

# Freud: the impact of psychology on our understanding of civilization



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Sigmund Freud, author of *Civilization and Its Discontents*, is widely regarded as the father and originator of modern psychology. Through the formation of his now-famous four divisions of the human brain—the ego, the id, the libido, and the super-ego—Freud changed the way man views himself and his actions forever. How, then, could such a great psychologist also write a work that questioned and explained western civilization? Through his discovery (or invention) of those four divisions of the human brain, Freud was able to better understand the formation and existence of western civilization as it is now. Freud begins his work by explaining the formation of the “ego,” that “division of the psyche that is conscious, most immediately controls thought and behavior, and is most in touch with external reality.” By the time a human is adult, the lines of demarcation between it and the rest of the world are strong and definite—with the exception of one case, in which a person in love considers himself and the person with whom he is in love to be one. These definite lines take time to develop, however, and Freud points out that an infant learns this slowly; that there are outside factors over which he has no control, while there are immediate responses—from limbs and organs of the infant himself—from which impulses are constantly being retrieved and reported. So while at first the infant’s ego includes everything around him, it slowly learns to be more exclusive, and demarcate between himself and objects around him. This exclusivity continues as the infant develops until the strong, definite lines between the ego and everything else that adults have exist. Interestingly, Freud also believes that forgetting something does not automatically mean the destruction of that within one’s mind. Instead, he compares the phenomenon to that of an archeological dig: if one regresses long enough, everything can eventually be seen. Just as an

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archaeologist simply needs to know where to look and what for, one performing a regression on a patient can find anything, any memory, if he simply knows where to look, and what for. This translates eventually into the first need for religion. Freud holds that a feeling can only energize when it is the embodiment of a serious need)an infant needs his father just as an adult feels a need for religion as a remembered remnant of that prior need. Freud then examines the reason that man so zealously protects his own life and what he hopes to achieve in it. His answer is simple: man strives for happiness; “ to become happy and to remain so” (Freud, 25). In fact, the original and strongest way in which humans strive for happiness is through love. Freud argues that part of that attraction, part of what makes love so perfectly happy, is that when a person is in love, he is completely defenseless against suffering, and when he loses the object of his love, he is helplessly upset. So it is vulnerability that makes one so intoxicatingly happy when in love. Humans strive for such happiness as part of the “ pleasure principle,” an instinctual impulse that drives man to gratify immediate needs and avoid pain. However, a man’s ability to make himself happy when living out the pleasure principle is limited by everything around him, including his libido, “ the psychic and emotional energy associated with instinctual biological drives.” After explaining his psychological analysis of mankind, Freud moves on to the tough question of man’s psychological relationship to society, or civilization. It is a strange relationship; society allows man to improve his own life, especially through the acquisition and distribution of technology meant to ease life, yet his own happiness is rarely thought to empirically improve. In fact, neuroses are thought to develop in some humans because of the many frustrations which society places on them.

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Interestingly, the construct of civilization itself is one of the limiting factors on man's libido)where once he felt no restrictions on his freedom, man has now entered into a pact of sorts with other men to reduce such liberty for all. Strangely, the freedom which man now gives up had no value when civilization did not exist; it is only now that it has been taken away that man feels the need, or has the ability, to defend it. Thus, the " replacement of the power of the individual by the power of a community constitutes the decisive step of civilization" (Freud, 49) because man " will always defend his claim to individual liberty against the will of the group" (Freud, 50). Most importantly, though, and perhaps most confusing, " the urge for freedom(is directed against particular forms and demands of civilization or against civilization altogether" (Freud, 50). Despite this conflict, though, Freud claims that a founding concept of civilization is, in fact, love. There are two types: sensual and " aim-inhibited." The first is entirely sexual, the second, love between, for instance, a brother and sister. Even though love is a building block of society as a whole, " on the one hand love comes into opposition to the interests of civilization; on the other, civilization threatens love with substantial restriction" (Freud, 58). Because of this, Freud does not support a communist system: In abolishing private property we deprive the human love of aggression of one of its instruments, certainly a strong one, though certainly not the strongest; but we have in no way altered the differences in power and influence which are misused by aggressiveness, nor have we altered anything in its nature (Freud, 71). This natural aggression of which Freud speaks comes from the ego and the separation from the rest of the world that it fosters; humans are naturally intolerant of all others, especially those different from themselves)" the existence of this inclination to

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aggression (is the factor which disturbs our relations with our neighbor and which forces civilization into such a high expenditure of energy" (Freud, 69). In fact, " in consequence of this primary mutual hostility of human beings, civilized society is perpetually threatened with disintegration" (Freud, 69). Where does this aggression go, especially if different structures of society, such as communism, cannot get rid of it? Through the development of the super-ego (the division of the unconscious that is formed through the internalization of moral standards of parents and society, and that censors and restrains the ego ) man takes his aggression towards others and society as a whole and forces it on his own ego. It is this eternally internal struggle that is called by most " guilt." Thus Freud lays out his argument for the invention and continued practice of civilization, especially western civilization. Despite his training as a psychologist, Freud has taught man more about his civilization, and especially why it exists as it does, than perhaps any other philosopher or writer. Because of his understanding of the ego and super-ego, we can now understand how we fit into the society around us and how we fit in relation to others within the society as well.