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Sigmund Freud and Sensibility

In 1929, Freud wrote Civilization and Its Discontents, which **explores the tension between societies and individual members and the contention that civilization is the main source of our misery**. Sigmund Freud is widely known as the founder of psychoanalysis, a set of theories that studies the unconscious mind. In Chapter Two of the book, Freud talks about the pleasure principle and reality principle. The two principles serve as programs in our body that help us achieve the purpose of life, which is to obtain and maintain happiness. The function of Chapter Two is to allow the readers to understand that human relationship is one of our three sources of suffering. Therefore, civilization, which is made up of families and relationships, is one of our primary sources of suffering. Nonetheless, Freud mentions sensation and sensibility several times in the same chapter. **The repetitive mention of sensibility in Chapter Two of Civilization and Its Discontents suggests that our sensibility can possibly intervene or have an effect on our perception of pleasure and unpleasure**.

To start with, **Freud presents a possibility that the more a substance can interfere with our body mechanisms**, the more it impedes our sensibility towards unhappiness. Freud is comparing three various ways, "powerful deflections" (41), "substitutive satisfactions" (41), and "intoxicating substances" (41), that could have to affect our sensibility using parallelism. He is comparing them side by side, knowing that they share fundamental similarities to reduce our misery and have effects slightly stronger than one another. He starts by explaining how "powerful deflections" (41) can "make light" (41) of our sensibility towards misery. In other

words, Freud proposes that things that can distract us from feeling sad and depressed do not reduce our misery, instead, it makes misery seems as if it is not as strong. We can still feel the sadness, but we are putting on a façade to pretend that it does not exist. Powerful deflection has the lightest effect of the three because it simply distracts us from sensing our unhappiness. Moving forward, Freud turns his attention to describe that "substitutive substances" (41) can "diminish" (41) our misery. It suggests that substitutive substances have a more substantial effect than powerful deflections, and they can actually reduce our distress by deceiving our bodies. Then, Freud talks about how intoxication "makes us insensitive" (41) towards unhappiness, indicating it has the most potent effect of the three because of how it can alter our body mechanisms.

Intoxication not only weakens our sensibility towards unpleasure, but it also **affects our sensibility towards happiness**. Freud presents the two concurrent effects of intoxication. One of the most immediate effects is the sensation of pleasure, which is "directly" (46) given by the substances. In comparison, the other function is to alter our body mechanisms and to change our sensibility so that we become "incapable of receiving unpleasurable impulses" (46). The curious thing is that although one of the effects adds to the sensation and the other effect does the opposite, both effects seem like they can happen simultaneously. The immediate effect, the sensation of pleasure, also seems like a more primary effect as it is "directly" given by intoxicating substances. Later, we found out that the two effects "not only occur simultaneously" (46) but are also likely to be "intimately bound up" (46) with one another. It illustrates a deeper relationship between the two sensations, which are likely to restrict each other. Freud proves the idea by saying that without intoxicating substances, we as human beings encounter "oscillations" (46) of days when we can feel happiness easily and days that are more difficult, as well as a

"diminished or an increased receptivity to unpleasure"(46). It renders their complex and intertwining relationship of existence. However, we would generally think that when it is more challenging to feel happiness, it is often easier for us to respond to depressing moods. Yet, it is not always the case, and both events can happen simultaneously.

The occurrence of sensation will not matter if **they do not exists**. Freud claims that all the unhappiness we experience is "nothing else than sensation" (45) and our ability to feel misery. He specifies all suffering, including suffering from our own body, the external world, and human relationship suggests that all suffering are sensations that are equivalent to each other. If we somehow do not sense misery or lose the ability to sense ourselves and our surroundings, then, based on Freud's proposal, misery does not exist anymore as it only exists "in so far as we feel it" (45). An interesting thing to point out is that he uses the phrase "so far" (45) to indicate that even if we feel misery, it might only exist in ourselves, as we are the only person feeling our pain. In this case, if we lose our senses, then we do not suffer pain that exists only in our own body, or unavoidable natural disasters, or disappointments in human relationships, as our mind cannot sense and interpret the pain.

The existence of sensations is too ambitious for a discussion, but **our endeavor to strive for happiness** is doubtlessly easier for inquiry. Freud states that we as human beings strive for satisfaction and want to be happy all the time. There are two ways of achieving this, and it is either positive or negative. The positive aim is to experience pleasure continually, which is also known as the pleasure principle. The negative aim, he explains, can be achieved through the "absence of pain and unpleasure" (42). It is essential to point out two specific diction, "absence" and "unpleasure." Interestingly, "unpleasure" is not a dictionary term but a psychoanalytic term created by Freud. It does not simply mean the lack of joy and delight, instead, it means an ego

suffering or inner pain resulting from the inability to fulfill the instinctual desire. The implication of "absence" is that the pain does not exist. Combining the two notions, Freud promotes the idea that if the pain from our own body does not exists and that we do not suffer from our desire for food or love, then we can avoid misery. To bring the idea to another level, Freud also elucidates that the ways we can "feel" (45) pain is largely restricted and dependent on how our body mechanism is "regulated" (45) to maintain life. It suggests that if misery exists in our life, then our body will primarily aim to mitigate the pain so that we feel less of it until the point that it does not exist.

Our **experience of pleasure and joy** is mainly dependent on our pleasure principle. Freud states that happiness to the strictest sense can only come from the "most intense" (52) sensation of pleasure. An example would be sexual love, which creates that "overwhelming" (52) feeling when we first encounter it because we have never experienced anything alike. Freud poses that any situation that makes you happy but is "prolonged" (43) can only produce a feeling of "mild contentment" (43). Yet, the overwhelmingness we feel in sexual love is one of the most extreme sensation of pleasure we can ever undergo as it is momentary and short. Therefore, creating a feeling of "intense enjoyment" (52), which is much stronger than the feeling of mild contentment. Additionally, Freud argues that the pleasure we can obtain from "a state of things" (52) is minimal, and most of the time, our intense enjoyment only comes from "contrast" (52) of situations, meaning a certain level of accumulated satisfaction happening momentarily or periodically. If the pleasure lasts for an extended period, then the marginal happiness we obtain will lessen by day.

The intense spur of **beauty in our surroundings** can also spark joy in ourselves. In regards to the connection between happiness and beauty, Freud put forward the idea that

happiness appears the most often when we see, hear, touch, smell, or taste something beautiful. He defines explicitly the "enjoyment of beauty" (53) as times when "beauty presents itself to our senses and our judgment" (53) and not when we seek and find beauty. It implies that beauty that creates happiness is a spontaneous event that shows up whenever it wants, and we are not in control of that. If we can control the presence of beauty, spontaneity will disappear, and the beauty will become restrained by us. Thus, the happiness will reduce because the contrast between the situation will vastly decrease. Freud also mentions how beauty is perceived through our senses and judgment, which means happiness produced by the enjoyment of beauty is also a sensation. However, the steps here are apparent. Beauty has to exist for us to sense. After we perceive beauty, it has to pass through our judgment that is shaped by our society.

The thought that sensibility interferes with how we perceive unpleasure and pleasure **does not change the way we think about the main argument but re-equip it with ideas of how we can shift our behaviors for the best**. For instance, intoxication can affect both our sensation towards happiness and our sensation towards unpleasant feelings. In fact, the more it intervene with our body mechanisms, the more it can "make us insensitive" (41) to our misery. It suggests that since civilization is one of our main sufferings and unavoidable, with the help of intoxication, we can be insensitive towards the pain that society imposes on us. Furthermore, the existence of sensation proposes that if we hypnotize ourselves into believing that we cannot sense our surroundings, or ourselves, then we will not suffer for the rest of our lives, as misery is "nothing else than sensation" (45). Lastly, our enjoyment of beauty illustrates the possibility of civilization with beauty under disguise so that we can enjoy happiness impulses every day.