

Freud's Theory Of The Super-Ego

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Introduction

Sigmund Freud, an Austrian neurologist, wrote his book [Civilization and its Discontents](#) in 1929. He initially published his book in German in 1930, titled *Das Unbehagen in Der Kultur* – The Uneasiness in Civilization. Freud's book is known as one of the most important and influential books on the subject of psychology (Gay, p. 722). In this study, Freud explored the conflicts between the expectations of society and the individual's desire for individuality.

In this book, Freud explains his viewpoint as the fundamental clash between individuality and civilization. He believes that the individual's pursuit of instinctive freedom and contrary demands of society for compliance with the standards and repression of instincts are the main points of discussion. Freud says that it creates the feeling of satisfaction and fulfillment when any circumstances preferred by the pleasure principle are prolonged. Many of the primitive instincts human beings have are, in general, harmful to societies. Examples of such instincts are the desire to kill a person in a state of anger and the craving for sexual consummation. These instincts fall into the category of those desires that destroy the well-being of society (Gay, p. 722). Civilization is said to have defined rules and laws that discourage killing, rape, and other types of adultery. If these rules and laws are broken, civilization implements punishment and penalty. It can be, thus, said that the defined laws restrict the happiness of people in a society. Freud argues that this process is the built-in quality of civilization that results in the long-lasting feeling of discontent in the people (Gay, p. 722).

The Theme Of The Book

Freud's theory is mainly based on the idea that human beings have some fundamental characteristic instincts that are very natural and almost impossible to imitate. In particular, these characteristics include the desire for sex and the tendency to violent aggression aimed at authority figures and sexual competitors.

Freud believed that religious feeling – the “oceanic feeling” of eternity, limitlessness, and wholeness was overlooked in his previous book, *The Future of an Illusion*. So, he found it suitable to start his work with what was ignored in the last book. Freud mentions that there are many pathological and healthy states, such as love, where the ego and object are likely to have no boundary – lost, distorted, or blurred. The writer classified the oceanic feeling into a state of consciousness in one's earlier life when it was far before the differentiation of ego from the world of objects. Freud writes that an infant baby's helplessness and craving for a father is what gives rise to religious feelings, as there is nothing like a father's protection that an infant would need (Strachey, p. 72).

In the second chapter, Freud investigates how religion could be a remedial strategy to keep individuals from all the miseries in the world. Upon grasping the negative aspects associated with reality, a child's ego forms far over the oceanic feeling that would prefer to keep itself at a distance from the negative aspects. Ego, at the same time, hopes to avoid any displeasure, and it develops itself so that it can better secure greater happiness. Freud says that the pleasure principle does have twin aims when the ego realizes that fact and has to deal with the 'reality' as well (Strachey, p. 76). Freud, in this chapter, does seem to claim that the purpose of life for individuals is simply a program of pleasure principle (Strachey, p. 76). The rest of this chapter explores many different styles of adaptation that people keep on using to secure happiness in their lives while trying to save themselves from exposing themselves to suffering or completely avoiding it.

In the third chapter, Freud, while addressing the fundamental paradox of civilization, says that we have created this as a tool to save ourselves from getting exposed to things that make us unhappy, yet it has become the greatest source of unhappiness in our lives. The frustration that society imposes on people through its cultural ideals makes them neurotic as they cannot tolerate it. Freud went on to point out that advancements in science and technology have given humans mixed blessings. "If the pleasure principle is not satisfied, then what is the society actually for?" Freud asks. He further says that society must compromise on happiness in respect to meet its fundamental goals by the persons engaged in peaceful relationships. With the combination of wish-fulfillment of human ideas of control, order, hygiene, and beauty, and particularly for the exercise of the functions of society's highest intellectuals, civilization is built.

The structure of a civilization represses the natural processes of human development and feelings of eroticism. It is no wonder that this repression leads to discontent among the people in society (Freud, p. 97).

Conclusion

In 4th chapter, the writer attempted to sum up the history of civilization and how it evolved or developed. Freud supposes that development in the history of civilization occurred with the learning of man to stand upright. This stage is tailed by the writer's hypothesis that human culture is attributed to an ancient Oedipal drama where two brothers are planning to kill their father, then developing rules that would mediate their instinctual desires.

Continuing the discussion on civilization and what humans go through while living in a culture, Freud says the Psycho-analytic study has very clearly shown us that the frustrations of one's sexual life, which are known as neurotics, do not tend to be tolerated. Which in turn makes people do unpleasant things (Freud and Strachey, p. 106). With this, the author starts the fifth chapter of his study by explaining why love could be considered the answer and concludes by saying that an irreducible and genuinely aggressive drive exists in all human beings. The instinct of love can be either possessed by society to blind the members out there or repressed. It can well be directed towards other rival

cultures. He acknowledges that an irremediable ill-will exists in men's hearts, and civilization is primarily there to restrict these kinds of impulses.

The writer, reviewing the libido concept, explains why it should now be separated into two different instincts: 1. The ego instinct of Thanatos (death) and the object instinct of eros. The new concept that Freud introduced has quite a long history. It developed over time in Freud's history. His view of human nature, being inclined towards destruction and death, as he admits, is difficult to accept, but he gives the reason for this by saying that suppression of this instinct is the right cause for civilization to put restrictions. The perpetual struggle between the interpersonal forces of love and hate gave birth to life and civilization (Leary and David, p. 15).

Freud, in the seventh chapter, explains how the death instinct, if restrained, can give rise to neurosis in humans. Father, being the main figure, suppresses a child's aggressiveness by society, which is overall turned inward and directed against the ego. A super-ego as conscience is, then, developed with these aggressive energies that rebuke the ego for both transgression and sins that are only fantasized about. Individuals in a society should submit themselves in order to form feelings of guilt and repress their aggressive instincts if they want to hope to share in the love that a civilized society has assumed for its people. Both neurotic repression and guilt are the price that we pay to enjoy living together with harmony in communities and families.

Freud, in the final section of his study, says that a guilty conscience is the cost that individuals pay to become a part of a civilized society, but very often, this guilt is left unconscious, causing anxiety and discontent. Apart from the individual super-ego, Freud believes that there exists a cultural super-ego as well, which sets itself up as the conscience of a society. Freud's recommendation for this is the same as he suggested for many other of his neurotic patients - lowering the demands on the frail ego. Freud concluded the book by making a clear distinction between the two instincts he mentioned, Eros and Thanatos. By repressing an instinctual tendency, its libidinal components could be turned into symptoms, and the aggressive components of that instinct could be turned into a sense of guilt (Strachey, p. 139).

The study of Freud needs to be taken in the context of contemporary events in the world. If we pay careful attention, we can see that World War I greatly influenced Freud's observation and directed it to the unrest occurring among people in those days. Civilization and individuals were experiencing massive tension. Freud, in those days, developed thoughts in a nation not yet recovered from a brutal war. Freud, being an avowed atheist, stressed that it is a religion that has created a sense of community with tamed social instincts. This way, religion helps civilization (Kennedy and Fehim, p. 18).

Work Cited

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