

Two kinds of response to the challenges of the xx century: freud's pessimism vers...

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Early 20th century was a time when European civilization found itself in a deep crisis. That was a "good old world" of progress and orderliness in the late 19th century crashed down in the flame of the First World War.

European thinkers had to face a dramatic question: whether Europe is still existing and whether its ideals of humanism and enlightenment are still sought-after, or its previous aspiration to the perfect world were in vain? Naturally this question was being answered both in pessimistic and optimistic light.

In this paper I will attempt to analyze these two concepts, using Freud's *Civilization and Its Discontents* as an example of pessimism and Camus' *Plague* as example of optimism. At that I am going to argue that both pessimistic and optimistic approach attempted to discover latent natural aspects of human nature. The difference was only in the attitude towards these aspects. Freud's work can be distinctively separated into two great periods: before and after the WWI. In the first period he explored the optimistic desire of life, pleasure and reproduction that he called Eros.

In the second period he became interested in the desire of death and killing that he called Thanatos. Most basically, he attempted to explain what does mankind exist for, and in the *Civilization and Its Discontents* he finally melancholically observed that "The question of the purpose of human life has been raised countless times; it has never received a satisfactory answer and perhaps does not admit of one." (Freud 51). In contrast to Freud's runaround, Camus does answer the question, or, better to say, offers two answers.

The first one is given by the people before the Plague: " Their chief interest is in commerce, and their chief aim in life is, as they call it, 'doing business. " (Camus 2). The second one is given after the Plague has come: " if there is one thing one can always yearn for and sometimes attain, it is human love. " (Camus 298). In Camus novel the Plague does not certainly mean war, this is rather a disaster that makes people unite in their new understanding of life values.

But what makes people change in the disaster and what are the motivations that cause them to change? Freud sees a dramatic conflict between civilization and human nature. In order to become " civilized" and make use of the benefits of civilization people have to oppress their own nature and " civilization, therefore, obtains mastery over the individual's dangerous desire for aggression by weakening and disarming it and by setting up an agency within him to watch over it, like a garrison in a conquered city. " (Freud 119).

Yet those hidden inclinations never disappear and explode like an overheated steam boiler as soon as civilization control weakens in such situations as war or distress. Then people are no longer driven by rules, but by instincts, including desire to deaden and die, that tragically prevails over desire to live and give life. Camus agrees with Freud and also pays outstanding attention to relations between civilized human individual and the world of natural instincts. He notes that " what's natural is the microbe.

All the rest-heath, integrity, purity (if you like)-is a product of the human will, of a vigilance that must never falter". (Camus 253). Yet the book does not include much descriptions of any behavior that Freud would call " natural".

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There are few scenes of cruelty, but most of the men stay men like guards at the gates who are not interested in the plague at all and can easily be bribed to let a man leave the affected city. Life continues even in the times of plague and instinctive behavior is not demonstrated as soon as may be, but only in the most stressing situations.

A habit to be civilized still prevails in the Plague. Freud is unable to find a way out of this conflict and his late confessions like "readiness for a universal love of mankind and the world represents the highest standpoint which man can reach" (Freud 91) sound futile and unrelated to the subject matter. In contrast to this, his conclusion that "One feels inclined to say that the intention that man should be 'happy' is not included in the plan of 'Creation.'" (Freud 53) seems to tally up the entire Freud's work.

The more people tend to become good and orderly, the worse shall be the following explosion of the "steam boiler". Human nature is unchangeable and wild for Freud. Camus idea of the role of instinctive side of human nature is different. Men are good after all, and even their instincts can be enjoyable. One of the last scenes of the novel occurs on the seashore. The author and a friend of his go swimming symbolically both cleaning themselves from plague and returning to natural roots of their personality. Unknown" and "uncontrolled" does not surely mean "bad" for Camus. A disaster does reveal the hidden, it strips individual personalities to reveal their most suppressed inclinations, but who said that those inclinations are always bad? "What we learn in time of pestilence: that there are more things to admire in men than

to despise” (Camus 306) concludes Camus. Such “ optimism without hope” did give hope to the ruined Europe.