of the old ones, but without eliminating them. This makes the cityscape of the mind a complicated one, and more or less an impossible one to visualize. This, too, is Freud's point: the mind can be compared to objects in the world, or to other processes with which we are comfortable (like economic exchange). But the mind has its own structures and its own "economies" beyond what apply in other aspects of human behavior. This is the purpose of his psychoanalytic investigation—to find out what these mental structures and processes are, and how they're peculiar to the mind.

☞ The origin of the religious attitude can be traced back in clear outlines as far as the feeling of infantile helplessness.

Related Characters: Sigmund Freud (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 36

Explanation and Analysis

Freud has no problem arguing that religion is a remnant of an earlier, less advanced form of human engagement with the world. Freud believes that all organized religions are at least partly concerned with magic and superstitions. These are methods of explaining the world when scientific rationalism is not available to the mind.

But, interestingly and provocatively, Freud argues that the religious feeling, and the irrational desires and beliefs attached to it, are not merely existent in societies without science—as modern society attests. Instead, religious feeling transfers from traditional realms (the church) to internal patterns of thought, and to behaviors having to do with interpersonal relationships. Thus love, religion, and "infantile feeling" are all related in the consciousness of modern people.

Chapter 2 Quotes

☞ The question of the purpose of human life has been raised countless times; it has never yet received a satisfactory answer and perhaps does not admit of one.

Related Characters: Sigmund Freud (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 41-42

Explanation and Analysis

Freud does not shy away from tackling large topics. This, indeed, might be the largest of them all—the problem of what it means to be alive, and what human beings ought to do during their time on earth. Freud acknowledges that perhaps it is an unsolvable question, but this does not keep him from attempting to address it, in a way, throughout the remainder of the essay.

For Freud, human life does have a purpose, or series of purposes. This is important to note. That purpose is not necessarily derived from a religious feeling, nor from a relation of the individual to a social tradition, either ethical or theological. But Freud does believe that human life is oriented toward a set of ends. And he believes, too, that psychoanalytic theory can help to tease out and understand those ends.

☞ Another procedure [to avoid pain] operates more energetically and thoroughly. It regards reality as the sole enemy and as the source of all suffering, with which it is impossible to live, so that one must break off all relations with it if one is to be in any way happy. The hermit turns his back on the world . . .

Related Characters: Sigmund Freud (speaker)

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 50


Explanation and Analysis

Freud attempts to understand the different methods by which humans make their lives easier. Being a hermit, ignoring society, removing oneself from the world—this is, for Freud, similar to taking drugs, drinking, or otherwise smothering one's consciousness for long periods of time. Freud argues that this form of "numbness" to the world is a way of preventing suffering, of possibly extending happiness, and of allowing the individual to function in a society that is largely indifferent to his or her individual desires.

But Freud does not believe that a society can be constructed entirely of hermits. Indeed, if this were true, there would be no society at all. Thus Freud looks to other methods by which people ease the pain of social life without removing themselves from it entirely.

☞ One procedure I have not yet mentioned . . . I am, of course, speaking of the way of life which makes love the center of everything, which looks for all satisfaction in loving and being loved.

Related Characters: Sigmund Freud (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 52

Explanation and Analysis

Freud argues that there is a form of radical altruism to which humans can aspire—this is the altruism of a perfectly religious and beneficent soul, who wishes to merge the ego with the outside world. This merger replicates the merging that the "infantile" spirit feels with the mother and, thus, with the world at large. Freud associates this radical form of loving, and desire to be loved, with not only the "primitive" in human development but the primitive in social

development, too. In other words, Freud believes that societies outgrow this radical love as they become more "modern."

This quotation doesn't only refer to a mystical kind of religious love, however. Freud also addresses those whose purpose in life is the ideal of romantic or sexual love—provided that the lover feels a similar desire for total union with the one being loved.

☞ Happiness, in the reduced sense in which we recognize it as possible, is a problem of the economics of the individual libido.

Related Characters: Sigmund Freud (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 54

Explanation and Analysis


This is Freudian rationalism taken to its supreme principle. Happiness is not, for Freud, a set of moral principles, nor a state to be attained through achievements, love, or selflessness. It is, instead, a calculation. It is a way of understanding how one's libidos (the set of drives constructing individuals) function in a "market" of other libidos, and within the individual itself. Happiness can only be achieved by balancing one's libidos in a healthy way—but this is never entirely possible, since some desires are inherently contradictory (like Freud's idea of the "death drive").

Furthermore, this idea extends to civilization as a whole—balancing one's individual desires with the desires of others, and with the rules and requirements of civilization itself. Thus in one sense, Freud's idea of happiness is never truly attainable, and is fundamentally market-based. In a society, some people get what they want, and this, in Freud's theory, means that others do *not* get what they want.

Chapter 3 Quotes

☞ ... we come upon a contention which is so astonishing that we must dwell upon it. This contention holds that what we call our civilization is largely responsible for our misery.

Related Characters: Sigmund Freud (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 58

Explanation and Analysis

This is one of the major and jarring points of Freud's inquiry. Civilization and modernity are often understood uncritically to be good and positive things. Both are progressions by which humans become better, cleaner, saner, smarter, more technologically proficient.

The power of Freud's argument, then, does not derive from his belief that civilization doesn't work, nor that technology and other advancements haven't taken place. Instead, Freud states that these advances in some realms necessitate pain, suffering, dislocation, confusion, or guilt in others. Thus, civilization requires that certain things be internalized, sacrificed, and misunderstood in the consciousness of individuals.

Human misery is therefore created, in the present age, by modernity and by the impulses that conspire to make us "civilized." The question, then, is whether civilization can be its own cure, and can help those that it harms.

☞ Men ... seem to have observed that this newly-won power over space and time, this subjugation of the forces of nature, which is the fulfillment of a longing that goes back thousands of years, has not increased the amount of pleasurable satisfaction which they may expect from life and has not made them feel happier.

Related Characters: Sigmund Freud (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 60

Explanation and Analysis

Freud extends his previous argument by stating that happiness, unlike other measures of the success of civilization, has not increased as society has "advanced." Other than written descriptions, there is no good way of knowing how happy people were—how satisfied and loved and sexually pleased they were—in earlier ages of human history. There can be no formula for making this inquiry into the historical state of happiness. Yet it appears unlikely that humans are any better at being happy than they were so many years ago.

We do not, therefore, have any more developed

"technology" for being happy and fulfilled now than we did in a primitive state. In fact, we might be quite a bit less happy *because* of advances in civilization—for reasons that the book goes on to attempt to explain.

☞ Civilization . . . describes the whole sum of the achievements and the regulations which distinguish our lives from those of our animal ancestors and which serve . . . to protect men against nature and to adjust their mutual relations.

Related Characters: Sigmund Freud (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 63

Explanation and Analysis

These concepts—regulation, protection, and adjustment—are central to Freud's conception of what makes humanity modern. Modern societies consist of a set of rules designed to ensure order and the continuance of the society itself. Societies also protect people, or certain people, from violence, either violence that comes from within the society or from outside it. And societies grow and change as conditions around them change, in their physical environment, for example.

What Freud investigates, however, is how effective society actually is in achieving these ideals. Can society regulate itself effectively? Can it protect those who live within it? Does it always wish to? And can societies change as the people within them change? What makes a society change, and how quickly can it adapt to new circumstances?

☞ We recognize as cultural all activities and resources which are useful to men for making the earth serviceable to them, for protecting them against the violence of the forces of nature . . .

Related Characters: Sigmund Freud (speaker)

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 63

Explanation and Analysis

The concept of "service" is important here. Freud argues, implicitly throughout and explicitly here, that humans are placed on the earth in order to use it for their ends. He does

not state whether this is a religious and ethical or just a practical principle. In other words, he does not say whether he believes humans *ought* to use the resources of the earth for their own betterment, but he does state that this kind of relationship between humanity and the natural world seems to exist across civilizations.


Thus human happiness and the structure of social bonds derive in part from a human's relationship to his or her physical environment, from what can be taken from the earth and used. Societies tend to function best when they work out a productive relationship to the earth's resources that also does not completely destroy those resources.

Chapter 4 Quotes

☞ Perhaps St. Francis of Assisi went furthest in exploiting love for the benefit of an inner feeling of happiness.

Related Characters: Sigmund Freud (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 81

Explanation and Analysis

Freud makes a controversial claim here, arguing that St. Francis, a famously benevolent, humble figure from history, was in fact "exploiting" the very idea of love for his own happiness (although Freud doesn't argue that this was intentional on Francis's part). Freud does not expand on just what he means by St. Francis as an individual, however. Does Francis represent an impossible ideal, attainable only by a vanishingly small number of true believers? Or is Francis instead an example to humans who wish to exert, through sheer force of will, a desire to love everything radically?

The latter does seem more likely for Freud, and so he regards Francis as an anomaly, as a marginal case that proves his point. Humans, for Freud, do not really wish to live their lives with such radical concern for the betterment of other people. That is why "saints" are "saints"—they are social exceptions, people whose libidinal economies are calibrated in such a way as to allow significant and long-standing love and support for others, and to allow them to achieve happiness from such a state.

☛ The tendency on the part of civilization to restrict sexual life is no less clear than its other tendency to expand the cultural unit.

Related Characters: Sigmund Freud (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 84

Explanation and Analysis

Freud identifies a fundamental tension in human sexual and romantic life. On the one hand, humans wish to have sex with one another, and heterosexual relationships will produce children through sexual activity. This, Freud believes, is a fundamental biological fact of human experience—it is not something that people, for the most part, have to think too much about in order to do. But society also imposes rules and restrictions on who can have sex with whom, and when.

These restrictions complicate and run counter to the biological desire for sex. Society might be "easier," or less rule-bound, if people were allowed to have sex with whomever they wanted, whenever they wanted. But Freud argues it is not merely our desire for order that keeps us from doing this—it is a larger social injunction against sexual pleasure, and indeed toward dissolution and destruction, that keeps humans from merely procreating in a world of creation and love.

☛ Present-day civilization makes it plain that it will only permit sexual relationships on the basis of a solitary, indissoluble bond between one man and one woman, and that it does not like sexuality as a source of pleasure in its own right . . .

Related Characters: Sigmund Freud (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 86

Explanation and Analysis

Freud believes that there are several reasons for most societies' injunction against sexual activity outside the relatively limited bounds of marriage. First, he believes that society exists to regulate the libido, and that the power of the unregulated libido can lead to a difficulty in separating self from other, or self from object. Freud argues that this feeling is understood, in civilized societies, as being

"primitive," even if it is also a radical religious belief (toward loving the neighbor) that is evident in the behavior of saints and other religious exceptions.

Freud also argues that the regulation of sexual relationships derives from an unwillingness to accept sexual procreation unproblematically as what it is—a pleasurable act of creation. If it were only this, then perhaps people could have sex constantly without complication. But sex is also a transaction (an economy) of the libido—it is an interaction between two egos with different sets of desires. This makes matters much more complex.

Chapter 5 Quotes

☛ The neurotic creates substitutive satisfactions for himself in his symptoms, and these either cause him suffering in themselves or become sources of suffering for him by raising difficulties in his relations with his environment . . .

Related Characters: Sigmund Freud (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 89

Explanation and Analysis


This is one of Freud's most profound, and perhaps most disturbing, conclusions. Psychological symptoms are not just the things that a neurotic sufferer wants to avoid—although they do cause pain and, at least superficially, are to be avoided or treated. But Freud argues that the definition of a true neurotic is the "enjoyment" of symptoms—of the pain that these symptoms cause.

That idea of enjoyment is complex and has been further studied in the many decades since Freud wrote. But a symptom that a person enjoys combines pleasure and pain in a manner that Freud believes is central to the human experience. According to Freud, humans have both a pleasure-drive and a death-drive—they want to love and live but they are also fascinated by destruction and death, even if it means their own death. Thus the symptom has a strange hold on human consciousness—it is a reminder both of life without the symptom and of the irrational desire that keeps us stuck in our painful actions.

☛ Not merely is this stranger in general unworthy of my love; I must honestly confess that he has more claim to my hostility and even my hatred. He seems not have the least trace of love for me and shows me not the slightest consideration.

Related Characters: Sigmund Freud (speaker)

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 92

Explanation and Analysis

Freud here counters what he believes to be the inherent falsehood of the Golden Rule—the idea of "do unto others as you would have them do unto you." Freud argues that strangers have no reason to care for the wellbeing of people outside their social circles; similarly, we have no reason to care for strangers. The Golden Rule therefore breaks down because it is not an economical principle—for Freud, it flies in the face of all logic.

Freud points out that hatred or mistrust of other people is a far more common and natural human emotion than disinterested love. Most people respond to new experiences and new people with a mixture of fear and apprehension. This anxiety about the unknown makes for a more sensible foundation of a moral and interpersonal system, as it guards against potential pain or danger.

●● The existence of the inclination to aggression, which we can detect in ourselves and justly assume to be present in others, is the factor which disturbs our relations with our neighbor and which forces civilization into such a high expenditure of energy.

Related Characters: Sigmund Freud (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 95

Explanation and Analysis

The Golden Rule might not be a "natural" state for humans in the world, but aggressiveness is understood, by Freud's theory, as a more characteristic attitude for people to take toward one another. Freud argues that, because humans are inclined to be distrustful of people they do not know, they are also inclined to not want to deal with them peacefully. Instead, people will work hard to assert themselves against others—to get what they want, and to satisfy their own libido over the needs and desires of another person—especially a person whom the subject does not know. Thus aggression, rather than love and brotherhood, is the default state of human interaction.

Chapter 6 Quotes

●● Neurosis was regarded as the outcome of a struggle between the interest of self-preservation and the demands of the libido, a struggle in which the ego had been victorious but at the price of severe sufferings and renunciations.

Related Characters: Sigmund Freud (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 104

Explanation and Analysis

Neurosis, as Freud sees it, is one of the characteristic features of life in modern civilization. A neurotic is a person who wants what he does not have and does not have what he wants, and whose conflicting libidos are not balanced. For the neurotic, there is no uncomplicated relationship to one's drives and desires. Instead, the neurotic is a prisoner of his or her own making. The guilt the neurotic feels for wanting some things and for not wanting others is very, very difficult to stifle.

The neurotic, in addition, partly *enjoys* the struggle between wanting and not-wanting—they believe it to be a natural part of life, and indeed can derive pleasure from it.

●● ... besides the instinct to preserve living substance and to join it into ever larger units, there must exist another, contrary instinct seeking to dissolve those units and to bring them back to their primeval, inorganic state.

Related Characters: Sigmund Freud (speaker)

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 106

Explanation and Analysis

This is Freud's most cogent definition and explanation of his idea of the "death-drive," which counters the love-drive. Humans, Freud states, like to join things together and create—to build families and communities, to bring people together out of love and shared interest. This is what allows people to live together in the first place.

But this love of others is countered by a very strong force of destruction, aggression, separation, self-interest, and greed. Civilization cannot eliminate the death-drive, but it can subdue it, and can direct it inward. The subject in a modern civilization has internalized the struggle of one person against another—and this struggle of wanting and not-

wanting becomes apparent in the neuroses of individual psychological cases.

Chapter 7 Quotes

☹☹ The tension between the harsh superego and the ego that is subjected to it, is called by us the sense of guilt; it expresses itself as a need for punishment.

Related Characters: Sigmund Freud (speaker)

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 121

Explanation and Analysis

Freud narrows in on exactly which parts of the human psyche are responsible for the eternal neurotic struggle, the management of the libido and the drive for love and self-preservation. It is the "harsh" regulating superego that tells a person what is good or not good, possible or impossible, socially positive or socially negative. And it is the ego that is "subjected" to this punishment and regulation. The id, for its part, is the portion of the mind that is subject most closely to the unconscious drives of the sexual and the destructive.

Thus the ego must always mediate between the regulating superego and the unregulated id. The ego is in an impossible, unresolvable position between these two poles, thus creating human psychological suffering and necessitating psychoanalytic treatment.

☹☹ A threatened external unhappiness—loss of love and punishment on the part of the external authority—has been exchanged for a permanent internal unhappiness, for the tension of the sense of guilt.

Related Characters: Sigmund Freud (speaker)

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 120

Explanation and Analysis

Freud's argument here is complex and persuasive. He claims that a sign of cultivated, civilized society is the insistence on placing guilt, an internal struggle of regulation, into the ego. Societies regulate individuals with external rules, but also by causing people to regulate themselves through feeling that they are insufficient, bad, or weak—the ego, Freud states,

will take over in these cases, reinforcing the social injunction for weakness by allowing the subject to feel compromised by illicit desire, and unable to save himself.

For Freud, the "tension" of modern life is the continual tension between wanting love (and sex) and wanting to be alone, between being interested in destruction and the fear of actually dying. These forces cannot be resolved, and the subject cannot find comfort. Instead, one must merely navigate the stormy psychological sea as best as is possible. This is the only possible equilibrium that modern societies can provide subjects.

Chapter 8 Quotes

☹☹ ... the price we pay for our advance in civilization is a loss of happiness through the heightening of the sense of guilt.

Related Characters: Sigmund Freud (speaker)

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 131-132

Explanation and Analysis

This is a succinct formulation of one of Freud's most important theses in the essay. Freud argues that civilization is a structure that people, when living in groups, assume. It consists of many factors, one of which is the championing of the rational, the "clean," and the organized over the disorder and relative violence of "primitive," or pre-civilized, life.

But for Freud, this change is not without consequence and sacrifice. The external punishment that is always lurking in pre-civilized life is made to be felt in modern society through the complex process of the internalization of guilt, and the perpetual belief that one is entirely at the mercy of one's desires, despite whatever one might do to attempt to control them. Control them too much, and one's psychic life becomes a prison. But don't control the id enough, and the social fabric itself is in danger of fraying altogether.

☹☹ If the development of civilization has such a far-reaching similarity to the development of the individual ... may we not be justified in reaching the diagnosis that, under the influence of cultural urges, some civilizations, or some epochs of civilization—possibly the whole of mankind—have become neurotic?

Related Characters: Sigmund Freud (speaker)

Related Themes:**Page Number:** 147**Explanation and Analysis**

Freud makes a crucial point here, arguing that societies might be subject to the same psychological laws as individuals. As a consequence, a society might become psychologically "sick," might want what it cannot have and not want what it does have. Entire civilizations could suffer as individuals do—could exist in a constant interior war between what is wanted and what is feared, between pleasure and chaos, between constructive behavior and destruction. A neurotic society, like a neurotic patient, can possibly be cured, but Freud's ideas of treatment, of the "talking cure" and the processes of psychoanalytic therapy, were not, at the time of this writing, available to entire groups of people.

●● And now it is to be expected that the other of the two "Heavenly Powers," eternal Eros, will make an effort to assert himself in the struggle with his equally immortal adversary [Thanatos]. But who can see with what success and with what result?

Related Characters: Sigmund Freud (speaker)**Related Themes:****Page Number:** 149**Explanation and Analysis**

This final quotation in the book is of great historical importance, as Freud, and many thinkers of his time, wondered the extent to which Europe might collapse under the weight of a Second World War. Freud sensed that European society had not been righted by the First World War—and indeed, felt that the previous conflict and its aftermath might merely have stoked the flames of a neurotic society.

Freud believes, however, that one way to combat the fears of the unknown, of a civilization whose future is not assured, is to attempt to understand that society rationally and scientifically. One must do this even though society itself might not be rational, and might not want scientific answers to every question. It is this paradox that makes Freud's inquiry so complex and so useful, even in the many decades since this text's first publication.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

CHAPTER 1

Freud begins his study autobiographically. He describes a conversation with a friend—a poet—who claims that, though men (meaning all humans) might not be naturally predisposed to one religion or another, most men have a kind of “oceanic . . . religious feeling,” a sense of the “limitless.” Freud notes that he does not have this feeling in himself—he finds religion and belief strange and often tiresome—but he recognizes that others *do* seem to have an intrinsic desire for religion, and for a god or gods.

Freud seeks to investigate the means by which an individual relates to an abstraction like “God.” Freud asserts, as he has in other articles, that the self can be divided into ego, id, and superego. The ego is the active, conscious, decision-making self. The id is the set of unconscious desires “deep” within the mind (which he later identifies as drives toward love and death). The superego manages or controls the ego and id. Freud notes that “the feeling of our own ego is subject to disturbances and the boundaries of the ego are not constant.”

As a human develops from child to adult, Freud goes on, the ego must learn to “differentiate” the inside from the outside—the “internal” from the “external” worlds. This divides the world into “self” and “object.” An “object” can be either a person, a group of people, or a thing towards which one directs either love or aggression. Originally, in youth, the ego “includes everything,” and the division of self and object happens for some people more strongly than for others. For those who are religious, the ego maintains a more powerful connection to things outside the self. The ego is more inclusive, more open to the “oceanic” feeling of otherness that Freud associates with religious belief.

Freud uses a long metaphor about Roman architectural history to explain the “architecture” of the mind. He notes, in brief, that anything “arising” in the mind “cannot perish.” Thus, for people of strong religious feeling, the notion of a connection between internal self and external world—that oceanic religious feeling—will necessarily coexist with a feeling of difference between self and object—the “mature,” adult view of the ego in the world. It is, in Freud’s Rome metaphor, as though all the historical Romes of every age existed atop the other, all vibrant, all alive—not one Rome buried under another, but all Romes present at once, in the same space and time.

From the beginning, Freud situates his investigation as a personal, rather than a totally objective, one. In this instance, he is clear that religion is not an important motivating force in his own life, but he acknowledges that religion is important to many others. It is his ability to be both self-referencing and open to other opinions that makes Freud’s arguments so powerful.



The division between ego, superego, and id is a central one in Freud’s work, and it extends beyond Civilization and Its Discontents into other examinations of dreams and the psyche, or the lower layers of the mind. For Freud, this triangle of deep desire, outward self, and internal regulation provides all the tensions and forces necessary to explain the complexities of the mind.



Freud’s argument here seems counterintuitive. One might imagine that a baby knows only its “self,” and not the outside world, and that, as it grows and is educated, and thus broadens its conception of the world and the “other.” But Freud claims just the opposite. He notes that children are open to all feelings, and all thoughts, both internal and external—that they are, in a sense, full already of the impulses and desires available in the world. Growing up, then, is a winnowing away of these desires—to create a stable, individual “self.”



This is a very important metaphor in Freud’s work, and one of his most famous. Freud uses the idea of architectural ruin to describe the phases of the mind, and how the mind contains, in its present state, all the states it has passed through to reach the present. The notion that thoughts or feelings might be “buried” in the mind, to be recovered by the psychoanalyst, is originally Freud’s. It has now seeped broadly into the culture, but was once a claim only of psychoanalysis.



Freud notes that the architecture metaphor breaks down for the mind, however, because the mind is not limited psychologically to the demands of time and space, as Rome would be. Thus, it is possible and indeed necessary that all stages of the mind exist at the same time within the mind. Thus the “child-mind” is active and working within the “adult-mind.” Freud uses this to assert that the religious, “oceanic” feeling, among those so inclined, is related to “an infant’s helplessness and the longing for the father aroused by it.”

As with many of Freud’s metaphors, however, the architectural idea of the mind as Rome is not a perfect one. The mind, Freud notes, is not quite like anything we see in the world. We can think of its fundamental forces as physical forces, and we can compare its attributes to features of the physical world we inhabit, but the liquidity and flexibility of the mind, as evidenced by dreams and obsessions, is more difficult to visualize than something like a city.



Freud argues that different religious practices, like yogic meditation and Christian prayer, all relate to a desire for the ego, the self, to join to a world external to it. This desire, Freud repeats, is predicated on the child’s fear that his father will not always be present to guide him or her. Thus the father of childhood becomes, in adulthood, God the Father, or His equivalent.

Freud’s argument, here and elsewhere, cuts across the boundaries separating different religious and philosophical traditions. He argues, in particular, that prayer and meditation are different manifestations of the same impulse: to recreate a childlike “oneness” between the self and the outside world.



CHAPTER 2

Freud begins the second chapter in an attempt to tease out the persistence of religious feeling in the modern world, where artistic and scientific achievement occur, especially in the West (in his view) at a very high level. Freud admits to being, occasionally, perplexed by the persistence of religious feeling despite these great artistic and scientific achievements, because art and science require cultivation of the mind, but religion is based, as he stated at the end of Chapter I, on an “infantile” relation to the figure of the father.

Despite Freud’s initial willingness to entertain the idea of religious feeling, here he takes a more hostile attitude towards exactly that religious belief. Freud admits to not understanding how it is that intelligent, rational, indeed “scientific” people are religious. Thus Freud admits to seeing religion and scientific objectivity as, effectively, opposites.



Freud then turns, rather abruptly, to a different question, one he also believes to be a driver of religious feeling in humans: the question of the meaning and purpose of life. Freud notes that this question probably has no answer. But one method might be to say, provisionally, that life’s purpose is happiness. Freud wonders whether this is related to the “pleasure principle,” or a human being’s desire to ensure his or her own physical satisfaction (often sexually, but also related to physical comfort and safety). Freud notes that pleasure can be complicated by the fact that humans often find out their own pleasure relatively—that is, by comparing it to instances of pain in their lives. Pleasure can only be known fully in contrast to pain.

The “pleasure principle,” although it seems fundamental on its face, is actually a rather complex idea. Freud notes that pleasure is known in part as a lack of pain, and that only by experiencing pain can we understand pleasure. Thus the pleasure principle admits, and depends upon, the existence of a substantial amount of pain in one’s life. Freud therefore argues not that humans wish to avoid pain altogether, but that, instead, they wish to see their pain as a contrast to feelings of contentment and happiness elsewhere in their lives.



Pleasure, for humans, therefore derives from the removal of pain or suffering, from banding together in groups to ensure comfort, and from various human methods, some more effective than others, for removing pain from daily life. Freud notes several: “intoxication,” or the use of drugs to hide pain from the perceiving mind; the “killing” of the instincts, through yogic practice or other methods of meditation; and the “turning away” from the problems of the world, as a hermit does on a mountaintop.

For Freud, the most common method of transforming a desire for pleasure and the removal of pain is the “sublimation of instinctual drives,” or the turning of pleasure impulses (sex, food, sleep) to socially-productive and communal ends. Freud makes distinctions within this category, too, identifying one example as “the way of life which makes love the center of everything, which looks for all satisfaction in loving and being loved.”

Love between two persons, for Freud, is a complex interaction. It contains a desire—on the part of the lover—for beauty and comfort, a desire that can be aesthetic, as directed toward an art-object, or more passionate, as directed toward an attractive human being. Love also contains a sexual component, which is tied to libido, or an individual’s erotic energy. “Happiness,” Freud goes on, “is a problem of the economics of the individual’s libido.” A person becomes happy by figuring out, for himself or herself, how best to manage his or her emotional and sexual energies, within the self or directed toward another person. Freud says there is no formula for how to go about managing this “economy.”

Freud sees this economy of libido as essential to the human phenomenon of happiness, or perceived happiness—and to the idea, then, that humans have of a purpose in life. Some humans wish to share a life with another; others find ego satisfaction in living primarily with themselves. In Freud’s view, religion, then, is a mechanism outside the self that aids in the regulation of the instincts of libido—directing love either toward other people (as in Christian commandments to love another as oneself, discussed below) or toward the abstraction of God.

Removal of pain does not always produce or sustain pleasure. Hermits living far away from human civilization do not necessarily guarantee that they will be happy—they simply guarantee that their pains will not be the same as those living enmeshed in human communities. Freud seems to imply that hermits and drug users, in trying to avoid pain, only find more or different kinds of pain for themselves.



This process of “sublimation” is absolutely essential to Freud’s ideas of human interaction. Freud believes that human impulses toward basic pleasure, like food and sex, can never be removed, but these impulses can be “directed” or channeled toward different ends—or repressed. Later, Freud will illustrate how civilization tends to direct these impulses, and whether or not it is effective in doing so.



Freud also admits, in this section, that human happiness is rarely achieved in a vacuum – the hermit might avoid pain, but he rarely finds true happiness. Instead, this contentment occurs in human relationships, especially in loving, romantic relationships (and Freud will later argue that all love-relationships contain within them a kernel of sexuality, whether expressed or not). The “economy” Freud references here is the balance between the needs and desires of each member of a romantic relationship.



In this instance, then, religion is something akin to the superego – a regulatory set of principles, designed to shape and direct basic human desires toward productive ends. Religion, however, is a set of principles that work only for certain people, and only in certain historical moments. Because Freud himself, for example, finds religious belief to be unrealistic and unhelpful, he cannot regulate his own desires using religious principles – though others might be able to do so.



CHAPTER 3

Freud begins this chapter by attempting to isolate the causes of human suffering: “the superior power of nature,” “the feebleness of our own bodies,” and the relationships of human beings “in the family, the state, and society.” Freud believes that the first two are inevitable consequences of being alive. Nature will always be powerful, and the body always weak by comparison. But Freud wonders whether the third, human relationships, is a necessary cause of suffering. Freud wonders if maybe humans would be better off—would suffer less—by “abandoning” civilization and returning to a “primitive” state.

Freud notes that, in the age of colonial discovery (beginning in the 17th century), modern Europeans looked at “primitive” peoples in Africa, Asia, and other parts of the world as being intrinsically happier, “closer” to nature, and therefore untainted by the suffering of civilization. Freud counters, however, that these ideas about non-European life were often predicated on faulty assumptions of happiness (for example, most Europeans could not speak the languages of the “natives”). Freud also notes that, for every technological advance in human society (like the railway), there might be said to be a complementary problem. For example, there is the fact that railways enabled diseases to spread more rapidly among populations.

Freud concludes his discussion of happiness by arguing that, because “happiness” itself is a subjective category, one depending on the whims and nature of the person using the word, a researcher cannot know for certain which ages were “happier” than others—whether, for example man was happiest in medieval times, or in the 16th century, or at the present day. Freud leaves off the subject of happiness and turns to an attempt to define civilization, which, he believes, can be more objectively understood than “happiness” itself.

Freud defines civilization as “the whole sum of the achievements and the regulations which distinguish our lives from those of our animal ancestors and which serve two purposes . . . to protect men against nature and to adjust their mutual relations.” Protection against nature is, for Freud, easy to understand. “Motors” and other industrial machines have allowed humans to built habitations and cities, and to tame natural forces (with dams, roads, and walls) when necessary. Freud notes that humans have become so effective at controlling their environment that they have begun to marshal the forces of nature the way that God might have. Humans have, in essence, made themselves gods, at least regarding things like managing floods, preventing fires, and navigating the globe.

Freud attempts to sort through just how it is that humans can feel so miserable. It's not a pleasant topic, but in doing this analysis Freud reveals that the terrible powers of nature pale in comparison to the cruelty humans can inflict on one another. In terms of the historical context of this work – the lead-up to the Second World War – Freud was something of a prophet, understanding intuitively the sort of violence humans were capable of..



Freud introduces the rather easy claim that people existing “without” civilization (or, more exactly, people living in non-Western forms of social organization) appear “happier,” or “closer to nature,” than those living in Paris or Rome. But Freud is quick to rebut this: he argues that, if we are not able to see exactly how happiness functions in other cultures, perhaps we cannot know how sadness and cruelty operate in those cultures, either. Freud admits to understanding only the Western perspective thoroughly, in his analysis.



Freud admits here, too, that he will not be able to develop an objective metric that will measure happiness in one society or another, and across time periods. Perhaps people really were happier in the Stone Age, when they did not have railways and did not have the smoke and noise pollution those railways produced – but there is no way of knowing this exactly. There can be no data, in other words, to support these claims in either direction.



Freud's use of the term “god” here is a telling one. In pre-modern societies, a “god” usually stemmed from any force that could not be sufficiently explained by human endeavor. Thus, when thunder and lightning were not well understood, it made sense to attribute these forces to divine powers. But because humans now understand the world more exactly, in a scientific sense – and because they can manipulate their environment in profound ways – this notion of the divine seems somewhat outdated. Humans are now as powerful as they imagined their old gods to have been.



But the second prong of civilization—relationships between humans—is governed by more subtle forces. Freud notes that another aspect of culture becomes important where human relations are concerned, and that aspect is beauty—something totally “unnecessary” in the utilitarian sense (for beauty builds nothing and protects no one)—but nevertheless a value highly prized by all developed civilizations. Freud believes that cleanliness and order are related to beauty, and are also organizational principles of human civilizations. Beauty is, in other words, something that distinguishes advanced civilizations from “undeveloped” peoples.

Freud goes on, saying that civilizations, in their desire for beauty and order and cleanliness, naturally move on to “higher” spheres of intellectual concern once these more basic aspects of human organization are achieved. For Freud, the “higher spheres” are religious thought, philosophy, mathematical speculation, and other forms of abstract reasoning.

There are political implications for civilized societies, too—namely, the idea that, as civilization develops, so too develops an idea of collective, or communal, interest over the interest of individuals. Civilizations are therefore tasked with a central problem: maintaining the balance of individual liberty and freedom (and Freud notes that freedom was greatest before civilization, when humans simply did as they pleased, but without communal protections) while also allowing for and protecting the interests of the group as a whole.

Freud makes a final, and very important, point in the chapter: namely, that the development of civilizations mirrors the development of individuals. In childhood, instincts are “sublimated,” or rerouted, from the baser ones (involving sex and excretion, primarily) to more elevated ones—for example, abstract reasoning, love, and a relationship toward one’s desires and toward death. In civilizations, too, one finds this process. Earlier civilizations manage instinctual desires, and more advanced civilizations sublimate these desires (revenge, violence, greed, sexual libertinism) into more socially-acceptable and community-minded outcomes, like justice, peace, generosity, and sexual restraint.

Freud admits that, although individuals develop like civilizations, the correspondence between the two categories may not necessarily be exact. Thus Freud will attempt, in the ensuing chapter, to determine how exactly civilizations originate and progress, and through what stages they advance.

This does not mean, however, that modern or developed civilizations do not include, within themselves, spaces where rational thought breaks down. One of these spaces is the “aesthetic,” or the beautiful. Modern societies seem to make space for exactly this kind of phenomenon – of things appreciated in themselves, with regard to the pleasure they give, and not for rational reasons. Thus painting, which serves no survival purpose for humans, flourishes in more developed societies.



Freud continues his argument. He claims that there is a direct relationship between how developed a society is, and how “refined” its intellectual abilities are. A society that does not worry about food has far more time, then, to worry about mathematical principles.



This balance between the individual and the social in a civilization is absolutely central for Freud. It also makes sense to compare this “balance” to the three-way balance of the id, ego, and superego within the human psyche. For, as Freud will explain later, these forces within the mind have a way of replicating themselves outside the mind. Thus human societies organize in the same way that humans minds do – as systems of opposed forces.



Freud spends the remainder of the chapter teasing out the implications for this claim, that human society replicates (or, in his term, “recapitulates”) the developments of the human mind. Sexuality is one place to start. Human minds might, in a less developed state (perhaps adolescence) attempt to test out the limits of their own bodily desires. Likewise human societies, in their “undeveloped” phases, might permit sexual relationships that more “developed” societies would not.



As with the “Roman architecture” image above, Freud admits that the correspondence between his metaphor and his argument is not perfect. Thus the mind and society are not identical in their development – hence the remainder of the essay, which seeks to explain their subtle differences.



CHAPTER 4

In this chapter, Freud seeks out the psychological bases of communal life—why did humans beings first feel the need to join together in groups? For Freud, the answer lies in human male-female sexuality. “Stronger” men found that, by “keeping” women closer to them—by living with them and raising biological families with them—they could each satisfy what Freud identifies as the two initial human imperatives—love (eros) and necessity (or basic items like food, water, shelter, and clothing—Freud also calls this “ananke,” from the Greek word for “need”). Women, for their part, looked to men for protection from violence and for satisfaction of sexual and procreative desires. Thus civilizations began with these first family units.

Freud then goes on a self-identified detour to investigate what exactly he means by love in this earliest human setting. For Freud, love is not inevitably bound up in happiness, but is instead a relationship of need, desire, and potential jealousy between two persons. Freud believes that the kind of love extolled in certain philosophies, especially the Christian religion—a love of all mankind, and the injunction to “love one’s neighbor as oneself” (the **Golden Rule**)—is an aberration, something nearly impossible for most humans to manage.

Freud investigates the “**Golden Rule**” in greater detail, arguing that it is an impractical injunction for two reasons. First, because “a love that does not discriminate seems to me to forfeit a part of its own value . . . and secondly, [because] not all men are worthy of love.” Freud instead believes that the concept of “love” in Christian discourse—and that often used by people in modern Europe—is actually two different sensations: the sexual love between man and woman, and the genetically-based familial love between children and parents. Freud believes that sexual love is the primary drive, and that genetically-based familial love is a kind of “inhibited” form of that sexual desire, one that is reinforced by incest taboos, barring people within families from sexual relations with one another.

Freud’s arguments in this chapter are perhaps the most far-flung and tenuous in the book, but they are still of interest in the analysis of his own thought. In other words, Freud’s ideas on human development show just how much importance Freud places on sexual desire, and man’s wish to secure that sexual desire in the future. Thus Freud envisions family units as, essentially, protective structures guaranteeing sexual desire and other basic needs. Human societies, in this line of reasoning, are necessarily built on male-female family units.



Freud clearly differentiates between the sexual love of the family units (in the passage above) and the Christian concept of universal love – the second being a kind of fellow-feeling, a generosity of spirit. For Freud, the first, sexual kind of love is not a generosity of spirit, but is a desire for one party to find, in another, a certain set of physical and mental satisfactions.



One might anticipate Freud’s difficulty with the Golden Rule, and with Christian teachings regarding the love of others. In the Gospels, Christ argued explicitly that one ought to love other people not for what those people can do for one, but simply because love is itself an utmost good. For Freud, love cannot function in this way – love is not an end, in Freud, but is instead a drive, and therefore a means toward accomplishing things in the world. Love for Freud is the jealous, anxious, and powerful glue that binds humans together, creating families and societies.



Freud concludes the chapter by noting that sexual relations within societies are “impaired” by certain regulations, which tend to privilege monogamous, lifelong, male-female procreative unions, as contracted by marriage. These rules, Freud notes, are designed to maximize the smoothness of social functioning—because male-female family units are, in essence, the easiest for societies to replicate, and the easiest to govern. Freud acknowledges that a great deal of “variation” might occur from this norm within a society. For example, people might have sex with others of the same gender, or have sex outside marriage. Nevertheless, the social constraints against uninhibited love are significant, and constitute a foundation on which social control is constructed.

Freud’s notion of “impaired” sexuality is another controversial idea. For it is taboo in nearly all societies for people within the same family structure, whether biological or not, to engage in sexual activity. Indeed, one might argue that the “incest taboo,” as it is known, is a central organizing principle of human societies. Freud does not dispute this idea per se, but he does seem to argue that family love retains within it a sexual principle that is, of necessity, displaced and suppressed. It is a strange and disturbing argument.



CHAPTER 5

Freud continues his discussion of sexual control in the previous chapter, arguing that the “sexual frustrations” society imposes on individuals cause certain individuals, known as neurotics, to create certain symptoms in response (for example, excessive worry, bodily fixations, or obsessions). These symptoms give the neurotic both pleasure and pain—pain in their existence, and pleasure in the neurotic’s continual attempts to indulge in the symptoms and overcome them.

Neurosis is an important term in Freud’s system. In the definition provided in this chapter, neurosis is something like a “super-abundance,” an overflow of nervous energies – which cause the neurotic to have difficulty operating in the social world. Neurotics, therefore, possess a more pronounced version of the frustration and suppression of instinctual desires that all humans must deal with.



Freud then turns his attention back to the concept of the **Golden Rule**, which he seeks to analyze, and to debunk, in greater detail. For, Freud argues, the rule makes no sense when held up to closer scrutiny. If love is a valuable thing, one in which humans put a great deal of esteem, then it cannot make sense for humans to “love” a stranger equally to a family member or close friend. This, Freud argues, would devalue the concept of love and make it meaningless—and surely this cannot be the intent of religious doctrine.

Freud’s definition of love in this chapter is similar to the one used previously in the text. Romantic love is a selfish, rather than selfless, proposition – it is the joining of one’s life with another’s for purposes of mutual benefit. Freud therefore has trouble reconciling this selfish definition of love with the selfless love advocated for by the Christian faith.



Freud says that, although it might make sense to “love one’s neighbor insofar as that neighbor loves you,” it makes no sense at all to love one’s “enemies,” as Jesus also commands his followers in the New Testament. Enemies, Freud argues, should be loathed or competed against. This is the natural model of human society, and to argue that enemies ought to be loved is to ignore completely the real antagonism between some groups of humans.

Again, Freud finds Christ’s teachings to run counter to human nature and “common sense.” Freud’s implication here is that the Golden Rule might be a useful principle for a society to claim to follow—to advocate for in the abstract—but it is not a workable principle in practice. It is too generous, whereas humans are inherently egotistical.



Freud goes one step further. He writes that not only is it unnatural for humans to love their neighbors and enemies as themselves, it is instead more natural for humans to be aggressive toward most people—even toward friends. This aggressiveness, competitiveness, and desire for one’s self-interest is deep-rooted in humans, enough so that “the primary mutual hostility of human beings [is]” a “perpetual threat” to “civilized society.”

Freud continues: “civilization has to use its utmost efforts in order to set limits to man’s aggressive instincts and to hold the manifestations of them in check by psychological reaction-formations.” Freud attributes society’s restrictions on certain kinds of sexual and romantic relationships as a way of curtailing humans’ baser, more aggressive desires. Freud then makes a brief detour, arguing that human aggressiveness can take many forms, and that communists, who believe the elimination of private property would eliminate antagonism between humans, are in error. For, he concludes, human aggression will always find an outlet, economically or socially, even if a society determines that all its citizens are “equal” under the law.

Freud also notes that antagonism between groups is not just limited to vastly different sets of people, but is actually more pronounced when groups are close together and largely similar, though still distinct: for example, the Spaniards and the Portuguese, or the “English and the Scotch.” Freud calls this amplified antagonism in close quarters the “narcissism of small differences.”

Freud concludes the chapter by arguing that people have accepted limits on their sexuality and their aggressiveness, within social bounds, for a reason—because societies make people safer, and protect them from harm. This is the only reason why humans are willing to give up their sexual and bodily freedom—and the happiness that attends to this freedom—when they enter into civil societies together. Freud argues that, though it may be possible to improve humanity’s happiness on the whole within a civilization, one cannot make men free and happy by lifting civilization’s bans on unfettered sexuality and violence. This means that civilization itself might be incompatible with man’s desires for total happiness, even as civilizations continue to satisfy man’s need for safety and security. Freud sees this tension as central to modern life.

Aggression will become an important drive later on in Freud’s text. Aggressiveness is, in this usage, the opposite of generous, Christian love. It is the desire, instead, to better one’s opponent – it is a tendency to view the world as a “me vs. them” competition.



Freud makes an interesting distinction in this section. He argues that some, like communists and socialists, believe human aggressiveness to be dependent on certain economic systems—namely the capitalist model. This itself was of great concern to people in Europe in the 1930s, when Freud was writing the text, as Fascism and Communism were pitted against one another as responses to the political and economic turmoil of a global depression in the 1930s. In any event, Freud maintains that aggression still exists in communist societies – it is simply framed differently from capitalist aggression.



This is an important term, and one whose use extends beyond the bounds of the present text. It seems paradoxical that people close to one another might find increased reason to loathe one another, yet, as anyone in a small group or club can attest, tiny differences often beget major discord.



The question Freud poses, then, is not whether aggression exists – for he concedes that human aggression is a baseline across cultures, regardless of political system. Instead, he believes that the nature of civil societies is predicated on a willingness of some citizens to accept limitations on their aggression. They do this not out of altruism, but because in exchange they receive the advantages that a stable, smoothly-functioning society provides—like a police force, a court system, or a fire department. This balance between liberty and order will be taken up in the following chapters, too.



CHAPTER 6

In this short chapter, Freud discusses the existence of two different drives in the human libido, or economy of energies within the self. The first is the love-drive, Eros, in which an ego desires to join itself to an object (a thing outside itself, like another person or group of persons), or to itself (in the case of narcissism, when a person falls in love with himself or herself). The second is the death-drive, or Thanatos—a desire to break down the bonds between people, to destroy the world around the self, or even to destroy the self. Freud sees both the love-drive and the death-drive at work in interactions between persons and within societies.

Specifically, Freud understands the love-drive to be, within a society, the desire between humans to establish bonds, to create sustaining relationships, and to create community. Eros, for Freud, is therefore the glue that holds a society together. Meanwhile, Thanatos, the death-drive, is the force tearing a society apart. It is the force that leads to aggressiveness between persons, and to the impulse toward destruction. Freud believes that the death-drive is prior to the love-drive in most humans, and that Eros must constantly battle Thanatos as societies develop in order to ensure the continued existence of those societies.

CHAPTER 7

Freud uses this chapter to describe how exactly people are able to maintain civil societies in spite of the overwhelming presence of the death-drive between persons in those societies. Freud believes that the love-drive alone would not be sufficient to hold societies together. In addition to Eros, then, people within societies must internalize the discipline and the rules a society imposes upon its citizens. This imposed, internalized discipline becomes an individual's conscience, and it is civilization's greatest insurance policy against total disruption and decay.

Freud calls the internalized conscience—which is implanted in the individual mind by the controlling society—the “super-ego,” and argues that the super-ego motivates the ego to behave according to society's rules. It does this by instilling in the ego a fear of the “loss of love”—that is, the loss of a community's protection—if the individual incurs society's wrath by breaking any of its rules.

The division between the love- and death-drives is an essential one for the purposes of this text. The love-drive seems reasonable enough to common sense – for as stated earlier, Freud believes that humans are hardwired to seek a certain kind of pleasure, however they might conceive of that feeling. But the death-drive, which Freud also views as essential to human life, is more troubling: a belief that humans also wish to court a proximity to destruction.



Just as humans receive a certain amount of stimulation and excitement—if not pleasure per se—from the death-drive, so too do societies, in their collective death-drive, have an impulse to destroy themselves permanently. This idea has a historical context, as Freud felt that European civilization was doing exactly this—and indeed, World War II was soon to begin. Freud's essay might be viewed, then, as an attempt to reconcile the heights of European refinement and culture with its barbarism and violence, as born out in war.



Freud's notion of internalized discipline is perhaps the central explanatory mechanism for the book. This notion – that people in civilizations largely regulate their own behaviors, and that civilized governments simply reinforce these internal regulations – helps explain how people can both prize their own liberties within a society and work together for the common good.



Here Freud explains why the superego is so effective. “Loss of love” is the flip side of the love-drive – it is a fear all humans have, that their closest relationships will be taken away from them. Internalization of discipline is therefore effective because humans depend so much on the love of others.



Freud argues, too, that the super-ego tends to be most active in truly virtuous people. Therefore, the most virtuous people often believe themselves to be the most flawed, and their super-egos, in turn, motivate them to seek penance more and more for their supposed infractions of social rules. These individuals, who believe themselves to be terrible, are often the most generous and loving within a society.

Freud closes the chapter with a discussion of the development of the super-ego in children. Freud believes that family units are a reproduction of the social phenomenon by which the super-ego is the internalized presence of a disciplining authority reflecting the rules of society at large. In other words, children grow up fearing their parents' authority—internalizing within the self both this authority and a resistance to it. The human conscience, then, is a battle between the self, which wants to assert its will and its instinctual desires, and the super-ego, which reflects the authority of the parents, who wish both to control and protect the child.

Freud concludes that human guilt derives from, on the one hand, one's love for one's parents, and on the other, one's desire to disobey them, even violently so. For the individual conscience, doing something bad is the same as desiring to do something bad, so the super-ego does not distinguish between purely psychic acts—like wanting to kill one's parents—and physical acts like actually murdering them. Thus guilt can exist in people's minds even when they have done nothing wrong, but have merely entertained the notion of doing something wrong.

CHAPTER 8

Freud begins the final chapter by defining guilt "as the most important problem in the development of civilization" and attempting to "show that the price we pay for our advance in civilization is a loss of happiness through the heightening of the sense of guilt." Freud goes on to explain that the consciences of individuals—that is the patrolling of their super-egos through the accumulated weight of social rules for behavior—cause individuals to suffer, rather to thrive, within many civilizations.

This is another important point, offered almost as a footnote in the text. Freud here explains why the "saintly" seem so saintly – because they believe they are not, and therefore work their entire lives to become better. This, Freud argues, is the only way to be good: by feeling less-than-good.



Freud ties together discussions of the self, family, and society here, synthesizing different strands of his argument from throughout the essay. Freud sees the family as a unit that is intermediate to the self and society. The family is the fundamental building block of society because it allows for a certain kind of control and regulation between people. Society, then, is a series of families connected in hierarchies of power.



The superego functions by way of guilt. Guilt, or the feeling that one has done something wrong, is the great motivator for human "good," for actions that will benefit selves and families within a society. As Freud notes, guilt need not be connected to bad things actually done: it is in fact more powerful when linked to bad things only considered, without actually being executed.



As with neurotics, whose sublimation of anxieties goes "overboard" and causes suffering, those who are guilt-ridden can be excessively guilty, and can therefore create a net negative, rather than positive, in society. Societies function best, Freud argues, when the superego of both individuals and the group maintains a productive level of guilt – one that knits people together without suffocating them.



Freud then revisits many of his previous claims, arguing that human guilt is really a feeling of aggressiveness—which ultimately derives from the human death-drive—directed inwardly. This aggression, which society seeks to control in its outward manifestation (that is, against other individuals in society) can nevertheless very much harm the individual toward whom it is directed internally. In this way, societies, though attempting to make individuals less violent and to protect people, result in individuals inflicting violence on themselves, through the control of the super-ego.

Freud also notes that, in the development of humans, two impulses are at play: the egoistic, or self-motivated, and the altruistic, or generous (the motivation to help another being). For individuals, self-motivation outstrips motivation to help others. But in societies, the altruistic impulse is championed over the egoistic, because societies value unity and agreement over individual aims.

Freud ends his essay by wondering the extent to which the development of civilizations, over time, mimics the development of children into adults. For if Freud's previous reasoning holds true, then societies age and mature just as humans do. Therefore, societies on the whole have "selves" that grow up, and, as a consequence, these societies also have "super-egos," or mechanisms by which the desires of the society on the whole are regulated. This results in a kind of "super-conscience" patrolling all the persons living in a given community.

If societies can have super-egos, then, societies can also feel guilty for their collective actions, and can become neurotic, or overly aggressive in their internal disciplining, when they become so guilty that they cannot function normally. Freud asks what a societal neurosis might look like. What would it mean for a society to become so guilty over its collective "aggressions" and "instincts" that it sickened itself, and desired to punish itself for its actions?

Freud restates the major arguments of the book in this section. It is worth noting that Freud's argument has proceeded more or less organically—although it is organized into chapters, Freud allows it to flow from one idea to the next. He restates his thoughts, qualifies them, and develops them over the course of many chapters. The result is, in the literal sense, an "essay"—an attempt or trial—of an argument about the nature of civilized societies.



Freud here shows that the balance between the self and society will, in a civilized space, always tilt toward society, or the general good.—otherwise the individual will to power and aggression is too strong. Societies, in order to keep existing, will always need to counter this individual will with a collective value of agreement and concord.



Freud offers some speculation at the close of the piece. Here, he asks whether societal development maps onto human development exactly – and, if so, he asks what particular stage of development the West is in now (in the 1930s). It would be tempting to have said, then, that the West was in decline, and this was indeed a fashionable idea in the lead-up to WWII. Freud, however, is not convinced of exactly where on the spectrum of "rise" and "fall" European societies lie.



Freud ends the piece with this grand and haunting question: what does a "sick" society do? And how can it be cured? In this way, Freud has played the role of medical doctor throughout the essay, attempting to diagnose the ills of society. But he is a doctor who is unsure of the cure – and who wonders if a cure is even possible for all of civilization.



Freud ends the essay by implying that the rise of National Socialism in Germany and its neighboring countries in Europe might in fact be the social result of a neuroticism within a society. In Germany during the 1920s and 30s, self-discipline of a community became so intense that it turned its aggression outward against other peoples (as, in the case of National Socialism, Europe's Jewish populations). The essay ends on this somber and prophetic note—and Freud died in 1939, before the horrors of the Second World War were fully revealed.

There was little reason to be happy about the state of Western civilization at the time the essay was composed. National Socialism in Germany and Fascism in Italy represented dictatorial responses to the economic and political turmoil of the time. These societies therefore privileged absolute government control over the rights of citizens: an imbalance between the liberties of the self and the regulations of the government, as Freud has explained throughout the essay. In such a society the superego has too much control in suppressing the ego, and so the society itself becomes neurotic and "sick."





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