Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*

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Repetition Compulsion

- In *Civilization* (1930), pp. 30 (Part III), 55 (Part VI)

- *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920): a compulsion to repeat unpleasant or traumatic experiences (e.g., dreams of a trauma in “war neuroses”; we might say PTSD today)

- This is yet another text that shows us our present, our civilization in an unflattering light (e.g., Rousseau, Nietzsche)

  - do we have a compulsion to repeat such arguments (or just to assign them to you)?
Outline for today

1. Background to help make sense of the text
2. Our discontents with civilization; repetitions of other philosophers we’ve read
3. Repetition of the beginning in the end of the text
Sigmund Freud, 1856-1939

Circa 1905

1921

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Some important terms
Instinct, drive

An impulse that originates in the body and is transferred to the mind; drives actions

- instincts are “the representatives of all the forces originating in the interior of the boy and transmitted to the mental apparatus” (*Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920))

There are numerous instincts: e.g., sexual, nutritive, self-preservation, aggression/death instinct
Libido

- The energy attached to sexual instincts
  - “On the exact analogy of ‘hunger’, we use ‘libido’ as the name of the force (in this case that of the sexual instinct, as in the case of hunger that of the nutritive instinct) by which the instinct manifests itself.” (Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis (1917))
- Can be “sublimated” (next slide)
Sublimation

• The “capacity to exchange the originally sexual aim for another—which is no longer sexual but psychically related to the first—is called the capacity for sublimation” (Civilization 90 (in ‘‘Civilized’’ Sexual Morality” essay—this essay is not in your version of the text)).

• “directing the instinctual forces away from their sexual aim and towards higher cultural goals” (Ibid. 95)

  ○ E.g., “aim-inhibited libido” can “reinforce the communal bonds (of civilization) with ties of friendship” (Civilization 46 (Part V))

  ○ E.g., can change the aim of libido so that one directs love “not to individuals, but to everyone in equal measure”; having a “readiness to love mankind and the world in general” (Civiliz. 38 (Part IV))
Unconscious, preconscious, conscious
Freud’s “topographical” model; like an iceberg

Conscious

Preconscious

Unconscious

Censor

repression

return of the repressed
Id, Ego, Super-ego
The unconscious id ought to have been incomparably greater than that of the ego.
Eros and Thanatos
Life Instinct: Eros

- Self-preservation, self-assertion, mastery *(Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920))

- Unification
  
  - “Eros, by bringing about a more and more far-reaching combination of the particles into which living substance is dispersed, aims at complicating life and at the same time … at preserving it” *(Ego and Id* 38).
  
  - “the drive to preserve the living substance and bring it together in ever larger units” *(Civilization* 55 (Part VI))

- Also includes **sex drive** as part of bringing individuals together
Death Instinct: Thanatos

• Drive to return to the inanimate state—death

• **Breaking apart**: a drive that seeks “to break down these units [formed by Eros] and restore them to their primordial organic state” *(Civiliz 55 (Part VI))*

• **Aggressive drives**
  - against self: super-ego and guilt, masochism
  - can also turn it **against others & the world** (e.g., drive to destruction, cruelty, sadism)

• Posits death drive partly from **compulsion to repeat** traumatic experiences *(Beyond the Pleasure Principle (1920))*
Breaking glass, flickr photo by GabPRR, licensed CC-BY 2.0
Life as Struggle

• “the struggle between Eros and death, between the life drive and the drive for destruction …. is the essential content of all life” (Civilization 58 (end of Part VI))
Civilization and Discontents
Title of book

- Unclarity of *Civilization and its Discontents*

- German: “unease, malaise, discomfort” “in Civilization” (Translator’s Preface, xxv)

- Suggested English translation: “Man’s Discomfort in Civilization”
pp. 24-25; sect. IV
Discontents

1. “If civilization imposes such great sacrifices not only on man’s sexuality, but also on his aggressivity, we are in a better position to understand why it is so hard for him to feel happy in it” (51 (Part V))

2. Individual and cultural super-egos make demands that we can’t fulfill; require us to control id further than is possible (79 (Part VIII)).

3. The result is guilt, and “the sense of guilt … [is] the most important problem in the development of civilization and … the price we pay for cultural progress is a loss of happiness, arising from a heightened sense of guilt” (71 (beginning of Part VIII)).
Intro to these discontents: Freud & Plato
Freud and Plato: the self/psyche and the community

• Plato: 3 analogous parts; justice is the same in both

• Freud:
  ○ similar aims of processes of civilization and development of individual: “the one being to create a unified mass consisting of many individuals, the other to integrate the individual into such a mass” (76 (Part VIII))
  ○ struggle of eros & death drive in both the individual and the community (75 (Part VIII))
  ○ super-ego in community: ethics (78-79 (Part VIII))
Freud and Plato: unity in community & psyche

Plato:

• state should be unified; avoid civil war
• psyche should harmonize the parts of self

Freud on unity in psyche

• ego tries to bring about “harmony among the forces and influences working in and upon it” (New introductory Lectures (1933) 69)
• “An action by the ego is as it should be if it satisfies simultaneously the demands of the id, of the super-ego and of reality—that is to say, if it is able to reconcile their demands with one another” (An Outline of Psychoanalysis (1938) 15)
Freud on unity in community

- Civilization “seeks … to bind the members of the community libidinally to one another, … favouring any path that leads to strong identifications among them, and summoning up the largest possible measure of aim-inhibited libido in order to reinforce the communal bonds with ties of friendship” (Civilization 46 (Part V)).

- Civilization “is a process in the service of Eros, whose purpose is to gather together individuals, then families, and finally tribes, peoples and nations in one great unit—humanity” (58 (end of Part VI)).

- But to do this, need to inhibit the drive to aggression (49 (Part V))
Inhibition of Aggression: Freud and Nietzsche
Aggressivity & Will to Power

• “The reality … which many would deny, is that human beings are not gentle creatures in need of love, at most able to defend themselves if attacked; on the contrary, they can count a powerful share of aggression among their instinctual endowments” (*Civilization* 48 (Part V))

• “If the circumstances favour it, if the psychical counter-forces that would otherwise inhibits it have ceased to operate, it manifests itself spontaneously and reveals man as a savage beast that has no thought of sparing its own kind” (Ibid.).
How to curb aggressivity (1)

• Give it an outlet for expression outside the community: “It is always quite possible to bind quite large numbers of people together in love, provided that others are left out as targets for aggression” (Civiliz. 50 (Part V))

• Compare to Nietzsche on the ancient Greeks and their “strongest instinct, the will to power”: “I saw all their institutions arise from security measures, in order to make themselves safe in the face of each other’s inner explosives. The immense internal tension then discharged itself in ruthless and frightening hostility: the city-states ripped each other to shreds so that the citizens might, each of them attain peace with themselves” (Twilight 88)
How to curb aggressivity (2)

• If don’t discharge aggression outwards, it turns inwards: “The aggression is introjected, internalized, actually sent back to where it came from; in other words, it is directed against the individual’s own ego” (60 (beginning of Part VII)).

  ○ super-ego becomes aggressive towards ego through sense of conscience

• May try to eliminate aggressive drives, but can’t hide from super-ego; this leads to guilt and felt need for punishment (63-64 (Part VII))
Conscience: that aspect of super-ego that monitors ego, can exercise aggression against it.
Freud & Nietzsche: Return of the Repressed

• “It is remarkable that the more a man checks his aggressiveness towards the exterior the more severe—that is aggress—he becomes in his ego ideal” (Ego and Id 1923) 56

• “Any aggression whose satisfaction we forgo is taken over by the super-ego and increases the latter’s aggression (towards the ego)” (Civilization 65 (Part VII))

• Nietzsche: “All instincts that do not discharge themselves outwardly turn themselves inwards’... Hostility, cruelty, pleasure in persecution, in assault, in change, in destruction—all of that turning itself against the possessors of such instincts: that is the origin of ‘bad conscience' [guilt]” (Genealogy of Morality II. Sect. 16)
Sickness: Nietzsche

• “I take bad conscience [guilt] to be the deep sickness into which man had to fall under the pressure of that most fundamental of all changes he ever experienced—the change of finding himself enclosed once and for all within the sway of society and peace” (Genealogy II, Sect. 16).

• “the greatest and most uncanny of sicknesses … the suffering of man from man, from himself … a declaration of war against the old instincts…” (Ibid.)

• The “tamed” animal is “sick, wretched, with ill will towards himself; full of hate against the impulses to live …” (Twilight 39).
Sickness: Freud

- “Holding back aggressiveness is in general unhealthy and leads to illness” (*An Outline of Psychoanalysis* (1938) 20).

- The cultural super-ego, ethics, ask us to curb our drives (sexual and aggressive) more than we are capable of doing
  - e.g., “Love thy neighbour as thyself”: “It is impossible to keep this commandment” (*Civiliz.* 79 (Part VIII))
  - such impossible demands can “provoke the individual to rebellion or neurosis, or to make him unhappy” (Ibid.)

- Suggests perhaps entire societies, or even all of humanity, might “have become ‘neurotic’ under the influence of cultural strivings” (*Civiliz.* 80 (Part VIII))
Religion as Remedy?
Nietzsche & Freud
Religion as remedy?

**Nietzsche:** Attempting to set up some “other world” beyond this life to try to escape our suffering just makes it worse: we are then denigrating *this* life and ourselves even further.

- The priest “brings along ointments and balms, no doubt; ...as he then stills the pain that the wound causes, *he poisons the wound at the same time*” (*Genealogy of Morality* III, Sect. 15).

**Freud:** Religion sometimes used as “an attempt to “assure [oneself] of happiness and protect against suffering” (*Civilization* 19 (Part II)).
Freud: God(s) as father

• Three functions of religion *(New Introductory Lectures (1933))*
  ◦ information about origin of universe
  ◦ protects people and assures them of ultimate happiness in life
  ◦ issues rules, prohibitions

• Why should these three things be combined? Because god(s) are projections of father figure(s)
Freud’s critiques of religion

Delusion

• Religion is “a delusional reshaping of reality”; turning away from reality with an attempt to “re-create the world, to build another in its place, one in which the most intolerable features are eliminated and replaced by others that accord with one’s desires” (Civilization 18-19 (Part II))

• “Its technique consists in reducing the value of life and distorting the picture of the real world by means of delusion” (Civiliz. 22 (end of Part II))

Nietzsche...
Freud’s critiques of religion

Childish

• religion “forcibly fix[es] human beings in a state of psychical infantilism” (*Civilization* 22 (end of Part II))

• if people give up religion, then they have to “admit to themselves the full extent of their helplessness and their insignificance in the machinery of the universe …. They will be in the same position as a child who has left the parental house where he was so warm and comfortable. But surely infantilism is destined to be surmounted. Men cannot remain children for ever ….” (*Future of an Illusion* (1928), sect. IX)
Freud’s critiques of religion

Requires everyone to follow the same path to happiness

• “There is no advice that would be beneficial to all [in achieving happiness]; everyone must discover for himself how he can achieve salvation” (Civiliz. 21 (end of Part II))

• Religion “forc[es] on everyone indiscriminately its own path to the attainment of happiness and protection from suffering” (Civiliz. 22 (end of Part II))
Is there a remedy, then?

• In psycho-analytic therapy, “we are often obliged to oppose the super-ego and attempt to lower its demands. We can make quite similar objections to the ethical demands of the cultural super-ego” (Civiliz. 79 (Part VIII)).

• We can, e.g., reduce the severity of limitations on sexual drive (“‘Civilized’ Sexual Morality” article in Civilization (may not be in your copy of the text))
Repetition: the beginning in the end
Beginning: “oceanic” feeling

- “[A] feeling … of being indissolubly bound up with and belonging to the world outside oneself” (4 (Part I)), of “being at one with the universe” (10 (Part I))
  - why call this “oceanic”?
- Explanation: “[T]he ego is originally all-inclusive, but later it separates off an external world from itself” (6 (Part I)).
- Not the source of religious feeling, but can be connected to it later as “an initial attempt at religious consolation, as another way of denying the threat that the ego perceives from the outside world” (10 (Part I)).
Freud has no such feeling

• “I can discover no trace of this ‘oceanic’ feeling in myself” (4 (Part I)).
the beginning in the end

By the end, we too may have no oceanic feeling:

- No sense of ultimate unity, connection in self or community; Eros continually struggles with Thanatos
- Civilization is only partly successful in binding us together, and even when it does this can lead to illness
- Religion is just a way to delude ourselves into thinking such a unity is possible
the beginning in the end

• Last paragraph: “And now it is to be expected that the other of the two ‘heavenly powers’, immortal Eros, will try to assert himself in the struggle with his equally immortal adversary. But who can foresee the outcome?” (81-82 (end of text))

• ‘Heavenly power’ is not just that which brings us together, promises us salvation; the death drive is “equally immortal.”

• The “oceanic” is replaced by a continual battle…