

Freud, Civilization and its Discontents

Reid Blackman

Chapter I

Freud's friend accuses him of not accounting for the "true source of religious sentiment," the "sensation of 'eternity', a feeling as of something limitless, unbounded... 'oceanic'" (11).

- It is "the source of religious energy which is seized upon by the various religious systems" (11).

Freud's two part response:

1. Let us analyze the feeling to which you are referring.
2. Let us ask whether that feeling, in light of our analysis, explains the source of the need for religion.

As for (1): A Psychoanalytic Hypothesis on the "Oceanic" Feeling: the Development of the Ego

The infant has no sense of a division between itself and the external world but develops that understanding. The process by which this occurs is the process of the formation of the "ego" the "I" (13-15).

Two compatible suggestions:

1. No distinction between outside and inside → learned distinction between pleasures that are always there and pleasures that are only sometimes there → understanding that the latter must be external to him.
2. No distinction between outside and inside → a natural tendency to separate oneself from painful objects in an act of self-protection.

Each suggestion endorses the following claim: originally the ego includes everything, later it separates off an external world from itself. 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 about it" (15).

- The particulars are not as important as the claim that the ego is the result of a process.
- The oceanic feeling to which Freud's friend refers just is the primitive ego-feeling.

Note:

- Love may involve the dissolution of the boundary between oneself and an other. This is normal.
- But such dissolution is pathological when the boundaries are drawn in the wrong way, as when certain of one's perceptions, thoughts, feelings, even parts of one's own body, appear alien to one.
- It looks like the notion of *identification* is here at play. (We've seen this before in Rousseau and Marx).

As for(2):

1. A feeling can only be a source of energy if it is the expression of a strong need.
2. The oceanic feeling is not the expression of a need.
3. Therefore, it cannot be a source of energy (seized upon by religious institutions).

Alternative Thesis:

1. The infant's (feelings of) helplessness and the longing for the father's protection are needs of the infant.
2. This feeling is "permanently sustained by fear of the superior power of Fate" (you don't know what the future holds for you; this is scary).
3. This need can be seized upon by religious institutions and interpreted as a need for the ultimate father figure, God.

As for the oceanic feeling: It may be used by religious institutions in another way. To describe the feeling as a "oneness with the universe...sounds like a first attempt at a religious consolation," in that it offers protection from the external world by making one part of it.

Chapter II

Happiness is threatened from three directions:

- i. From our own (decaying, weakening) body.
- ii. The external world, “which may rage against us with overwhelming and merciless forces of destruction.
- iii. Our relations with other people.

Religion offers a complete understanding of the world and compensation for pains suffered during (this) life. It purports to provide us with an answer to the question. If religion falters we see there is no such purpose to life. (22).

Religious institutions tell us to ask: What is the purpose of human life?

- We shouldn't ask this question; we don't ask it about other animals.

Question: What do people seek, if they are not persuaded that life has a “purpose”?

Response: Happiness, conceived of as at least one of the following: the avoidance of pain and the acquisition of pleasure (25).

We seek various methods to avoid suffering and obtain happiness, most of which are not successful: The most interesting methods of averting suffering are those which seek to influence our own organism:

- 1) Intoxication affects us. Some substances directly cause pleasure or make us dull to pain.
 - i. It also allows one to withdraw from (harsh) reality.
 - ii. Downside: drugs are responsible, in certain circumstances, for the useless waste of a large quota of energy which might have been employed for the improvement of the human lot (28).
- 2) Happiness consists in satisfaction of instincts. Thus, we may seek to alter them.
 - i. One may kill off the instincts.
 - ii. One may control the instinctual life, e.g. try to dampen it. One receives less pleasure when it is satisfied, but also less pain when it is not.
- 3) “Displacements of libido,” a “shifting” of the instinctual aims so the external world cannot frustrate them.
 - i. One may direct the instincts at psychical and intellectual work, e.g. creating works of art and discovering scientific truths.
 - Downside: this only works for those with talent, i.e. for very few.
 - Downside: it is not complete protection against misfortune from the external world and one's own body.
 - Such satisfactions “seem ‘finer and higher’”, though “their intensity is mild as compared with that derived from the sating of crude and primary instinctual impulses; it does not convulse our physical being.
 - But there is the outlet of work (30, footnote).
- 4) Our own imaginings/fantasies
 - i. This includes our appreciation for art.
 - But the “mild narcosis induced in us by art can do no more than bring about a transient withdrawal from the pressure of vital needs, and it is not strong enough to make us forget real misery” (31).
- 5) One tries to re-create the world, to replace the unbearable features with bearable ones.
 - i. But he is a madman, who finds no help from anyone to support his delusion.
 - ii. But there can be a collective act of “introducing delusion into reality”. Religion is of this sort. (“No one, needless to say, who shares a delusion ever recognizes it as such” (32).
- 6) One may seek to find happiness in loving and being loved.
 - i. But nothing makes us more vulnerable than love; we may not be loved, harm can come to the one we love

“There is no golden rule which applies to everyone: every man must find out for himself in what particular fashion he can be saved” (34).

Religion imposes a uniform standard for everyone, disregarding relevant differences (36).

- Compare with what Nietzsche says about “fixed ideas”, and what Mill says about “experiments in living”.

Chapters III-VIII (but not VI)

We can easily recognize two of the causes of suffering, the limitations of our own bodies and the rough conditions of the external world. But we may question whether the third – our relationships with other people – is a necessary source of suffering.

- We begin by examining the conditions that regulate human conduct, specifically, the nature of civilization.

Civilization (42):

- Protects men against nature.
- Invokes cleanliness and order as ideals so that we have space and time to pursue our good.
- Provides us with examples of beauty.
- Esteems and encourages the use of man’s higher mental activities.
- Regulates mutual relations; without civilization there would only be the rule of the stronger.
 - Laws are created to protect the community from destructive individuals.

Question: Civilization has all of the above advantages. But what must each person do, or what must each undergo, so that (s)he may be the beneficiary of civilization? What does it require of man?

Answer: “We may characterize this process [the development of civilization] with reference to the changes which it brings about in the familiar instinctual dispositions of human beings, to satisfy which is, after all, the economic task of our lives” (50). (Consider this with Nietzsche’s claim about the development of the bad conscience).

- Sublimation: the redirection of natural instincts towards ends for which they were not originally directed.
- But most generally, civilization requires the renunciation of instinct and presupposes non-satisfaction of so many instincts. This dominates our social interactions.
 - If the losses are not compensated for “disorders will ensue” (52).

The problem: we must renounce our instincts, our desires, so we may be members of society and receive the benefits of being members. But it is the satisfaction of our instincts and desires that constitutes our happiness. How, then, can we both a) be members of society, which is necessary for happiness, and b) satisfy desires, which is also necessary for happiness, when (a) requires that we renounce (b)?

Proposed Solution: Love for everyone

Two kinds of love: sexual and aim-inhibited

- Sexual and aim-inhibited love can extend outside the family, thus the formation of new families and friendships.

Civilization presents a problem for love: The attempt at civilization is the attempt to bring people into larger unities, and thus opposes the foundation of the family, which “refuses to give the individual up.”

- It demands that libidinal energy be spread to everyone.

Religious claim: Love all of mankind. (56-57).

Objections:

- i. That sort of love, which does not discriminate, forfeits a part of its own value, by doing an injustice to its object
- ii. Not all men are worthy of love (57, 66-7).
- iii. It denies, and so cannot come to terms with, the following fact of human nature: we are, in part, *aggressive* animals, and we want to express our aggressive instincts (68-9).

This solution fails.

Civilization and Aggression

“In consequence of this primary mutual hostility of human beings, civilized society is perpetually threatened with disintegration. The interest of work in common would not hold it together; instinctual passions are stronger than reasonable interests” (69).

- This is why civilization needs to incite people to identifications and aim-inhibited relationships of love, hence the restriction upon sexual life, and hence too the ideal’s commandment to love one’s neighbor as oneself (70).

The claims of Communism rely on ignoring our aggressive instincts (70-1).

- Even if we abolish private property, and destroy all sexual restrictions, we will still have this instinct to contend with (71-2).

Question: What does society do with this aggressive instinct that threatens the bonds of civilization?

Overview response: It forces the individual to internalize it → guilt/the conscience → unhappiness: (84)

The details: What could be the motive for submitting to some external influence? In “his helplessness and his dependence on other people, and it can best be designated as fear of loss of love...At the beginning...what is bad is whatever causes one to be threatened with loss of love” (85).

- So far, then, we have only the avoidance of certain acts if there is a fear of being caught by parents/community. But the sense of guilt is more than the sense of fear.
- What is needed? A judgment that one’s thoughts and actions are *bad*.
- The child must renounce his instincts to retain the love of the external authority. But this only makes him frustrated. To deal with his frustration the child identifies with the authority and in this way “takes the unattackable authority into himself. The authority now turns into his super-ego and enters into possession of all the aggressiveness which a child would have liked to exercise against it” (91).
- A great change takes place only when the authority is internalized through the establishment of a super-ego. Now it is not merely fear of being found out because everything is found out, including thoughts and intentions to harm; the super-ego sees all.

“The sense of guilt [is] the most important problem in the development of civilization and 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” (96). (Compare with what Marx says is the “true induction into civil society”).

- “It is very conceivable that the sense of guilt produced by civilization is not perceived as such...and remains to a large extent unconscious, or appears as a sort of *malaise*, a dissatisfaction, for which people seek other motivations. Religions, at any rate, have never overlooked the part played in civilization by a sense of guilt, which they call sin” (99).

Criticisms of the establishment of the super-ego (108): In the severity of its command and prohibitions it troubles itself too little about the happiness of the ego. (Therapy aims at lowering the demands of the super-ego).

- The same may be said about the cultural super-ego; it makes demands (e.g. love thy neighbor) but does not ask whether it can be done. And in some cases it neither can nor should be done.

“The fateful question for the human species seems to me to be whether and to what extent their cultural development will succeed in mastering the disturbance of their communal life by the human instinct of aggression and self-destruction” (111).