Civilization and Its Discontents Study Guide

Civilization and Its Discontents by Sigmund Freud

(c)2015 BookRags, Inc. All rights reserved.

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Plot Summary

Civilization and its Discontents spells out Sigmund Freud's somewhat astonishing theory that civilization itself is the main source of unhappiness among civilized people. By inhibiting their natural instincts, civilization drives people into a perpetual state of guilt, causing this unhappiness. Using themes from his earlier work in psychoanalysis, Freud examines the source of this guilt and the mechanism by which it controls human instinct. Freud concludes his book with a suggestion that civilizations and individuals develop in parallel ways, and that just as it is possible for individuals to become neurotic, it may be possible that civilizations can be disturbed in a similar way.

Freud begins by referring to an earlier work on the topic of religion and its origin in human civilization. He addresses a remark made to him by a friend that there is a desire among individuals to feel they belong to a kind of eternal continuum. Freud refers to this as an "oceanic" feeling and approaches it from a psychoanalytic viewpoint. He concludes that infant children at first do not distinguish between themselves and the external world. Once they do, their ego arises, setting them on the path of development. This initial feeling, however, may be the source of this "oceanic" impulse toward religion, he concludes. Freud uses this as a departure point to establish the fact that instincts that were present in primal man remain within every individual, even though they have been incorporated, transferred or possibly covered over. He thus lays the groundwork to discuss civilization in terms of natural instincts and makes the suggestion that the two are linked somehow.

Relying on his earlier work in psychoanalysis, Freud enters a discussion of the definition of civilization and what features it has. He then moves to the psychology of the individual members of a civilization, examining their instincts and motives in forming a civilization, as well as the instincts that would seem to harm the survival of civilization.

Freud concludes that in order to join into a civilization, humans are required to suppress many of their natural instincts. This makes them essentially unhappy. They are made to suppress these instincts through guilt, which arises first in the individual as a form of fear of punishment from an external authority, and later is taken up by the individual himself, who creates a conscience that seeks to punish the individual (self) for its bad thoughts.

The source of this guilt, Freud concludes in the latter part of the book, is an eternal struggle within each individual between an instinct for love and an instinct toward death and destruction. This struggle is inevitable, Freud suggests. By analogy, Freud extends these conflicting instincts to the development of civilization, drawing a parallel with human development. He does not attempt to judge the value of civilization but ends the book with the hopeful suggestion that civilization may eventually develop past this ultimately destructive stage.

Characters

Primal Man

The primal man is man before he has entered into a civilization. He is aggressive and pursues his life based only on instinct. He follows his sexual desires as they arise and does not cooperate with other men. In Freud's theories, this primal man still lives within all men to some extent but has been tamed through the mechanism of civilization. in Freud's theory, the sexual drive leads him to keep a woman close at hand to satisfy his urges whenever he wishes. This leads to the birth of children and gives the woman and child a reason to stay close to the man for protection. Thus the primal family begins, as well a the interplay between the child and its parents on which much of Freud's psychoanalytic theories are based. This family is also an elemental type of civilization. The primal man also discovers early on that there are other men around him engaged in the same activities and that working together with them allows for more to be accomplished. This is another force that sets the primal man on the course toward becoming civilized.

Civilized Man

Civilized man is one who belongs to a civilization after submitting himself to its demands. These demands are both external and internal as Freud defines them. Externally, there the demands of the civilization's ethics. Internally, there are the demands that each civilized individual places on himself. These individual demands are enforced by the person's sense of guilt, which is a feeling that arises as a result of civilization. This guilt serves to inhibit the residual instincts of the primal man so that men may live in groups without destroying the bonds that hold them together.

Civilized man is never truly happy because of this inhibition of his instincts. He lives in constant internal struggle between his ego, or sense of self, and his conscience, which is connected to his sense of guilt and enforced by his super-ego. This constant struggle produces a persistent feeling of discontentment in civilized people.

Civilized man is naturally aggressive, a trait that is a holdover from primal man and which is normally held in check to some degree. Nevertheless, it is often set loose to the detriment of society. Freud seems to be of the opinion that it is possible for individual civilized men, and by extension civilization itself, to develop beyond the need for this aggression.

Goethe

An important German thinker and writer and one of the most influential literary figures of Europe. Freud quotes from Goethe several times in the book, usually to reinforce what Freud feels should be recognized as an essential truth about humanity.

Voltaire

A French enlightenment era writer and philosopher, who was frequently critical of Christian teachings. Freud refers to Voltaire while explaining the various methods humans use to alleviate suffering.

Schiller

A German writer and philosopher and friend and colleague of Goethe. Freud quotes from Schiller's poetry to illustrate the human condition.

Franz Alexander

A recognized authority in the field of psychoanalysis and a contemporary of Freud. Freud refers to some of Alexander's works in the book.

The Jews

Several times, Freud mentions the Jews as a people, usually in reference to their place in civilization as a kind of scapegoat for the dominant society. Freud is writing in the years leading up to the rise of the Nazi Party in Germany, and it is likely that the treatment of the Jews was a much-discussed topic at that time.

Heine

A German romantic poet. Freud quotes from Heine's memoirs while illustrating the impossibility of the adage to love one's enemies.

Francis of Assisi

A man who gave up his possessions and lived in poverty in service to the Catholic Church. Francis founded a religious order known as the Franciscans. Freud uses him as an example of a rare type of person who finds satisfaction in giving his love to all living things.

Romain Rolland

A French writer and recipient of the Nobel Prize for literature. Rolland is a contemporary of Freud and is the distinguished friend to whom Freud refers in Chapter I, who offers his opinion of Freud's earlier book on religion. Freud uses Rolland's remark as a departure point for the discussion of the love instinct.

Objects/Places

The Ego

The ego is an individual's sense of self as a separate organism from his surroundings. Before the appearance of the ego, an infant does not distinguish between itself and the rest of the external world. This feeling of being part of the world is later covered over by the ego but does not disappear completely. It is this feeling of belonging to the world, he postulates, that makes people willing to join religious groups.

The Libido

The libido is the name Freud gives to those human instincts that have external things as their objects. Sexual desire is a part of the libido, as is the general instinct toward love.

The Super-Ego

The super-ego is a part of the ego that separates and turns inwardly back toward the ego. This is the seat of an individual's conscience.The super-ego takes on the role of punisher first played by external authority. The super-ego seeks to punish the ego and enforce the sense of guilt.

The Sense of Guilt

In Freud's theory, guilt first arises when a child internalizes the fear of external authority, giving rise to the super-ego. Later, guilt is enforced by the super-ego. Guilt is the product of the struggle between the love and death instincts as Freud explains in the latter part of the book.

The Death Instinct

An instinct that Freud proposes is present in all humans that drives them toward destruction and death. It coexists in opposition to the love instinct, and often mingling with it.

Eros

Eros was a figure from Greek mythology who represented love. Freud uses this as a metaphor for the love instinct present in all humans. Eros stands in contrast to the death instinct, with which it interacts within all humans. Freud also uses Eros to describe the

instincts that are directed outward, particularly the drive to group together with other humans.

Ananke

In Greek mythology, Ananke is the goddess of necessity. Freud uses Ananke as a metaphor for those human instincts such as hunger, which are directed inwardly toward survival of the organism. He positions it alongside Eros, representing instincts that are directed externally.

The Future of an Illusion

A book published by Freud in 1927, in which he presents his theory of the origin of religion and a psychoanalytic discussion of its effects on people. He refers to this earlier work throughout the current book.

Totem and Taboo

A book written by Freud and published in 1913. The book applies psychoanalytic theory to the development of primal man, as well as child development. Freud refers to the essays in this book frequently.

Beyond the Pleasure Principle

A work by Freud published in 1920, in which he first explores the idea of competing drives of love and death. Freud expands on these ideas in the present book and refers often to this earlier work.

Themes

Instinct vs Civilization

Freud spends a good deal of the book discussing man's natural instincts and how they affect and are affected by civilization. He concludes that the two forces are opposed to one another in an almost paradoxical way because instinct is what leads to civilization forming in the first place, then that civilization seeks to control or inhibit instinct.

There are two types of instinct as Freud describes them—those directed inwardly and those directed outwardly. He uses the Greek metaphors of Eros and Ananke to represent these kinds of instinct. Eros represents the "love" instincts, which include sexual desire but also the desire to procreate and join with other humans. Ananke is the "necessity" drive, which rules over the instinct to stay alive.

Civilization arises partly because Eros drives humans to gather together; however their natural instinct of aggression works against civilization. For civilization to survive, the aggression of its members must be inhibited. The same is true of their sexual desire, as Freud lays out his theory. This constant effort of civilization to control its members' instincts is, on the surface, the cause of man's seeming perpetual unhappiness within civilized society.

Freud delves deeper into the question, however, in two other themes that arise in the book. The first is guilt, which is the primary method by which civilizations inhibit instincts. The second is the struggle within every individual between his instincts toward life and love and his instinct toward death and destruction.

Guilt

Since human instincts will tear a civilization apart if they go unchecked, a civilization must have a way to inhibit these counterproductive instincts. In Freud's theory, this method is guilt. Guilt is used to make people believe that some behaviors are bad even if they would make a person happier.

Freud seeks to discover the origin of guilt and builds a theory based on his previous work in psychoanalysis. He concludes that a part of an individual's ego, or his sense of self, is turned inward back toward the ego. He calls this the "super-ego." This super ego takes the place of external authority figures, who might punish bad behavior and acts as an internal authority that holds the ego in check by making it feel bad for even thinking about performing "bad" acts. This is the point at which an individual can be said to have a "conscience," Freud states.

Freud develops the theme of guilt over the course of the book, proposing one theory of its origin and then changing the theory slightly and redefining some of its features. He finally separates "remorse" from guilt in order to bring his theory in line with his previous

work. Remorse is felt after an individual actually performs a bad act. It is different from guilt, which is inflicted by the super-ego for even thinking about behaving badly.

Since guilt is the method by which man is made unhappy by civilization, Freud points to it as a root problem and the prime cause of unhappiness or discontent in civilized man. But guilt is something that arises in an individual and is not innate. The third major theme in the work is an investigation along psychoanalytical grounds for the origin of guilt.

Love and the Death Instinct

In explanation for the origin of conscience and the sense of guilt, Freud develops a theme based on his earlier work that applies to his theory of civilization. This theme is that in addition to Eros, the instinct to create and join together with other humans, there is a counteracting death instinct that seeks to destroy these bonds. This death instinct takes the form of aggressiveness.

The two counteracting forces are always present at the same time in varying degrees. The practice of sexual sadism is an example of the two instincts mixed together. This destructive force can also be directed inwards, as in the case of sexual masochism.

Unlike Eros, the death instinct is difficult to discern. It is also a problematic concept to accept. Freud himself admits that he was reluctant to believe that such an instinct existed but adds that it explains much within psychoanalytic theory. There are still those who hesitate to believe in it, however. This is possibly because people are reluctant to believe that human nature has such a destructive nature at heart.

Freud connects this struggle between love and death in the individual to the development of a conscience, for it is the death instinct pointed inward when the super-ego seeks to punish the ego for "bad" thoughts. This, in turn, results in a sense of guilt, which is the tool by which men are made unhappy in civilization. Thus Freud has tied the three main themes of the book together by providing an explanation of how they are inextricably linked. Guilt is unavoidable, for it arises directly from instinct.

Style

Perspective

Freud is writing Civilization and its Discontents later in his career from the perspective of a respected and highly-influential man in his own field. The book looks back on his earlier works and pulls threads from many of them, which he weaves into the supporting material for his new theory about civilization and man's happiness. Having reached the level of importance that he has, he does not feel the need to establish the validity of most of this earlier material, assuming that his readership will accept his supporting theories as given.

Freud is also writing from the perspective of someone addressing his colleagues, and he anticipates their potential questions and objections to his central theory. At these points in the book, Freud uses the rhetorical device of changing his perspective to that of his imagined reader, slipping into their voice and raising questions he imagines they might be thinking. He then proceeds to answer these questions.

Freud does not pretend to answer all the questions he raises but leaves many of them open, implying that his readers might find the pursuit of their answers worthwhile. This indicates a certain respect Freud has for his readers, which forms part of his perspective while writing.

Tone

Freud's tone is matter-of-fact and direct, occasionally injected with deference, humor and sarcasm. He often writes directly to the reader, acknowledging the structure of the book and even apologizing from time to time that he has not laid out his argument as clearly as he would have liked. This deference to the reader is mildly flattering and serves to soften Freud's somewhat startling conclusion that civilization makes us unhappy.

Freud frequently assumes his reader is already familiar with his previous writing and with the field of psycho-analysis. As a result, his tone is often in the direct, matter-of-fact style that one might expect from a professor lecturing to a college class. He runs quickly through material he assumes his readers have already studied and then slows down to explain new or more complicated ideas.

Freud is skeptical about religion, and he assumes his reader shares his skepticism, as evidenced by his remarks about religion and religious people. His tone is often sarcastic on this subject, as when he closes Chapter II, with the sarcastic suggestion that religious people are essentially weak-minded people, who could satisfy their need to submit to authority without going through the bother of following religion.

Structure

Civilization and its Discontents is a short book, divided into eight chapters. Freud refers to it as an essay, which describes it well, for it does not go into great depth on the subject matter but outlines the larger themes of his theory of civilization and happiness, along with the supporting material he uses to arrive at the theory.

Broadly speaking, Freud starts with the general and moves to the specific over the course of the book. He begins by discussing a definition of civilization, followed by the interactions of individuals within a civilization and then onto the processes within the individual that both drive humans to form civilizations and also make them unhappy within civilizations. While this is the broad structure of the work, Freud often digresses and detours. This can make it difficult to follow the main thread of his argument at times, a fact which Freud acknowledges and for which he apologizes.

Chapters I-VI are primarily concerned with the supporting material on which Freud bases his main conclusion. They draw largely from his earlier works and provide background information to the reader. Chapter VII, is where Freud draws the various threads of his discussion together to propose his main theory that the struggle between love and death in the individual is the root cause of man's unhappiness in civilization. Finally, in Chapter VIII, Freud reiterates the path he has taken to reach his conclusion and more specifically defines some of the terms he has used.

Quotes

"It is impossible to escape the impression that people commonly use false standards of measurement - that they seek power, success and wealth for themselves and admire them in others, and that they underestimate what is of true value in life." p. 11

"Normally, there is nothing of which we are more certain than the feeling of our self, of our own ego. This ego appears to us as something autonomous and unitary, marked off distinctly from everything else." p. 13

"The origin of the religious attitude can be traced back in clear outlines as far as the feeling of infantile helplessness. There may be something behind that, but for the present it is wrapped in obscurity." p. 19

"We will therefore turn to the less ambitious question of what men themselves show by their behavior to be the purpose and intention of their lives. What do they demand of life and wish to achieve in it? The answer to this can hardly be in doubt. They strive after happiness; they want to become happy and to remain so." p. 23

"The program of becoming happy, which the pleasure principle imposes on us, cannot be fulfilled; yet we must not - indeed, we cannot - give up our efforts to bring it nearer to fulfillment by some means or other. Very different paths may be taken in that direction, and we may give priority either to the positive aspect of the aim, that of gaining pleasure, or to its negative one, that of avoiding unpleasure." p. 30

"But they seem to have observed that this newly-won power over space and time, this subjugation of the forces of nature, which is the fulfillment of a longing that goes back thousands of years, has not increased the amount of pleasurable satisfaction which they may expect from life and has not made them feel happier." pp. 34-35

"The last but certainly not the least important, of the characteristic features of civilization remains to be assessed: the manner in which the relationships of men to one another, their social relationships, are regulated - relationships which affect a person as a neighbor, as a source of help, as another person's sexual object, as a member of a family and of a State." p. 42

"The development of civilization appears to us as a peculiar process which mankind undergoes, and in which several things strike us as familiar. We may characterize this process with reference to the changes which it brings about in the familiar instinctual dispositions of human beings, to satisfy which is, after all, the economic task of our lives." p. 43

"But in the course of development the relation of love to civilization loses its unambiguity. On the one hand love comes into opposition to the interests of civilization; on the other, civilization threatens love with substantial restrictions." p. 50

"Present-day civilization makes it plain that it will only permit sexual relationships on the basis of a solitary, indissoluble bond between one man and one woman, and that it does not like sexuality as a source of pleasure in its own right and is only prepared to tolerate is because there is so far no substitute for it as a means of propagating the human race. This, of course, is an extreme picture. Everybody knows that it has proved impossible to put it into execution, even for quite short periods." p. 52

"The element of truth behind all this, which people are so ready to disavow, is that men are not gentle creatures who want to be loved, and who at the most can defend themselves if they are attacked; they are, on the contrary, creatures among whose instinctual endowments is to be reckoned a powerful share of aggressiveness." p. 58

"Starting from speculations on the beginning of life and from biological parallels, I drew the conclusion that, beside the instinct to preserve living substance and to join it into ever larger units, there must exist another, contrary instinct seeking to dissolve those units and to bring them back to their primeval, inorganic state. That is to say, as well as Eros there was an instinct of death." pp. 65-66

"Another question concerns us more nearly. What means does civilization employ in order to inhibit the aggressiveness which opposes it, to make it harmless, to get rid of it, perhaps?" p. 70

"Thus we know of two origins of the sense of guilt: one arising from fear of an authority, and the other, later on, arising from fear of the super-ego. The first insists upon a renunciation of instinctual satisfactions; the second, as well as doing this, presses for punishment, since the continuance of the forbidden wishes cannot be concealed from the super-ego." p. 74

"Whether one has killed one's father or has abstained from doing so is not really the decisive thing. One is bound to feel guilty in either case, for the sense of guilt is an expression of the conflict due to ambivalence, of the eternal struggle between Eros and the instinct of destruction or death. This conflict is set going as soon as men are faced with the task of living together." p. 79

"I suspect that the reader has the impression that our discussions on the sense of guilt disrupt the framework of this essay: that they take up too much space, so that the rest of its subject-matter, with which they are not always closely connected, is pushed to one side. This may have spoilt the structure of my paper; but it corresponds faithfully to my intention to represent the sense of guilt as the most important problem in the development of civilization and to show that the price we pay for our advance in civilization is a loss of happiness through the heightening of the sense of guilt." p. 81

"The fateful question for the human species seems to me to be whether and to what extent their cultural development will succeed in mastering the disturbance of their communal life by the human instinct of aggression and self-destruction." p. 92

Topics for Discussion

Freud calls civilization a process. It this process beneficial for human society?

What role do technology and technological advances play in Freud's theory?

Discuss Freud's remarks about religion. Are they important to his central theory?

Freud proposes that civilization makes people unhappy. Does he imply or propose a solution?

Freud frequently quotes from literature, especially the poetry of Goethe. How does poetry help him make his point?

Freud apologizes more than once to his readers for the organization of his book. Is the book's argument well organized?

Who is Freud's intended audience for this book?