

Sigmund Freud

Civilization and its Discontents

Objectives

1. Describe Freud's "oceanic feeling" as a concept.
2. Identify Freud's three-part theory of the mind.
3. Recognize the tension between social requirements and rewards versus individual desires and impulses.
4. Describe Freud's theories of substitution and sublimation.
5. Interpret Freud's argument about "discomfort" and "culture" in relation to our contemporary world.

Reading Assignment

Freud, Sigmund. *Civilization and its Discontents*. Translated by Joan Riviere.

Hendricks, Christine. "Sigmund Freud, Civilization and its Discontents." *Arts One Open*, University of British Columbia, 2015. <https://youtu.be/WyfyMtuXvZA>

Commentary

[Sigmund Freud](#) (1856-1939) created the theory and practice of psychoanalysis. While psychology and our popular understandings of how the mind works have changed much over the past century, psychoanalysis (the "talking cure") continues to be an influence in counselling, and Freud's influence on social theory is enormous. We should also understand Freud through his historical circumstances—he lived within the Austro-Hungarian Empire, a major military, industrial, and cultural power in the world, which he lived to see dissolved at the end of [World War I](#). He was born after the major nineteenth century revolutions in Europe and lived through both World Wars. His first innovations in psychoanalysis began at the end

of the nineteenth century while the Austro-Hungarian Empire was at its height, but he continued to innovate after the war, in particular because of his work treating former soldiers experiencing what we today call “post-traumatic stress disorder.” This means read Freud’s work in three distinct periods in which he revised his earlier theories.

In Freud’s early works, he articulates a theory of the mind based on three parts: the unconscious (unrecuperable), the pre-conscious (recuperable with exertion), and the conscious mind. This begins with his book *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1899), which he revised with Otto Rank many times across his life as his theories developed. In its first form, this three-part structure meant he viewed the mind as having an unconscious that the person could not directly access, including memories and feelings that were not consciously known. Dreams were then used as a means of accessing this unconscious material. He quickly revised this into the model that is more familiar today: the Id, the Ego, and the Super-Ego. This is a significant change because the first three-part model had no paradigm for the Super-Ego (a social “conscience” that applies to *Civilization and its Discontents*). Here is a loose breakdown of what these terms mean, and in particular their meaning in German (English uses different words with slightly different connotations, which should remind us about the difficulties of translation):

1. “Unconscious” — the word in German is the “Unbewusst” or literally the “Un-be-known” or what I do know have “knowing” access to by the conscious mind. The unconscious is the “Unbewusst” that I cannot gain access to, even though it drives me to want and desire things in ways that I cannot comprehend or prevent, and even if they cause me to feel guilt or suffering in the materials world. A part of Freud’s theory is we can feel ashamed and guilty about feelings over which we have no conscious control. The conscious mind’s job is to manage the “Unknown” against reality.

Freud’s middle period saw him rename this three-part structure as follows:

2. “The Id” — Freud changed this nomenclature to mostly replace the “Unbewusst” with “Das Es” (literally “the

IT," a phrasing he took from the psychoanalyst Georg Groddeck). In English we translate this as "the Id." The Id is meant to represent the unknowable spiritual/libidinal forces of the living. Id comprises all the unconscious materials and drives that are not normally accessible to the conscious mind. This is where human life begins before we differentiated our "drives" from our "selves," as well as our sensations from the external world. However, for Freud, the Id remains after this process, and the Id does not forget anything. Notably, Freud postulated that the Id did not distinguish between reality and fantasy, so an imagined evil is just as bad for the Id as a real one, and a desire is as real as an action.

3. "The Ego" – Freud again changed the "conscious" to "Der Ich" (literally "the I" or self). In English we translate this as "the Ego." By this he meant the whole area of the conscious mind and its capacity for rational and Enlightenment projects, the exercise of reason, and the things we know and believe about ourselves. However, in many respects, the Ego must make sense of the drives and wants of the Id, which it must *explain* but cannot *prevent*. A person might *want* something they do not "want" to want. An example is an attraction (i.e.: to a person) that contradicts how we understand ourselves, such as identifying as heterosexual or homosexual but experiencing a desire that contradicts that self-identity. The Ego must rationalize these all of these desires, but it leaves the drives (by definition outside of the Ego's own existence) frustrated and makes the Id unhappy.
4. "The Super-Ego" – this is "Der Über-Ich" (literally the "Over-I" or the "Super-I"). In common terms, we call this our "conscience," but it also carries a societal association of imperatives, guilt, rules, and demands. It is known by the conscious mind (the Ego) but is experienced as something "over" the self, like a set of morals or social norms to which we feel shame if we do not conform. The super-ego does not accept the Id, and the Ego must also accommodate itself to the Super-Ego. This conflict can leave the Ego in impossible situations between desire (the Id) and guilt (the Super-Ego). The Super-Ego is built

from the internalization of requirements or external demands, but it is also “perverse” —you *cannot* want what you want, and you *must* want what you do not desire...

This three-part structure brings us to the heart of what Freud meant by “discontents” (“Unbehagen” in German or literally “uncomfortable feeling”). There is not permanent resolution between the Id, the Ego, and the Super-Ego, and we therefore always live in a state of “Unbehagen” or uncomfortable compromise between our desires, our self, and social demands. Our desires and impulses are always unfulfilled, and we can never meet our social obligations (even if a person *does* all the right things, they can never *feel and desire* all the right things, so there is always “discontent” through either shame or frustrated desires). Somehow, the self or the Ego must try to exist between these two things.

Psychoanalysis is the discipline Freud developed from this theory. It began when he was treating patients with psychosomatic illnesses, which means a physical illness or symptom arising from psychological causes (ie: Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, anxiety, non-physical paralysis, memory loss, etc...). He found that patients were exhibiting *physical* symptoms based on *psychological* problems—think of how we may have an acne breakout or a panic attack from stress. Freud had patients with paralysis of a limb that was not based on any physical cause, or blindness, and so forth. Today we call this “Somatic symptom disorder”

and it includes “conversion disorders” (loss of a physical function, such as blindness or paralysis, often due to anxiety) and “pain disorders” (experiences of chronic pain without any physical cause). Freud found that *talking* with patients experiencing psychosomatic illnesses often improved their symptoms and ability to function, in particular by seeking out unconscious causes. Whether the unconscious cause was real or not (i.e.: shame about a desire, or the recovering of a forgotten trauma), it made patients feel their conscious mind (Ego) was making the Id (the unconscious) conscious so that they could understand what had caused their illness and thereby become functional again.

Do we accept that as possible today? If we do, it is largely because of Freud...

Freud's Three Periods

Freud's career went through three distinct stages:

1. Early Freud—in this period he created the theory of psychoanalysis and formulating the notions of repression and the unconscious. This began with his dream work in 1899 and lasted until the First World War.
2. Middle Freud—in this period he increasingly tried to align psychoanalytic treatments and therapy with social pressures, such as the pressure to conform to social obligations for approved romantic or sexual relations, etc. He also became increasingly interested in the anthropological origins of different behaviors.
3. Late Freud—he became, in the context of the wars, interested in the pathologies of social conduct as a subject of psychoanalytic analysis. This led to the psychoanalytic origins of the impulse for religion, violence, greed, aggression, etc...

Our reading, *Civilization and its Discontents*, is from Freud's third, late period. It is concerned largely with therapy for trauma and irrational social behaviors, such as war. It is more pessimistic than his early work and is focused on "pathological" (harmful) behaviors, such as how soldiers would continue to relive their war-time traumas in ways that hindered their ability to live a satisfying life.

Timeline

- 1899 – Freud published *The Interpretation of Dreams*. The remarkable features of this book were that it:
 - refuted the notion that dream images or narratives carried fixed meanings for different people (meaning an interpretation were personal and best done by the dreamers themselves).
 - it saw dreams as a function of the Unconscious (Unbewusst), and hence an expression of what was wanted but was censored by the Super-Ego. Dreams were, hence, a disguised and transformed style of "wish-

fulfillment” in order to get past the “censor” of the conscious mind or Super-Ego.

- It posited a rich dream life for everyone, regardless of class, race, ethnicity, religion, and so on. *Everyone* has a complex and rich psychological life...
- 1905 – Freud wrote *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* with his concept of the “universality of perversion.” By this, he meant that all forms of sexual desire in our modern world are somehow engaged in processes of substitution. We do not experience sexual desire or gratification as animals do. His startling example of this is kissing, which he calls a perversion because it is unrelated to the biological sexual aim (reproduction) and is instead a form of substitution—the problem or discomfort comes from the universality of these “perversions” and substitutions in our modern world. His description is particularly striking: “the kiss, one particular [sexual] contact of this [perverse] kind, between the mucous membrane of the lips of the two people concerned, is held in high sexual esteem among many nations..., in spite of the fact that the parts of the body involved do not form part of the sexual apparatus but constitute the entrance to the digestive tract” (Freud, *Three* 62). His point is that our most normalized forms of pleasure and sexual expression often (or even usually) have absolutely nothing to do with biological sex whatsoever. They are, strictly speaking, perversions, and hence the “universality of perversion” in our society. We displace and eroticize parts of the human body and its activities that otherwise have absolutely nothing to do with sexual reproduction—and furthermore, many people value these substitutions far beyond the thing they replace...
- 1914–19 – Freud wrote *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) and anticipatory works for his later period. This changed his previous theories:
 - he had *previously* posited the existence of a “pleasure principle” (humans seek pleasure but often need to substitute for it or redirect this desire because it runs contrary to the social norms of the society, and hence causes guilt)
 - He *now* posited the existence of a “reality principle,” which sought to shape and redirect the desire for

pleasure in order to “regulate” or “discipline” pleasure so as to intensify or to prolong it.

- For example, a person might save the best tasting food on the plate across the whole and eat it as the last bite rather than eat it all at first (deferred gratification). One might save food rather than eat *all* the cotton candy and get sick from it... One might delay obtaining pleasure in order to make that pleasure more intense, etc... The point is that the “reality principle” regulates the “pleasure principle.” We can never get *what* we want in the *way* that we desire it... Hence, desire is never actually fulfilled; it is always thwarted, *even if* we do so only to get *better* or *more* pleasure.
- 1923 – Freud publishes *The Ego and the Id*. This work revises the previous notion of the Conscious and Unconscious with the more nuanced 3-part structure of the psyche.
- 1927 – Freud publishes *The Future of an Illusion*, which is about religious faith (the illusion). Freud asks how religious faith functions with regard to delaying pleasure in order to obtain and even better pleasure later (or to avoid suffering and fear). He then asks if this ultimately makes people ill psychologically or limits their ability to be satisfied with their life (pathological). If so, can this “illusion” (religious faith) continue to exist for much longer if its repression of people’s desires makes them experience great pain and great psychological illness?
- 1930 – *Civilization and its Discontents*. This book obviously arrives at a complex time in Freud’s works as well as a complex historical period after World War I, the rise of literary Modernism, and in anticipation of the kinds of social and economic upheavals that put the Nazis into power in Germany in 1933 amidst global economic depressions.

Freud’s Suppositions

As may now be clear, Freud presumes that human desires and sociability, at their most basic levels, are in conflict with each other. This means that we cannot be both socially adapted to our communal interactions *and* fulfil our desires. Sociability is, then, fundamentally a way of controlling and disciplining desire. We are “cultured” and “socialized” insofar as we learn to repress our drives and desires.

However, he sees this as coming at a cost because those desires and drives never actually go away—they simply appear in new forms that never actually satisfy the desire or drive itself.

Furthermore, sociability grants to the members of society the fulfillment of desires through alternatives (we will discuss this more in the next section), and it can prevent fear and suffering (i.e.: having shelter, protection, reliable pleasure, etc. all mean more happiness), but in doing so society must regulate desire as such. Regulating desires then causes fear and suffering even while reducing the overall level of suffering. Therefore, civilization itself creates neuroses and illness as the price of civilization and the regulation desire in order to achieve higher levels of pleasure. It's an impossible situation.

Analysis

Freud defines the “Oceanic feeling” is a sense of ‘oneness’ with the world or universe (1–2). He casts this as a religious impulse and hence as a regulatory function of the Super-ego (social regulation) rather than as a genuine mystical experience. His concern is that people might choose death, which ends all pleasure, as a way of obtaining this symbolic form of pleasure in ‘oneness’ with the world (2). In other words, Freud worries that the “oceanic feeling” of oneness with the universe might also be pathological, meaning it harms a person’s life even while making them feel as if they have overcome the difficulties and struggles in the world. In this sense, the “oceanic feeling” is akin to the sense of belonging to one’s civilization and society. We also see in these opening pages Freud’s references to his 3-part structure of the psyche: the Id, the Ego, and the Super-Ego (2–3).

Freud then goes on to propose his earlier theory of the Pleasure Principle (4). He sets the Pleasure Principle in contrast to the Reality Principle. Simply put,

- 1) We desire pleasure and want to get pleasure, whether that is in the form of sexual gratification, food, rest, warmth, or more symbolic versions of pleasure.
- 2) In order to get pleasure in the real world, we cannot simply succumb to the unconscious “want,” drive, or desire and just do anything that we wish. We need to “govern subsequent developments” and “dominate future development” (4) in order to get pleasure.

This leaves us with several questions. In the modern world, simply doing what you wish will result in suffering rather than gratification. In plain terms, “Do you want sexual pleasure? Then you must attract the right mate in the right social pattern...” “Do you want food? Don’t eat all of it or you’ll go hungry tomorrow...” “do you want to see a good band? Don’t buy tickets for the most expensive band today and then not have any access to music for the rest of the month...” “Do you want to taste pleasurable food? Don’t eat too much of it or you’ll get sick and feel bad...” The point is that we only achieve pleasure in civilization by regulation the drive or desire for pleasure, which means the drive never actually gets what it wants.

Freud then suggests there is nothing more to the religious experience of the “oceanic feeling” than this interaction between the Pleasure Principle and the Reality Principle (4). The Oceanic Feeling is the remnants of a stage of the Ego’s development in which there is not a reliable distinction made between “I” (the Ego) and the external “World out there” (i.e.: when babies cannot distinguish between their own hand and someone else’s hand). To this he adds the argument about the unconscious that nothing is ever fully forgotten. Once something takes shape in the mind, it cannot be destroyed (in normal circumstances). You might not recall it consciously (repression), but it is still there and can cause feelings of guilt or shame if it runs contrary to the Super-Ego (the social moral norms). One can then feel guilt over things one does not remember or that were never even real in the first place. Guilt becomes a universal experience, including guilt about things that have never even existed.

This leads Freud to ask about potential remedies (12). It is worth enumerating what he sees as the only possible responses to the impossibility of preventing all suffering and the conscious knowledge that we cannot fix everything (as well as this universal feeling of guilt and the “universality of perversion” as described above in relation to his 1905 book *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*). This section defines important ideas (12). Follow the enumeration in the book and the margins in order to understand his argument—this may be disputing some of your most deeply held beliefs or unconsidered assumptions, so don’t feel foolish if that takes some work to understand. Freud is asking how we deal with the inevitable pain life places on us while confronting the drive for Pleasure and avoidance of pain? He argues we do three things, generally:

- 1) powerful distractions or deflections
- 2) substitutive gratifications or substitute satisfactions
- 3) intoxicants (12)

In the above three options (12), what role does religion play for Freud and the “oceanic feeling”? Is it #1, #2, or #3? Which is alcohol? Which is sex, success at work, professional success, winning a sports event or competitive game? What is art? What is money? Are any of these ever a genuine form of pleasure in the modern world, or are they (as Freud argues) always transformed through distractions, substitutions, or intoxication? You might also relate this to his discussion of “sublimation” (16–17).

Let’s use an example that is not very controversial and close to typical student life. You want to be lovely and attractive to the opposite (or same!) sex in order to get pleasure. However, getting sexual pleasure from a mate is not always socially allowed, so we get pleasure from *attracting* a mate without any actual consummation—the pleasure comes from being attractive or gaining attention, not actual biological reproduction. Yet, being attractive means (in the West) being thin, and that means foregoing the pleasures of some foods (you can consider other examples, such as “shadism” or body modification in other cultures or communities). Students also want to do well in school in order to achieve symbolic success, such as higher status. So, you end up late one night studying (reading Freud) and still want to reward yourself for enduring the pain of studying that leads to the pleasure of success (itself already a substitutive gratification), so you reward yourself with a food treat (a cookie for staying focused on studies). Nevertheless, the cookie has to be moderated, so you eat only a part of it in order to stay skinny, in order to have the substitute for sex: being desired by others without actual biological reproduction (procreation). We rapidly find that we achieve *none* of our main desires and have endured much pain and deprivation in order to achieve only *substitute gratifications*—to keep ourselves on track for that substitution, we employ distractions and powerful intoxicants such as music, Netflix, cigarettes, and so forth (Freud, *Civilization* 19).

Freud then asks (23–24) how do we moderate the *social* sources of suffering? We regulate other sources of suffering (illness, stomach aches from overeating, avoiding obesity and the raw bed sores that come with it...). Yet, how do we regulate the forms of suffering that

are created by the apparatus of regulating desires itself? Our attempts to avoid suffering also themselves create suffering. Consider the passages on page 24 where Freud suggests that civilization regulates our desires in order to give us more pleasure and minimize our suffering, but doing this causes suffering all on its own. We are then in an impossible problem. We must give up some pleasures and embrace some suffering in order to avoid the pain caused by civilization, and that leaves us again suffering and getting less pleasure...

We also have Freud's dispute with Marx, whom he does not name but does discuss (49–50). Obviously, Marx does not believe in the same deep psychological structures as Freud, and this disagreement between them has shaped much of contemporary social theory—even though we no longer actively analyze social conflicts directly through Freud or Marx, they were the starting point for most modern social theories (if we add [Emile Durkheim](#), from the same time, for the statistical analysis of social conflict, we have the early forms of virtually all contemporary social models). Where Marx would look at substitutions and social conflicts as a reflection of the inequitable organization of society (keep in mind, Marx's economic social analysis is quite different from popular concepts of it and its uses in political organization), Freud instead sees those same social conflicts as a reflection of the unfair organization of the individual psyche that creates society. For Freud, this means arguing that correcting property relations (economic organization) will do nothing to solve the problems of unhappiness because it does not correct the fundamental organization of civilization itself around the Super-Ego's containment and perversion of the Id (49–51).

Questions for Self-Review

1. What does Freud mean by the “oceanic feeling”?
2. Can you give two examples of powerful distractions, substitutive gratifications, and intoxicants from your own life?
3. What does Freud mean by the “universality of perversion” and can you think of an example in popular media today?
4. What does Freud feel we are “discontent” (or “uncomfortable”) even when we have more pleasure than we could have in earlier period of history?

5. Is a “healthy” civilization possible, or will we always have discontent? Why or why not, and what things would a “healthier” civilization make possible that others don’t?

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