

# **Freud and Heidegger**

In *Civilization and its Discontents*, Freud draws society as moving “from family to humanity as a whole” (Freud 1961 [1929], 96) at the cost of increased guilt. He frames this movement as a great struggle between Eros and Death for the fate of humanity. The struggle is inevitable, but the result of the fight is unknown as the winner in the struggle is unclear. This battle between Eros and Death is responsible for the development of civilization, the development of the individual, and the urge of life to clump into ever increasing units (104).

The march toward civilization (and thus the delineation between pre-modern and modern times) begins with man assuming an erect posture and, consequently, switching from periodic olfactory stimulation (caused by female menstruation) to constant visual stimulation. The effect of this constant visual stimulation results in “the need for genital satisfaction” changing from an occasional “guest” to a “permanent lodger” (53), and hence the birth of the human family. Freud traces the development of communal life through compulsion to work (Ananke: which requires cooperation) and compulsion to love (Eros: genital love for men; love of children for women). While love (both genital-love and aim-inhibited love) are motors of civilization, civilization threatens love through, among others, the prohibition of incest.

The force of Eros is opposed by the Death drive which is the desire for aggression toward and exploitation of one’s “neighbor” (69). This drive

“perpetually threaten[s]” civilization with “disintegration” (69). Thus, like Hobbes, Freud believed communal living was made possible only by men banding together as a majority capable of overcoming the strength of any one individual. The desires of the band of men are considered to be “right” while the desires of the individual are considered to be “brute force” (49). “This replacement of the power of the individual with the power of a community constitutes the decisive step of civilization,” wrote Freud. But, the very conditions which make civilization possible result in the reduction of individual freedom and frustration (as suggested above by the ways in which civilization threatens Eros).

For Hobbes, this power of many over one could only be insured by the state. Freud radically rejects this notion and, instead, traces the complex path by which society’s control over individuals is internalized. In this internalization, the battle for civilization is fought as aggression is turned inwards on the ego. Part of the ego “sets itself over against the rest of the ego as super-ego” and threatens the ego with the “harsh aggressiveness” it would have focused on “extraneous individuals” (84). The superego, which is the internalization of external societal norms, inhibits aggression. The result is guilt from wrong action or intention of wrong action (meaning action which would result in loss of love). Because this mechanism begins due to the

Eros/Death struggle, guilt will only increase as civilization develops. It is, as Freud concludes, the “price we pay for our advance in civilization” (97). Freud does proffer one hope of a civilization racked with less guilt. His discussion of the unpsychological nature of the unrealistic demands of a cultural superego – such as the command to love thy neighbor as thyself – suggest that one path out of the mounting guilt caused by an increasingly civilized world would be a cultural superego (perhaps such as Freud has become) that proffers an ethics that is psychological.

While Freud offers a view of history whose only telos is a process (the Eros/Death struggle) not an outcome, Heidegger offers a non-teleological view of history that states that humans can, if they choose (through decisionism), attain a predetermined telos. While decisionism is thought of as non-teleological, there is a strong sense in this text, as well as in *The Question Concerning Technology*, that the right outcome of history can be missed, implying a sort of spiritual teleology. In *The Self-Assertion of the German University*, Heidegger argues that the essence of the German university possesses the power to shape existence, but only in cooperation with a people choosing to will that essence. Heidegger seeks to fill the vacuum of a non-deterministic history with an if-then equation to teleology (if will to essence, then a certain end state). This is a teleological view of history that requires the

agency of individuals to fulfill it. The complexity of this approach is summed up in Heidegger's "ought" when he states, "Self-governance means: to set ourselves the task and to determine ourselves the way and means of realizing that task in order to be what we ourselves ought to be" (Heidegger 1993 [1933], 29).

In both essays, Heidegger proposes a version of science, an agenda for the university (which, as it shapes the character and leaders of the *Volk*, shapes the German state (30)), and a path out of enframing founded on his own, personal, hermeneutic phenomenological approach to science. He argues that, "To give law to oneself is the highest freedom" (34). And yet, his speech calls for the voluntary adoption by the university's faculty and students not of their own law, but the law as explicated by Heidegger. And, as that law enables "self-limiting self-assertion" which "will empower resolute self-examination to true self-governance" (38), it results in a history whose teleological outcome has been determined by Heidegger.

Written two decades later, Heidegger's *Question Concerning Technology* is similarly monomaniacal. In *Self-Assertion*, Heidegger asserts that history was, with the concerted individual decisions of the university body, at the mercy of the *Volk*. By 1952, Heidegger's view of social change was more limited. He still called for the same thing – for the people to follow the

questioning path he had marked. But, he now admits that this path of questioning – which is the only path out of enframing, the way of revealing that challenges-forth rather than brings-forth – will not easily bring humanity back from the dangerous precipice it had reached of itself becoming standing-reserve.

Heidegger takes his readers through a journey of developing understanding of the essence of technology. In this journey (as it was in the journey of *Self-Assertion*), the “way” (Heidegger 1977 [1952], 1)<sup>1</sup> (which Heidegger admonished his readers to attend) is marked by Greek words, Greek philosophers, and Hölderlin, a German poet who wrote with admiration of ancient Greece. Heidegger places the advent of modernity at the moment that enframing first becomes clear in the “challenging gathering-together into ordering revealing” of modern physics (22). For Heidegger, the modern is no positive thing. It, as embodied in the enframing essence of technology, blocks the path to truth as “enframing conceals that revealing which, in the sense of *poiēsis*, lets what presences come forth into appearance” (27). Heidegger’s harkening back to ancient Greece as the guide of the path to essence, as the last moment in time when *technē* was fully embodied as art as technology suggests that Heidegger believes all subsequent thought – all subsequent paths – may

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<sup>1</sup> Heidegger’s focus on the “way” suggests that means are as important as outcome and signposts are significant.

have been affected by the same unknown “origin” (22) that infected modern physics.

The path out of this abhorrent view of modernity where all is standing-reserve, is found within the essence of technology. Enframing endangers man’s highest dignity which is “keeping watch over the unconcealment – and with it, from the first, the concealment – of all coming to presence on this earth” (32). But, the extreme danger represented by enframing also brings to presence the knowledge of man’s highest dignity by revealing the “coming to presence” that was about to be lost. Heidegger offers two paths out of this danger. One is art, which is called to “poetic revealing,” and the second is questioning and reflection which will allow “decisive confrontation” with technology (35). He ends by stating, “For questioning is the piety of thought” (35). This is, essentially, a restatement of the thesis in *Self-Assertion* where Heidegger argued for questioning as the center of science and the importance of self-limits in allowing will to essence. Here, questioning is the self-limit of thought as “piety” means being obedient or submissive. Where before Heidegger’s phenomenological approach to science would serve as the center of the *Volk*, it now serves as the “way” to turn back modernity and return to the path outlined by the Greeks.

Heidegger's romanticization of a pre-industrial, perhaps less-strictly civilized, past was soundly criticized by Freud as an inappropriate reaction to the frustrations of civilization. While Heidegger bemoans the turning of nature into a standing-reserve, Freud viewed the purpose of civilization as means to "protect men against nature..." (Freud, 42). And, although Freud notes that man turning himself into a prosthetic god (44) to protect man from nature does not bring him happiness, Freud sees this progression as inevitable and not particularly lamentable. In fact, it is the ceasing of this activity, the victory of Eros over Death which Freud would mourn. Of course, the two men were ultimately concerned about very different things. For Freud, man stood at the center of the world and truth emanated from man. For Heidegger, truth and its coming to presence was preeminent and man's highest dignity devolved from man's role in the process of presencing.



## Works Cited

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