
WHY DO WE DESIRE THE END OF OUR WORLD? CIVILIZATION AND THE UNHAPPINESS OF MODERN HUMANS: THE ANTI-CIVILIZATIONAL TENDENCIES OF MODERN HUMANITY

A DEBATE THROUGH THE LENS OF SIGMUND FREUD

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Abstract:

Among the people around us, one can observe a certain desire for our world to come to an end. It is both a thought and an attitude. Nothing seems to work anymore, and therefore everything must be replaced. Although civilisation is inherently splendid and, according to some prominent economists, has even saved humanity from extinction, it is precisely this world that is being contested. Through civilisation, we have managed to overcome ancestral fears: fear of hunger, fear of cold, fear of the other. Only through civilisation have humans come together to create a shared world. Yet this world of ours is desired to end by some of the people around us.

*What is actually happening? What lies behind this desire? Is it specific only to the failures of society, as Mises suggested in *The Anti-Capitalist Mentality*, or is it a tendency found in all humans? Where does this urge to reject the human order of economic prosperity and civilisation originate? What are its hidden determinants? In this study, we attempt to answer these questions with the help of Sigmund Freud. His name requires no introduction, and his work on the social neuroses typical of the civilised human being is documented in *Civilisation and Its Discontents*.*

Keywords:

civilisation, anxiety, anti-civilisational tendencies, anti-capitalism, economic prosperity, the “ego”, human progress, maladaptation to civilisation, unhappiness of the civilised man

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SUCCESS AND RECOGNITION ARE THE GREAT ILLUSIONS OF THE CIVILIZED HUMAN BEING

From the outset, it must be stated that what we call civilization has not existed eternally, nor is it necessarily destined to exist perpetually. On the scale of past history, and possibly in the scale of future history, the Western man, for that is of whom we speak, has confronted and will continue to confront alternative ways of life. That is to say, eternal fears may resurface, and future humanity may face their full acuity. The human of the future may also experience a point of anti-civilizational minimum or an absence of civilization. If civilization (Freud, S. 1991, pp. 313-214) signifies the emancipation of man through the use of increasingly sophisticated tools and techniques, then it is conceivable that future humanity could return to caves. As improbable as this scenario may seem, it is not beyond the realm of possibility.

Returning to the questions raised earlier, Freud begins his essay by emphasising that people typically misjudge the true nature of their lives (Freud, S. 1991, p. 290). Genuine values are often neglected, while individuals are seemingly captivated by the struggles of daily existence. At the outset of his essay, Freud observes how humans pursue fantasies, whereas the realities of their lives should be otherwise. Success and recognition constitute the true thresholds for civilised man, both contemporary and historical. Freud acknowledges and proclaims the “ego” as the interface between the individual and the external world. In explaining how the self relates to the external environment through the ego (Freud, S. 1991, p. 292), he distinguishes between the self and the “I”. The ego is merely a façade for the inner self, for our internal universe.

This sense of the ego is not fixed from birth to death. The human psyche undergoes a series of transformations in relation to itself and the external world. Throughout life, each individual develops what Freud calls a “pleasure-ego” in relation to their surroundings (Freud, S. 1991, p. 293). Pleasure thus becomes the fundamental principle around which the pleasure-ego is constructed. Humans seek to avoid discomfort, eliminating sensations or circumstances that diminish or obscure pleasure. The external world constantly challenges and reduces the satisfaction of the ego. There is an inherent competition with others, as each individual seeks similar goals—pleasure, satisfaction, and the attainment of objectives that bring gratification. In economic terms, this principle can be readily demonstrated.

In this struggle with the external world, numerous circumstances generate frustration and dissatisfaction within the ego. Interaction with the external environment can be intense, resembling a seemingly senseless struggle. Nevertheless, the “reality principle”—the engagement with the world and with other people—ultimately dominates each person’s life. In fact, all individuals live in a perpetual contradiction between the pleasure-driven ego and the demands of the external world. The external environment is perceived as an obstacle to be overcome. The reality principle develops precisely in tension with the pleasure principle. External pressures are experienced as attacks on the pursuit of pleasure (Freud, S. 1991, p. 293). This occurs because, in the earliest stages of human existence, the ego encompasses all; subsequently, it must acknowledge and accommodate the external world (Freud, S. 1991, p. 294).

ON HAPPINESS AS THE GOAL OF HUMAN LIFE

Freud then addresses the question of the purpose of human life. This is premised on the fact that humans possess an “ego,” unlike animals, and that life has value, which must necessarily entail a goal. However, only religion can provide an answer to this question, and such answers vary according to religious system (Freud, S. 1991, p. 301). For this reason, Freud abandons this ambitious question and replaces it with another (Freud, S. 1991, p. 301). He focuses instead on the explanation that humans aspire to happiness and nothing else. Happiness, therefore, constitutes the ultimate goal of human life.

According to **Freud**, there are two principal pathways to achieving happiness: the avoidance of pain and displeasure, and the experience of intense pleasures. Yet, the universe conspires to ensure that humans can attain this goal only episodically. Freud summarises this as follows (Freud, S. 1991, pp. 301-302): the pleasure principle determines the purpose of life; the pleasure principle governs the ego; yet, this human programme encounters opposition from the universal order; it appears that it was not intended in the Creator’s plan for humans to be fully happy; the capacity for happiness is inherently limited by our human constitution. As Freud observes: *“Any persistence of a situation desired by the pleasure principle generates only a fairly lukewarm sense of well-being; we are constituted such that only contrast can provide intense pleasure, whereas the pleasurable state itself yields very little”* (Freud, S. 1991, pp. 301-302).

Happiness is counterbalanced by suffering, which assails us from three sources (Freud, S. 1991, p. 302): firstly, from our own bodies, which are transient, fragile, and subject to decay and dissolution, incapable of escaping frequent signals of pain and anxiety; secondly, from the external world, which is in constant conflict with us and seeks only our destruction; and thirdly, from our relations with other people. This latter dimension produces great suffering. Humans have the capacity to wound one another, and they do so whenever the opportunity arises. There is also an element of social competition, as each individual pursues the same happiness achieved through pleasure. It must be recognised that what produces pleasure for one human being is, in principle, capable of producing pleasure for another; otherwise, either we would not be human, or others would not be human. The pressure exerted by the transient body and a life over which we have only partial control drives us into conflict. The self seeks happiness, while external conditions are rarely favourable. This constitutes the tragedy of civilised human existence alongside others. It is also the reason why many individuals abandon the struggle for happiness. Others even risk, or lose, their health and lives in this relentless endeavour that defines human existence.

Freud cautions that under these pressures, the pleasure principle transforms into a more modest principle, which he terms the reality principle (Freud, S. 1991, p. 302). Humans become rational under the guidance of this reality principle and seek primarily to avoid suffering rather than to pursue pleasure. Numerous strategies are available for this purpose. Freud observes: *“Voluntary isolation, withdrawal from fellow human beings constitutes the most radical measure of protection against suffering generated by interpersonal contacts”* (Freud, S. 1991, p. 302).



Through this path, tranquillity is attained, and thus happiness is achieved. Human cooperation remains another means of mitigating suffering. Once an individual recognises themselves as a member of a community, labour can serve to alleviate pain. This step is within our reach but requires overcoming selfishness and conceding to the happiness of others. Humans rarely take this step, but when they do, their suffering within society may be significantly reduced. Social integration and shared human goals are clearly preferable to isolation. Other methods enumerated by Freud in the struggle against suffering arising from both within and around us include (Freud, S. 1991, pp. 303-309): intoxication, through the use of drugs or medications; the displacement of libido, that is, cultivating instincts so that they can no longer be denied by the external world; detachment from reality, seen as the sole enemy and obstacle to happiness; adopting love as a weapon against unhappiness, available to many; seeking happiness in the pleasures inspired by beauty; and turning to religion as a means to achieve happiness and pleasure, since religion possesses its own pathways to this end.

Freud then asks what else might be added to the sources of human unhappiness already mentioned, which are: the overwhelming power of nature; the transience of one's own body; and the inadequacy of measures intended to regulate human relations, whether within the family, the state, or society (Freud, S. 1991, p. 310). While the first two sources are objective, as humans can do little against the eternity of nature, the third remains a matter for debate. Indeed, human discourse often centres upon it. It is widely believed that more can always be done to improve state institutions and provide better laws governing interpersonal relations. Family and state, as tiers of human association and cooperation, remain under scrutiny. Here, Freud identifies a form of human refusal to accept that the institutions between us may not provide greater trust and prosperity (Freud, S. 1991, p. 310). He observes: *“We stubbornly refuse to admit, we cannot understand why the institutions created by ourselves should not ensure greater protection and prosperity for all of us.”*

WHY DO WE LOSE THE BATTLE AGAINST UNHAPPINESS? WHAT LAW LIES BEHIND THIS FAILURE?

Indeed, if we reflect upon the deplorable failure of our measures to prevent suffering, recorded precisely in this domain, we begin to suspect that here too some law of invincible nature is concealed, and that, on this occasion, it concerns our very own psychic structure” (Freud, S. 1991, p. 310). **Freud** intuits that beyond ourselves and our desires for happiness, there exists “something” beyond our control, which drags us into the struggle with unhappiness—a struggle we most often lose. He continues his analysis, proposing that this is a law of the human psyche, a law inherently connected to civilisation, given that the source of all unhappiness is considered to be human civilisation itself.

This truth reflects a widespread human belief: that the past was always luminous and golden. The present, by contrast, is never so; it is filled with misery and problems. Simultaneously, the human collective memory carefully preserves the myth of a golden age, of a human childhood, when all was well and beautiful. Naturally, this myth may be linked to the narrative of Paradise and our expulsion therefrom, due to the Original Sin committed by Eve, who partook of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. It represents a form of damnation in relation to the happiness



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experienced by humans, prompting a longing for the “good old days.” Another reason why this myth of bygone felicity is so carefully maintained in collective memory is that the past, blurred by the hardships it entailed, becomes easier to idealise. Human sentimentality is strongly present in this idealisation of the “good old days.” Against the backdrop of a softened historical memory, humans tend to believe that the past was invariably better. Freud channels the debate regarding the culpability of civilisation: “...*largely responsible for our misery is what we call our civilisation; to abandon it and return to a primitive state, some believe, would bring the much-coveted happiness*” (Freud, S. 1991, p. 311).

Here, economists, historians, and anthropologists err considerably in relation to collective mentalities. Our efforts to keep people grounded should be more intense, for the wager against unhappiness cannot be won otherwise. **Freud** further asks how humans came to share a perspective so strange and hostile toward civilisation. This hostility and longing for the “good old days” possess several traits, according to Freud (Freud, S. 1991, p. 311): it is profound dissatisfaction; its origins are very distant; and the condemnation of civilisation represents a continuity in human history. An important source is seen in the manner in which Christianity became superimposed upon Western civilisation, promising an eternal life beyond, with ideals and values transcending this world. Freud states: “*Hostility toward civilisation must have been one of the reasons for Christianity’s triumph over pagan religions, Christianity being closely linked to the devaluation of earthly life, decreed as its doctrine*” (Freud, S. 1991, p. 311).

Undoubtedly, our entire thinking, including our attitude toward happiness, is influenced by religion. Freud ventures into challenging terrain here. Christianity does not promise the attainment of tranquillity and happiness on this earth; rather, it recognises human unrest and promises that the world beyond death will be calm and joyful. This is, in effect, an avoidance of the great problem, accomplished through postponement. The unhappiness of this world is acknowledged, yet humans are not granted significant capacity to combat it. By deferring the problem, Christianity deepens anxiety.

Another cause of human hostility toward civilisation, in **Freud’s view**, arises from the travels of Western explorers to regions inhabited by indigenous populations at various stages of development (Freud, S. 1991, p. 311). A form of envy toward the “savage man” emerged, later corrected by ethnographic research. Ultimately, humans reached the mistaken conclusion that by eliminating what they perceive as the excesses of civilisation, they could return to a state of happiness.

THE CONSEQUENCE: CIVILIZATION IS SEEN AS THE CAUSE OF HUMAN UNHAPPINESS

Civilisation and its institutions, invented by humans, are perceived as the true sources of our unhappiness. Consequently, the elimination of civilisation could hypothetically restore humans to a state of primordial happiness. The social and cultural demands created by civilisation are seen as the cause of discontent: humans are unable to meet such standards, and, moreover, their invention is considered detrimental, as it produces maladaptation and unhappiness. Freud helps us understand: “*It*



was then discovered that humans become neurotic because they cannot endure the degree of renunciation imposed by society in the name of its cultural ideal, and it was concluded that abolishing or reducing these social demands would constitute a return to possible happiness” (Freud, S. 1991, p. 311).

Owing to their innate impulses toward a primary, primitive freedom and their resistance to rules, humans associate civilisation with a form of constraint imposed upon their lives. From this stems the tendency to deny civilisation, without rationally weighing its benefits. In truth, human civilisation is all that we possess. As humans live together, and as societal evolution progresses, organisation becomes increasingly sophisticated, appearing to impose ever more norms and restrictions. Consequently, the tendency to contest civilisation intensifies. In defence of civilisation, the voices of qualified individuals—cultural elites within each nation—should rise. The effort to orient humanity toward the future must be undertaken deliberately and consciously. Yet, this rarely occurs. Contemporary Western elites, for example, often appear to look backward, adopting anti-civilisation positions. This phenomenon is neither new nor inconsequential, and its societal effects are evident. Contestation of civilisation and its benefits has, today, subtly become a mode of existence.

On the other hand, the neurosis of the civilised human is an undeniable reality. The material aspect has seduced humanity, which has, in some respects, become a slave to tools, an appendage of its own creations. Dissatisfaction also arises from the absolutisation of individual needs and desires, in relation to each person’s ability to fulfil them. Planetary resources are finite, and the potential for development cannot meet the dreams of billions of inhabitants. Restrictions on achieving one’s aspirations constitute another source of the typical neurosis of the civilised human. Witnessing their inability to cope with the “daily struggle” at the level they desire, individuals become frustrated. They fail to recognise their own progress and relinquish responsibility for their destiny. Most must function as mere cogs in an increasingly sophisticated mechanism.

At this level of analysis, it is apparent that humans no longer equate civilisational advancement with happiness. They fail to see the purpose of civilisation if unhappiness persists. Yet they do not realise that the problem lies within themselves—in the manner in which they relate to the external world. Humans desire more and more, and when they do not obtain it, they seek someone to blame. The scapegoat is rarely the inner world, but rather the external world (Freud, S. 1991, p. 312).

CONCLUSIONS

It occurs that ingenious individuals, guided by their inquisitive minds, move far ahead of the masses from which they originate. Thus, the scientific elite has consistently driven the evolution of civilisation and technology, while the perception of the general population has remained primitive or semi-primitive. Cultural accumulations and the transformation of humans into beings with accurate perceptions is a phenomenon that unfolds over considerably longer periods of time. It requires hundreds, or even thousands, of years to achieve significant developments in human consciousness. Consequently, we are both advanced in terms of civilisation and stagnant in terms of individual and collective mentality.



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Moreover, **Freud** warns that civilisation does not aim to be equivalent to progress, nor does it intend to chart the path towards human perfection (Freud, S. 1991, p. 320). As previously noted, the path to human perfection can exist only within civilisation, though it requires additional factors. The civilised human is obliged to understand their destiny and purpose, with greater chances of attaining answers than the primitive human. Civilisation is therefore not, in reality, responsible for our unhappiness, even if it leads the individual to the sublimation of passions (Freud, S. 1991, p. 321). Nevertheless, the struggle between civilisation and human Eros continues and remains the central aspect of our lives (Freud, S. 1991, p. 364).

CITATIONS

Freud, S., (1991), “...the term ‘civilisation’ designates the entirety of works and organisations whose establishment distances us from the animal state of our ancestors and which have two purposes: the protection of humans against nature and the regulation of interpersonal relations.”, pp. 313-314

Freud, S., (1991), “It is impossible not to recognise that, in general, people err in their evaluations. While striving to acquire power, success, or wealth, and admiring those who possess them, they conversely underestimate the true values of life.”, p. 290

Freud, S., (1991), Freud states: “The first reasoning at our disposal is as follows: normally, nothing is more stable within us than the feeling of ourselves, the feeling of our own ego. The ego does not appear as an independent reality, unique and well-differentiated from the rest of existence. Yet this appearance is deceptive, for the ego in fact breaks any precise boundary, extending into an unconscious psychic zone which we call the self, of which the ego serves only as a façade—a fact first revealed to us by psychoanalytic investigation, from which we also expect many further clarifications concerning the relationship linking the ego and the self. But at least when viewed externally, the ego appears to have entirely precise boundaries.”, p. 292

Freud, S., (1991), “Moreover, a second factor contributes to detaching the ego from the totality of sensations, that is, to enable it to recognise an ‘outside’, an external world; the frequent, varied, and inevitable sensations of pain and suffering, which the pleasure principle, as absolute master, demands to be suppressed or avoided. There develops the tendency of the ego to isolate itself, to expel everything that could become a source of displeasure, thereby forming a ‘pleasure-ego’, opposed by a foreign and threatening ‘outside’.”p. 293

Freud, S., (1991), “Humans will experience a procedure ‘which allows us, through the deliberate orientation of sensory activity and, on the other hand, through appropriate muscular action, to distinguish the interior—which belongs to the ego—from the exterior, which pertains to the external world, and precisely by overcoming this stage, the reality principle is assimilated for the first time, which must dominate subsequent development. This distinction tends towards a practical goal: protection against unpleasant sensations that we experience or that simply threaten us. The fact that the ego resorts to no other method of defence against certain unpleasant excitations of internal



origin, but only to those used for disagreeable sensations of external origin, will become a starting point for significant morbid disturbances.”, p. 293

Freud, S., (1991), *“It is consequently necessary to replace the previous question with another, less ambitious: what are the vital intentions and objectives betrayed by human conduct, what do they demand from life? Towards what do they aspire? We will not be mistaken if we respond: they aspire to happiness; humans wish to become and remain happy. This aspiration has two aspects, a negative aim and a positive one: on the one hand, avoidance of pain and displeasure, and on the other, the experience of intense pleasures. In a narrower sense, the term happiness signifies that the second aim has been attained. In correlation with this duality of aims, human activity may take two directions, according to whether they strive—predominantly or exclusively—to achieve one or the other aim.”, pp. 301-302*

Freud, S., (1991), *Freud states: “Due to insufficient observational data, as well as misunderstandings of their customs and habits, Europeans imagined that the ‘savages’ led simple and happy lives, poor in needs, which were no longer accessible to the more civilised explorers who visited them.”, p. 311*

Freud, S., (1991), *Freud notes: “Humans are proud of these achievements (referring to scientific and technological conquests) and rightly so. Yet they must acknowledge that recent victories over space and time, this subjugation of natural forces, and the realisation of millennial aspirations have not necessarily led to an increase in the joy of living. They do not feel that they have thereby become happier. We should be content to conclude that mastery over nature is not the only condition of human happiness, nor is it the sole aim of the civilising endeavour, and that technological progress is not without value for the economy of our happiness.”, p. 312*

Freud, S., (1991), *Freud states: “Instead, we have avoided adopting the prejudice that civilisation equates to progress and charts the path of perfection for humans.”, p. 320*

Freud, S., (1991), *Freud concludes his essay under discussion: “The question of the destiny of the human species seems to me to be posed as follows: to what extent can the progress of civilisation control the disturbances to communal life caused by human impulses of aggression and self-destruction? From this perspective, the current era may merit particular attention. Contemporary humans have advanced the mastery of natural forces so far that, through these, it has become easy for them to exterminate each other to the last.”, p. 364*



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