

Civilization and Its Discontents by Sigmund Freud

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For this paper, the essay selected for analysis is *Civilization and Its Discontents*, written by a renowned philosopher, Sigmund Freud. Freud is most famous for his concepts that are based on the human psyche. The field of psychology has benefitted greatly by applying the concepts of id, ego, and superego, as presented by Freud, in understanding the way the human psyche works and the desires that motivate people to act in a certain manner. The essay at hand is centered on a conflict that permeates between an individual and his society due to the difference in one's desires and the expectations that society holds for that individual. The present paper will assess the reasons behind such a conflict, keeping in light Freud's views regarding the function of the [Super Ego](#).

The book *Civilization and Its Discontent* begins with a reference to those people who are filled with lust for materialistic things. Freud asserts that while they themselves are busily seeking power, wealth, and success, it is often thought that such people admire others for having these things (Freud). On the other hand, there is also a misconception that the majority does not admire people who have achieved all three mentioned things. The reason for mentioning these two different groups of people is that it is not easy to apprehend the feelings that one holds for another. As Freud states in the essay,

“Things are probably not as simple as that, thanks to the discrepancies between people's thoughts and their actions, and to the diversity of their wishful impulses.” (p. 1)

The above-mentioned quote sets the basis for Freud's essay as it highlights that the thoughts one carries can contradict the actions one performs. The contradiction between thoughts and actions will be discussed throughout the paper in order to explain why people behave in a certain manner using Freud's notions. Moving on with the essay, Freud mentions his friend who sent him a letter regarding religious views. Freud reflects on his book *The Future of an Illusion*, in which he commented on the role of religion in doing a service to civilization by repressing the animalistic instincts in people and harmonizing them into forming a community that shared similar views and beliefs. At the same time, Freud asserts that by taming people into civilized individuals, they have wholly submitted themselves to their religion. He terms the feelings one has for his or her religion as an 'oceanic feeling,' which can be looked at as something that is without limits and is whole in its form. Despite not being inclined towards religion, Freud engages himself in understanding the reason behind such a feeling for

something that is outside this world and to which man feels a connection. As the following lines state,

“The idea of men’s receiving an intimation of their connection with the world around them...fits in so badly with the fabric of our psychology that one is justified in attempting to discover a psychoanalytic – that is a genetic-explanation of such a feeling.”
(p. 2)

The quoted lines reflect Freud’s curiosity about understanding the human psyche in order to explain why individuals can submit themselves wholly to something that is outside this world and which is capable of repressing an individual’s desires. The first thing that comes to mind, as Freud writes in the essay, is the role of ego. He argues that ego encompasses all the feelings and desires one has, which sometimes come to the surface, as in the case of someone who is in love. However, there is a moment when an individual’s thoughts and feelings seem alienating and not aligned with his or her ego. This contradiction in the ego, as Freud suggests, is due to the ego being influenced by outside stimuli.

Furthermore, the philosopher comments on the development stages that occur at various phases in an individual’s life. From a young age, the child learns slowly and gradually that the source of excitement arises from within him while other sources are linked to the external world and require certain actions for the achievement of pleasure. As Freud states in the following lines,

“...other sources evade him from time to time – among them what he desires most of all, his mother’s breast – and only reappear as a result of his screaming for help.” (p. 3)

The mentioned quote shows that the child learns to differentiate between the ego and the object of pleasure, which exists outside and can only be achieved through actions. In addition to achieving pleasure through the ego, Freud states that there are certain stimuli in the environment that lead people to detach themselves from the ego. People are motivated to move away from any such thing that can cause displeasure and, in turn, motivates people to create a pure pleasure ego in its place. Freud adds that with the passage of time, people are able to give up on objects which are a source of pleasure. As Freud quotes in the essay,

“One can differentiate between what is internal – what belongs to the ego – and what is external – what emanates from the outer world.” (p. 3)

In the quoted lines, it can be said that the differentiation between these factors helps in developing control over one's desires and actions. This leads back to the initial argument about the oceanic feelings people have that are associated with love for religion or the belief that something outside this world exists despite not having any religious beliefs. Freud asserts that the feelings of helplessness that an infant holds and the need for a father figure can be linked to the oceanic feeling that people have claimed to have. The fear of a superior power lies parallel to the feelings of helplessness that one suffers from during infancy and, therefore, relates it to religion as religion advocates submission to a father figure, which is embodied by God.

Freud further argues that human beings are innately barbaric as they are inclined towards being aggressive. The aggression, Freud argues, is caused due to people not being satisfied with what they have. The notions of happiness are not applicable to humans as it is only a feeling of satisfaction that one gets after having one's needs fulfilled, as Freud states in the following lines,

“What we call happiness in the strictest sense comes from the satisfaction of needs which have been dammed up to a high degree...” (p. 9)

Moreover, it should be noted that when certain pleasure-invoking feelings are prolonged, they end up producing feelings of contentment. Humans have been restricted by society from achieving anything that satisfies their needs. Freud comments on the role of the superego and how it affects an individual. Conscience is considered to be a part of the superego, and it helps in differentiating between what is morally right and what is wrong. In opposition to this claim made by Freud, Thrasymachus, in his essay on Justice, states that morality and justice are two aspects that should be discarded (Kerferd). He asserts that keeping a just society only helps those who have power and are stronger than the rest. Being morally right will prove to be disadvantageous for people who are without any means or do not have power. Thrasymachus further argues that justice does not help those who are morally right as it only restrains them from attaining power and equal status. Justice has been created as a means of repressing one's desires and, therefore, should be neglected.

Contrary to Thrasymachus's views, Freud asserts that the superego functions to maintain social order as it keeps individuals from being violent towards their society. However, the repression of such feelings leads people to discontent as they cannot express their desires. The society expects them to behave in a civilized way and in accordance with the rules set out by the society. Freud argues that

adherence to these rules makes an individual civilized but keeps him from attaining the pleasure of having his desires fulfilled. This claim justifies Thrasymachus's views on going against the judicial institute and doing what one desires. Thrasymachus discards the role of the superego, functions as a repressor of desires, and keeps an individual from going against the norms of society.

From the above discussion, it is evident that adherence to the norms and values of society makes one civilized. However, neglecting one's own desires points towards the dissatisfaction one has with society. Freud argues that people are keen on believing in an external force that lies parallel to the longing one has for a father figure, and for this reason, they submit themselves to religious doctrines. Following the concepts of religion makes one a civilized member of society, and the superego is seen to be playing an active role in making one conform to the rules of society. However, Thrasymachus negates the concept of the superego and motivates people to seek what they desire instead of being just.

Works Cited

Freud, Sigmund. *Civilization and Its Discontents*. WW Norton & Company, 2005.

Kerferd, George B. "Thrasymachus and Justice: A Reply." *Phronesis*, 1964, pp. 12-16.