

Civilization and its Discontents by Sigmund Freud

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Abstract

This is a detailed summary of each chapter of Freud's Civilization and its Discontents, I think its enough to understand what Freud is saying and to skip reading the book.

Chapter I

Freud starts off this chapter by introducing his friend who agrees with Freud's view on religion, it being an illusion, but disagrees from where the need for such an illusion originates. Freud's friend argues that he feels this feeling that he calls "Oceanic" in which he feels "one" with the external world, and which he thinks millions of people also feel, "It is a feeling which he would like to call a sensation of 'Eternity', a feeling of something limitless, unbounded, as it were Oceanic". For Freud, He couldn't possibly deny his friend's feelings, because they are his, but Freud clearly states that he has never felt such "oceanic" feeling. Freud goes on explaining the Ego and the Id, the ego being our conscious self, what we are aware of, and the Id being our unconscious. Throughout our life, since when we are infants, we draw the line between what is "I" or "Ego" and what is the external world, here maybe it relates to what I've said in my previous blog, about the ideal we build for ourselves to satisfy and how we build it through the medium of judgement. Freud goes on saying that there are mental states in which the person developing may have a blurred line between the Ego and the external world, in which this line is drawn incorrectly. The example of a baby who still doesn't know how to differentiate his ego from the external world, he learns to do so. Here he gives an example of how the baby learns that an "Object" from the external which provides him pleasure can evade him from time to time, here being his mother's breast, here he learns to draw the line, and he learns that to get that object again he should scream for his mother's help. The baby here draws the line from his Ego and the external world, he learns that to obtain this object from the external world it is not entirely in his control, he would have to do that action which may get him that object. Freud then argues that another tendency to separate the Ego from everything that inflicts a constant suffering and unpleasure to achieve a pleasure-ego, this is a tendency for a baby through development to draw the line between ego and the external world. "Some of the things that one is unwilling to give up, because they give pleasure, are nevertheless not ego but object; and some sufferings that one seeks to expel turn out to be inseparable from the ego in virtue of their internal origin". Originally Freud argues the ego includes everything and then through development we learn to draw the line between our Ego and the external world. Here then Freud attributes the origin of this "Oceanic" feeling, we may assume that in some people the development of such line, or rather "Ego-feeling" (including everything) persisted in their mental life, then that is the origin of feeling a limitless bond with the world, that "Oceanic" feeling. Freud then argues how this ego-feeling, even though felt at a young age, can still persist in an adult life, leaving traces. He gives examples consisting of animal kingdom, and Rome, proving his point that such ego feeling might stick around, causing that "Oceanic" feeling as his friend described. But of course, Freud argues that the origin of religious attitude can be traced back as far as the feeling of infantile helplessness, then he adds that oceanic feeling became connected with religion later on, and we see it clearly with Buddhism..."One with everything"...this stuff.

Chapter II

The main purpose of this chapter is to lay out the numerous ways humans strive for happiness.

Reinforcing the point Freud ended the first chapter with, He states that the common man, on the one hand, needs religion to explain the world's riddles for him, and on the other, acts as a careful Providence which will watch over his life and will compensate him in a future existence for any frustration he suffers here. "The common man cannot imagine this providence otherwise

than in the figure of an enormously exalted father". Freud quotes Goethe, "He who possesses science and art also has religion, but he who possesses neither of those two, let him have religion!". This is relevant to what is later laid out by Freud, how science and art are also a way to strive for happiness, same as religion. The three powerful deflections according to Freud which cause us to make light of our suffering are the following: Powerful deflections, substitutive satisfactions, and intoxicating substances. Freud classifies science as a deflective measure, which I agree with. Art as a substitutive satisfaction, and Intoxication alters the body's chemistry. The question of the purpose of life, according to Freud, derives from human presumptuousness, and can only be answered transcendently. "One can hardly be wrong in concluding that the idea of life having a purpose stands and falls with the religious system". Freud asks rather a more humble question, what do men by their behavior demand from life? The answer should hardly be in doubt, men strive after happiness (or at least they think they are). This journey of striving for happiness has two aims, a negative and a positive one, Men aim on the one hand at an absence of pain and unpleasure and on the other hand, at experiencing of strong feelings of pleasure. Freud has hitherto laid out that the purpose of life is simply a question for the pleasure principle. I agree with this, even philosophies that attempt to answer the question of purpose by elevating above any instinct of pleasure is still an attempt at a happy life, as Freud shows later. The three sources of which we experience suffering from are the following: From our own body which is doomed to decay, from the external world which may rage against us with overwhelming and merciless forces of destruction, and at last the suffering which comes from our relations to other men. Against the most painful suffering, that of our relations to other men, the readiest safeguard is voluntary isolation which achieves "Happiness of quietness". Intoxication is of course another type of escape, which directly cause us pleasurable sensations, and serves as an immediate detachment from reality, some sort of indifference. It is the easiest, it lets one withdraw from the pressure of reality into one's own sensible reality. The satisfaction of instincts has been represented as happiness, but back to the point of elevating oneself from instincts, its the road one follows when one can't satisfy those instincts, but would rather kills them. It seeks to master the internal sources of our needs, here the individual has sacrificed his life, and achieved the happiness of quietness. The down side of this is the undeniable diminution in the potentialities of enjoyment, as Freud says. Another technique for fending off suffering through psychical and intellectual work, its a special form of enjoyment, it offers some sort of shield against Fate, as one is in some sense independent of fate, it serves as an escape of the external world by seeking satisfaction in internal psychical processes. Freud then describes three men, the erotic man which prioritizes his emotional relationships to other people; the narcissistic man, who inclines to be self-sufficient, and seeks satisfaction in his internal mental processes; The man of action who will never give up on the external world on which he can try out his strength.

Chapter III

The main purpose of this chapter is to outline what is Civilization as we know it, and the effects it has on humans.

The three sources from which our suffering comes from, as Freud said in the previous chapter, are "The superior power of nature, the feebleness of our own bodies and the inadequacy of the regulations which adjust the mutual relationships of human beings in the family, the state and society." the first two sources are inevitable, we can never fully master nature, but our longing to do so is a pillar of what makes civilization. In the last source of suffering, the way our human relations are regulated causes us much suffering yet we can't prevent it. This made Freud realize that, "Civilization is largely responsible for our misery". Neuroticism stems from the inability to cope with the frustration which society imposes on a person in service of cultural ideals, implying that an escape of said ideals may result in a possibility of happiness. Our development in the natural sciences stems from our longing to "control" nature, in a way mitigating nature, as a means to have control over our fate, but this god-like longing didn't make us any happier. Technology has solved problems it has created, the ability of speaking to a loved one that lives far away is one of the blessings of technology, but would he be living far away if it wasn't for technology? Freud describes civilization as the whole sum of the achievements and the regulations which distinguish our lives from those of our animal ancestor and which serves two purposes: "to protect men against nature and adjust their mutual relations". A civilized man is expected to value order, cleanliness, and beauty, the first two according to Freud have practical value but the last one doesn't. Order can be valued as a means to spare man hesitation when it comes to decision making, its a sort of insurance about what's about to happen, a natural instinct of pattern recognition. Of course,

intellectual, scientific and artistic achievements are pillars of a civilization, arguably the most important, as they set "ideals". An important part of civilization as stated before is the regulation of human relations, this idea relates to zizek's "ideology", in a sense, how one is supposed to act in accordance to one's role, as a neighbor, as a lover, as a friend, as a father. Those regulations are essential, because without them then relations would be subject to the will of the physically stronger individual. That's essential to the civilization's most important virtue, Justice. Justice is the prioritization of a law in favor of the majority against the instinct of the individual. Here, in a sense, we all have to make an instinctual sacrifice to serve the "whole", to keep civilization just. A good struggle of mankind is to find the perfect balance between that sacrifice of instincts and "justice" or civilization. Freud concludes the chapter by explicitly stating that civilization is built upon the renunciation of instinct, and that if instincts aren't satisfied in a way or another, serious disorders will ensue. I agree with the general sentiment that civilization is built upon the renunciation of instinct, and that it has heavily effected our happiness, but I also think one can be happy independent of that. Indeed one might find a lot of conflict between how he truly feels and what is the cultural ideal that he is supposed to align with, but we are starting to see a rebellion against cultural ideals with all the progressive political mindsets, I don't know if it is a good or a bad thing, but I can understand that rebellion. As for the rest, I mostly agree.

Chapter IV

the main purpose of this chapter is to introduce the concept of totem and taboo, how civilization imposes them on our daily life, consequently our sexual life

The primal man had to adapt by building shelter, hunting for food and it was inevitable that his fellow men would either work with him or against him, it was useful to have fellow-workers for survival. The first fellow-workers for a man were his family, his sons which formed a group of brothers. Freud here argues that the founding of families was connected to the fact that at one point a man had to keep his woman near him for immediate genital satisfaction, and the woman keeps her offsprings close to her as they are essentially a part of her. "The male required a motive for keeping the female, or, speaking more generally, his sexual objects, near him; while the female who did not want to be separated from her helpless young, was obliged, in their interests, to remain with the stronger male" Here it is clear why many people think of Freud as a misogynist. Of course, here it's implied that the father had the strongest will, but the sons noticed that a bundle of brothers would be stronger than just the individual (The father), so they imposed restrictions on their mutual relations and actions to keep their "group" going, Totem and taboo were a result of those rules. Eros and Ananke, hence are the foundations of human civilization, necessity stems from the compulsion of work necessary to keep the primal family going and love between the family members. This shows that "Love", or more precisely sexual love, as a foundation of civilization also provides man with prototypes of all happiness, as it gave him strong experiences of satisfaction. This may lead man to make genital erotism the central point of his life, but Freud argues against that as he says that wise men of all ages show us that much dependence on outer sources of satisfaction may result in devastation if that source was taken away from us; by death or unfaithfulness. Another type of love is love with an inhibited aim which aims love to all mankind, hence the outside source can't really be taken away. This can stem from, as we have seen in previous chapters, like religion one desires to neglect the distinction between ego and objects. This love, is of course an inferior one, as not all men are worthy of love, and the love of everyone makes that love worthless. Aim-inhibited love is important in civilization as it forms friendships and genital love forms families, at one point love comes into opposition to the interests of civilization and civilization threatens love with substantial restrictions. Love threatens civilization by the struggle that's felt by the family once it has to let go of a member for the larger society, it is especially hard if one was really close to his family members. Civilization imposes restriction on love, genital love, by the taboos and traditions of a certain civilization, the first restriction is the prohibition of an incestuous choice. Freud also argues that women adopt hostile attitudes towards civilization as it demands more of the man, it makes him work and that diminishes from his sexual drive, it estranges him from his duties as a father and a husband. Civilization also imposes a sort of standard of sexual relations, on heterosexual and homosexual partners. It lumps in a certain group of people who feel that they belong to this standards and disregards the rest as outcasts, this inevitably plays a huge role in everyone's sex life. He also calls people to adhere to this "weaklings".

Chapter V

the main purpose of this chapter is to discuss non-sexual restrictions that civilization demands of man.

Freud has hitherto treated the difficulty of general development as a general difficulty of development by tracing it to the inertia of the libido. A love relationship is at its peak when the sexual objects are sufficient to themselves, they don't even need a child to make them happy, a third person might be superfluous or disturbing. Civilization depends on a much more larger relationship of individuals. Here the energy of both individuals is fully conserved for their sexual love, but civilization isn't satisfied with that, it works towards binding the members of a community together in a libidinal way. Hence, communal love and neighborly love are of highest virtues, it summons up Aim-inhibited libido on the largest scale; the community. "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself" (Freud argues this commandment dates back to before christianity, though not very old), this statement is what Aim-inhibited love strives towards, it is restrictive of sexual love. This neighborly love is absurd, as it does injustice to the people who truly deserve one's love. People who deserve one's love are usually people who one loves himself in the other, and if the other is a better example of oneself which lets one love the ideal of him as the other. A neighborly love, or stranger love, is by no means deserved: putting a stranger and a deserved one on the same level of love is unjust to the loved ones. "A friend to all is a friend to none". On the other hand, one has an aggressive instinct that a neighbor might be able to satisfy, "Their neighbor is for them someone who tempts them to satisfy their aggressiveness on him, to deploy his capacity for work without compensation, to use him sexually without his consent, to seize his possessions, to humiliate him..." Freud uses this to get to the point that man has an aggressive instinct civilization tames, which results in manifestation in other ways, he gives the example of many cruel historical figures as Jenghiz Khan and the capture of Jerusalem by the pious Crusaders or the recent world war, at his time (little did he know what was coming next). By this instinct civilization is vulnerable to disintegration therefore civilization uses its utmost efforts in order to set limits to that instinct. Although reasonably it may be better for someone not to be aggressive towards any stranger instinctual passions are stronger than reasonable interests. Communists according to Freud believe that the deliverance from our evils would be by abolishing private property hence the abolishment of aggressivity also follows as it eliminates envy, the victim won't have a reason to be aggressive towards his abuser. Freud warns against the untenable illusions of communism and its abolishment for the humanly love of aggressivity, a strong instinct. "It is always possible to bind together a considerable number of people in love, so long as there are other people left over to receive the manifestation of their aggressiveness", Freud believed this is the role Jews played in all the place on earth that they were considered as outsiders, they were the scapegoat for the aggressivity of the universal love among Christians. For Communists the group that they let out their aggressivity on was of course the bourgeoisie, "...One only wonders, with concern, what the Soviets will do after they have wiped out their bourgeois", the same analogy implies to any ethnic group hating on another ethnic group. If Freud wrote this after world war two, he would've used Hitler as an example. Tribal man had an advantage of the freedom of instinct with no restriction, though only the leader did. With civilization man has exchanged a portion of his possibilities of happiness for a portion of security, against nature and other men.

Chapter VI

This chapter was a short one, its main purpose was only to shallowly describe what Freud characterizes as "Death Instinct".

Freud introduces his psycho-analytic theory of instincts, the instincts are split into two: "Ego-instincts and object-instincts". The energy of object-instincts is what is known as Libido. "The antithesis was between the Ego-instincts and the 'libidinal' instincts of love (in its widest sense) which were directed to an object.", sadism is the object-instinct that stands out, Freud argues that its aim is far from being "Loved", which I don't think I completely agree with, as sadism depends a lot on context. Neurosis is the outcome of a battle between the interests of self-preservation (Ego), which are the interests that civilization pushes us to strive towards, and the demands of the libido. When the Ego won that battle it had to do so at the expense of severe sufferings and renunciations of libidinal instincts as a means to self-preserve. The concept of Narcissism is introduced, where the Ego and the Libido coincide, the Ego becomes the "Home" of the libido. The libido can turn to object-libido but then changes back to narcissistic libido. Jung advocated for this view since ego-instincts too were libidinal it seemed inevitable to join the two. Freud introduced a new instinct that

went against Eros, the instinct of death. Everything that seeks to demolish, to destroy belongs to that Instinct. From the previous chapter we introduced aggressiveness, which belongs to the death instinct. Aggressiveness is first aimed outwards, as it becomes tamed and restricted, it becomes directed inwards. Sadism and its counter part, masochism, are the combination of sexual instinct and destructive instinct, one directed outwards and one inwards. This is the role the Devil plays, God's outward destructive instinct. Freud finalizes this chapter by providing the framework by which he analyses the evolution of civilization, the battle of Eros and Death.

Chapter VII

The main purpose of this chapter is to explain the origin of the "Super-Ego", and how it affects one's life.

This chapter is arguably the most important of the book, as everything that has been said hitherto isn't any new information. The origin of guilt is discussed in this chapter. Freud's Super-ego is basically what I called "Medium of judgement" in previous blog posts. The civilized man internalizes his aggression as he had to abstain from exerting it on an external object and directs it towards himself, his ego. Hence a conflict between the ego and the super-ego takes place in the form of "Conscience". This conscience exerts a force that necessitates punishment, and hence the feeling of "Guilt", this necessity of punishment first comes from an external authority, usually a parent. Later on as a child gains agency and can disobey their authoritative figure, they develop a super-ego that plays the role of "Conscience", its civilization's voice in one's head. "Civilization, therefore, obtains mastery over the individual's dangerous desire for aggression by weakening and disarming it and by setting up an agency within him to watch over it, like a garrison in a conquered city". The difference between the authority as an external one and an internal one is what makes the difference in the form of punishment. An external authority would punish the child physically, after the child has done the action as the outside figure can only be affected by the action but not the thought of the child. The internal authority, the super-ego, judges one based on his thought, on his "intention", not the action. The question to ask now is why does one feel guilty and why is there this tension between the super-ego and the ego on the way of acting? The answer is simply the fear of the loss of love. One may fear the loss of love of a person or society, but typically society as everyone judges everyone with reference to society. The moral man is now the man with the strongest conscience, where the super-ego always wins the battle. The moral man is the epitome of how civilization would want a man to act, the moral man always acts the same way he ought to; his super-ego is satisfied at the expense of his ego. Now a paradox happens, as Freud says, in the origin of conscience. Freud has demonstrated so far that a conscience may emerge internally as a result of an external authority internalized. The renunciation of aggressiveness for the satisfaction of the external authority will result in a child expressing that aggressivity inwards. Now the paradox happens when we think of whether conscience is the result of the renunciation of instinct, say the aggressive instinct, or that the renunciation of instinct is the result of conscience. Freud asserts that the beginning of conscience arises through the suppression of an impulse and that it is reinforced occasionally by fresh suppressions of the same kind. The authority figure, The father, also plays an important role in the development of the conscience, but an "innate one", that the human feeling of guilt goes back to the killing of the primal father. "Remorse" as Freud calls it is the feeling that one has after committing a misdeed, but the feeling of remorse presupposes the existence of a conscience. Freud believed that the feeling of remorse goes back to the killing of the father, "This remorse was the result of the primordial ambivalence of feeling towards the father. His sons hated him, but loved him too". Once their sons expressed their hatred as a form of aggression by killing their father, their love took the form of super-ego by identification with the father, it gave agency to the father's power. One thing is clear that we are bound to feel guilty, the killing of the father isn't the decisive factor. The father now takes the form of the community, or society.

Chapter VIII

The main purpose of this chapter is to further discuss super-ego with relation to the culture one lives in, and the super-ego of the community.

Freud represents the sense of guilt as the most important problem in the development of civilization, and that the price we pay for the advantages of civilization is a heightening sense of guilt. "Thus conscience does make cowards of us all", in a sense that the super-ego tames the id through the actions of the ego. Anxiety is the fear of the super-ego, which makes sense, anxiety

is felt when one feels the overwhelming presence of conscience. Neuroticism is the result of the repression of the libidinal instincts for the satisfaction of the super-ego, as represses his instincts, aggressive components of instincts are exerted inwards and take the form of super-ego [VII]. Every community has its own super-ego, which can be described by the german word "Zeitgeist", its the dominating spirit of a certain society. That Zeigest, or communal super-ego is inseperable from the individual's super-ego, as the individual's super-ego is society's voice in oneself. This last chapter is merely a summary of many points that have been presented in previous chapters, such as the idea of neighborly and christian love, and the effect it has on the degradation of love's worth.