

## Conceptualizing Civilization in Sigmund Freud: An Analysis

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### Abstract

*Civilization has been one of the central concerns of philosophical thinking especially in the twentieth century. In the continental world, many thinkers have discussed civilization as a philosophical problem and, have attempted to look into various aspects of its conceptualization. The realm of civilization is an essential element of the study of human being, which is not merely an anthropological and historical study, but a philosophical one. Sigmund Freud, the father of Psychoanalysis, has been one of the major thinkers who discussed civilization as an important issue especially in the context of the question of subjectivity. Freud's perspective on the question of civilization as expounded in *Civilization and Its Discontents* was the main source of inspiration behind the psychoanalytic critique of civilization. In this paper, I will try to explore how Freud conceptualizes civilization on the basis of his own concepts of self and repression.*

**Keywords:** Civilization, Self, Repression, Sublimation, Oedipus-complex, Super-ego, Sense of guilt.

### Introduction

The word civilization<sup>1</sup> in the literal sense refers to the action or process of civilizing or being civilized. Freud uses the word civilization almost interchangeably with culture. Freud's interpretation on 'civilization' has been initially set out in his work *Totem and Taboo* (1912-13). Here, he posits an intimate link between cultural progress and order and an ever-spiraling instinctual renunciation and repression<sup>2</sup> at the level of the self. Freud argues that our psychic tendency towards violence and destructiveness represents the major threat to the survival of society and culture. This threat leads to an instinctual renunciation and repression of the subject in society. Thus the repression and the formation of self<sup>3</sup> in society are the major two points behind the whole discussions of the concept of civilization. These issues are the main consideration of this paper.

*Civilization and its Discontents* (1930) is an authoritative work of Freud on civilization. In this work Freud exposes the battle between culture and the drives of the human self. He argues that the increasing complexity of culture necessarily entails the escalation of psychological repression. More advanced level of culture and society has been necessitated for individual's self-control of violence and destructiveness, the repression of desire and emotion. Civilization emerges initially from humanity's need to conquer the earth, to make its harsh surroundings bearable and serviceable to mankind's needs and desires. Thus, for Freud, 'civilization' refers to, "the whole sum of the achievements and the regulations which distinguish our lives from those of our animal ancestors and which serve two purposes- namely to protect men against nature and to adjust their mutual relations (Freud, 1961)." <sup>4</sup>

Here, Freud provides a clear picture on the nature and the function of civilization. Freud's description involves mainly three points: 1) civilization is founded upon the regulations and the acquisition of achievements; 2) these regulations and achievements established a mastership over the instinctual nature of human being; 3) this mastership, which distinguishes men's lives from their animal ancestors, protect men against nature and adjust their mutual relations. The first two have been momentous points in conceptualizing civilization. According to Freud, civilization protects man against the aggression and violence within himself that threaten continually to undermine human relations. Yet this protection and security is only achieved at a cost; the cost of freedom for control.

Freud notes, by the development of superior brain power, human beings have become survivors and conquerors. This process requires co-operation, an ability to abandon individual interests and demands in order to maintain an orderly society. Since, according to Freud, the "replacement of the power of the individual by the power of a community constitutes the decisive step of civilization (Freud, 1961)." <sup>5</sup> But this process occurs only in and through the suppression of the instinctual desires. Freud emphasizes civilization is founded upon instinctual renunciation in the sense of basic repression. So the perfection of our self-control is accomplished at the cost of instinctual repression in civilized man. The human being is the only animal that becomes an 'I' or a self-conscious subject, in and through the process of repression and sublimation. <sup>6</sup> Instinctual renunciation is the basis of justice and order in the relationships among human beings (morality) and survival in the struggle with nature.

Freud remarks that one of the foremost requisite of civilization is justice. Justice made laws that once made will not be broken in favour of

an individual. It implies that, there should be a rule of law to which all have contributed by a sacrifice of our instincts. No one can escape from the rule of law. Liberty, according to Freud, of the individual is not an element of civilization. He writes “the urge for freedom is directed against particular forms and demands of civilization or against civilization altogether (Freud, 1961).”<sup>7</sup> Thus, actually, civilization marches toward the organization of nature and the collective development of the superego (Freud, 1923).<sup>8</sup> We can see that morality (superego) make a powerful factor in the inner life of subject. Freud maintains that the aggressive and brute forces in man can be tamed through the institution of the ‘superego’ and ‘conscience’.

Civilization restricts the instincts and demands of men in mainly two ways: sublimation and renunciation. Restrictions force instincts to induce to displace the condition for their satisfaction that leads them into sublimation. Freud defines sublimation of instinct as “an especially conspicuous feature of cultural development; it is what makes it higher psychical activities, scientific, artistic or ideological, to play such an important part in civilized life (Freud, 1961).”<sup>9</sup> The denied satisfaction is diverted into a more acceptable channel or form of expression through sublimation. For example, aggression gets diverted into playing and watching violent sports or libido gets diverted into artistic and creative activity. This defense mechanism<sup>10</sup> of civilization consists of repression of the individual. Thus, civilization is built upon a renunciation of instincts by suppression, repression or some other means.

Hence, Freud observes that our civilization has been largely responsible for our misery. And we should be much happier if we gave it up and return to primitive condition. Why are we uncomfortable in our civilization? Freud asks this question repeatedly in his work. It is also the basic question for subjectivity, because it reveals the nature and hidden structure of the self. Freud insists persistently that happiness is impossible. Civilization, in the end, categorically implies “control and domination,” the sheer denial of human freedom and happiness.

As a matter of fact, Freud believes that life is basically suffering and that the dynamics of nature proves this point. He said there is no possibility at all that happiness can be achieved since all regulations of the universe militate against it. Freud writes: We are threatened with suffering from three directions: “the superior powers of nature, the feebleness of our own bodies and the inadequacy of regulations which adjust the mutual relationships of human beings in the family, the state and society (Freud, 1961).”<sup>11</sup> The suffering from our own body, which is doomed to decay and dissolution and which cannot even do without pain and anxiety as

warning signals. The second one is from the external world, which may rage against us with overwhelming and merciless forces of destruction, and finally from our relation to other men. The suffering which comes from this last source is perhaps more painful than any other. In regard to the first two sources, our judgment cannot hesitate long. It forces us to acknowledge those sources of suffering and to submit to the inevitable.

We shall never completely master nature; and our bodily organism, itself a part of that nature. It will always remain a transient structure with a limited capacity for adaptation and achievement. As regards the third, the social source of suffering, we do not admit it at all. We cannot see why the regulations made by ourselves should not, on the contrary, be a protection and a benefit for every one of us. But what Freud wants to clarify at this point is not only the fact that man is destined to suffer, but also the cause which gives rise to this suffering. Suffering is a direct upshot of the repression of instincts. We have seen that Freud never repudiates this repression. On the contrary, Freud argues that repression is necessary in order to preserve life. This can be done through the repression of instincts. Therefore, momentary pleasure, which he speaks of the alternation of pleasure and unpleasures in life, is the least that man can ever have. Freud maintains that the antagonism between the pleasure principle<sup>12</sup> and the reality principle<sup>13</sup> is eternal.

According to Freud, the large amount of frustration of society, imposed upon the individual, has been the causes of neurosis. There is a built-in antagonism between the demands of the instincts and the repressive structure of the society. For Freud, we suffer as human from external restrictions (for instance, laws and regulations which tell us not to kill our father or have sex with our mother) and internal restrictions (which often keep us from committing those acts even if we knew we would not get caught, because we would feel unbearable guilt if we did). Freud, thus, writes that the sense of guilt is the most important problem in the development of civilization. The price, we pay for our advance in civilization, is a loss of happiness through the heightening of the sense of guilt.

Freud argues that the sense of guilt attached to a Christian concept such as original sin--one in which the individual shares in the guilt of primal ancestors such as Adam and Eve--resembles that structure of the primal murder which posits an ancient crime against an ancient father figure. Hence, according to Freud, "We cannot get away from the assumption that man's sense of guilt springs from the Oedipus complex and was acquired at the killing father by the brothers banded together (Freud, 1961)."<sup>14</sup> Even if we do imagine that this murder may have actually taken place, the guilt structure remains and it is buried deep in

the unconscious. Conscience is based on repression, as Freud believed; it is a tool of submission. In Freud's account the civilized 'moral' human being is obviously a repressive formation. The structures of conscience work themselves torturously into our psyches by ingraining a long list of prohibitions and moral imperatives which keep us morally and legally in line. Hence, an advanced civilization is based on guilt. It makes the achievement of happiness as extraordinarily difficult.

The central demand of a civil society, for Freud, is one of the Christianity's proudest claims, 'Love thy neighbor as thyself'. Freud shows the way in which the relationship with neighbor suggests an encroaching aggressiveness. For civilization to function, everyone is expected to hold back these aggressive instincts. Thus, Freud writes, "an act of aggression was not suppressed but carried out; but it was same act of aggression whose suppression in the child is supposed to be the source of his sense of guilt (Freud, 1961)." <sup>15</sup> So, Freud realizes that the individual who lives life closest to impossible demands such as 'Love thy neighbor as thyself' actually suffers from an acute sense of guilt. For Freud, a person with a highly developed and punitive super-ego will be covered with guilt whether or not they have done anything wrong. Because of this reason, Freud draws out unfolding nature of "sense of guilt, is at bottom nothing else but a topographical variety of anxiety; in its later phases it coincides completely with fear of the super-ego (Freud, 1961)." <sup>16</sup> So, in the realm of mental illness it is often the case that obsessive and neurotics have the most acute sense of duty and responsibility towards others, according to Freud. Then, here, Freud noted that the commandment, 'Love thy neighbor as thyself', is the strongest defence against human aggressiveness and an excellent example of the psychological proceedings of the cultural super-ego.

Freud believes that the attitude of hostility towards civilization is based on a deep and long-standing dissatisfaction and it occurs through certain specific historical events. The repressive elements of civilization produce the dissatisfaction of the individual. In this context, Freud clarifies the nature of the human life: "the purpose of life is simply the program of pleasure principle (Freud, 1961)." <sup>17</sup> It is through the order and control over pleasure principle, that the civilization functions. The controlling elements of civilization are working as the higher psychological agencies, which have subjected themselves to the reality principle. It is a painful moment in the developmental process of human life.

The shift from the pleasure principle to the reality principle marks in two ways: in the evolution of the human species (phylogenesis), and the development of the individual (ontogenesis). According to Freud, this

event is not unique but recurs throughout the history of mankind and of every individual. In other words, it is a universal phenomenon. This insight leads him to a systematic analysis of the structure of civilization. The biological evolution happens over millions of years of transformation of the ego- id of the first pre-human primitive into the homo-sapiens, the cultural animal and the primitive homo-sapiens into the modern civilized man. Thus, the ontogenetic process of growing an ego embeds the phylogenetic process which produced modern civilization.

For Freud, these processes of evolution leave their mark on the human organism by the way of the 'inherited predispositions' and 'memory traces' of the archaic heritage. Man's archaic heritage forms the nucleus of the unconscious mind. Human's cultural evolution began, when the pre-human male stays permanently with the female, keeping her, and her young under her protection. Thus, the family makes culture possible. The family itself is the product of biological evolution. It is the product of the cultural learning also. Thus, Freud formulates a universal theory of sexual and mental development and subsequently, he applied his ideas which began as theories of the individual, such as the Oedipus complex<sup>18</sup> and repression, to society at large.

Freud speculates that child's repression of anal and genital erotism is a phylogenetically programmed repetition of this prehistoric evolutionary process. And furthermore, he proposed that the organic repression of anality and genitality carries with it an organic repression of sexuality also. Thus, it is important to note that he describes the organic repression as a biological phenomenon which is at the same time a prerequisite for the evolution of culture. And, thus repression is demanded by culture. Freud writes that the deepest root of the sexual repression comes along with the process of civilization and comes to be considered as the noblest cultural achievement. The basic repressions and sublimations accompany the development of the human psyche (self). So, further, we can see basic repression becoming the process of humanization/ civilization. It arises from the requirements of the species (morality and work) and the requirements of the individual (the need to grow an ego which relates the organism as self-conscious and self-controlling subject to its environment).

The human infants are biologically 'open' creatures. But their existence becomes fully human through their relations with others which guarantee that they will go through the process of basic repression, the process of civilization, according to Freud. So, civilization is a set of external requirements which is simultaneously a set of internal requirements also. Freud observes that the basic nature of man is exclusively



satisfying its biological needs in all activities. But the biological nature of the cultural animal ensures that the drive will go beyond the body. According to Freud, scarcity, the struggle for existence produces the cultural animal. Thus, scarcity leads to divert pleasurable energy to increasingly unpleasurable cultural activity. Work, in its broadest sense, is equivalent to cultural activity, constitutes and sustains human as distinguished from pre-human society. All cultural activities are based on sublimation; they depend on drive energy which has been diverted from its original aim (total and immediate bodily gratification). Only humans have the ability to delay and to renounce gratification in order to divert some of their originally instinctual sexual (and aggressive) motivational energy to socially necessary 'cultural activities', including work, observes Freud.

Furthermore, Freud observes the first acquired characteristics transmitted by culture are technological (the making fire, tools, weapons) and moral (the incest taboo, renunciation of patricide and infanticide). According to Freud, incest and exogamy rules, the first cultural restrictions of sexual behavior, as a means of uniting families to produce human societies. Thus the incest taboo is essentially a cultural demand made by society. For Freud, 'society' arises on the foundations laid by phylogenetic basic repression, the transition from primate to human, from pre-cultural to 'cultural society'. Furthermore, Freud argues that there must be a motive operating just outside of the human biological organism. He believes that it must be the economic factors (selective pressures) which transform primate into human. But this transformation is the product of basic repression and when this transformation is completed, work becomes a character of human species.

In Freud's writings, it is mentioned that libidinal renunciation has been the basis of justice and order in individual's relationships with other human beings and of his survival in the struggle with nature. It denotes the existence of life itself. Thus, Freud argues that humans must have the ability to divert some of their instinctual sexual (and aggressive) motivational energy to socially necessary 'cultural activities', including work. But, the diversion of energy is made possible only in and through the process of 'sublimation'. Freud refers to sublimation as derivative and pleasure-seeking motivation: "primal man made work acceptable .... by treating it as an equivalent and substitute for sexual activity (Freud, 1973)." <sup>19</sup> Similarly, society needs to divert their energies from sexual activity to work. Freud articulates that the first acts of civilization are the use of tools, the gaining of control over the fire and the construction of dwellings. As he points out, in *Civilization and its Discontents*, work in our civilization is primarily painful. It performed

not for its own sake but it is imposed by external necessity (scarcity). This unpleasurable work is essential for the progress in civilization.

According to Freud, beauty, order, and cleanliness obviously occupy a special position among the requirements of civilization. Thus the technological progress depends on the heightening of the cultural demands for 'order and cleanliness'. Freud observes that human beings have an inborn tendency to carelessness, irregularity and unreliability in their work. But the technological apparatus control over the nature and trains it for requirements of culture. Subjection of man's activity to the requirements of the technological apparatus (cleanliness and order) involves increasing instinctual renunciation, joylessness, and neurosis. For Freud, the progress of civilization is bound up with increasing neurosis.

Freud believes that the repression of the human instincts is enforced and sustained by scarcity or Ananke. Freud puts it clearly in his work *Civilization and Its Discontents*: "The communal life of human beings had, therefore, a two-fold foundation: the compulsion to work which was created by external necessity (Ananke), and the power of love (Eros), which made the man unwilling to be deprived of his sexual object.... (Freud, 1973)"<sup>20</sup> Freud believes that civilization begins with the twofold systematic repression of the primary instincts of man: a) the repression of life-instincts (Eros), ensuing in durable and expanding group relations, and b) the repression of the destructive instincts (Thanatos), leading to the mastery of man and nature, to the individual and social morality. Freud says that men "come together," i.e., live in society, first because they are forced to do so by economic necessity (Ananke) and second because they want to do so to acquire their sexual objects (Eros).

We know that work is not necessarily unpleasurable nature. But, for Freud, the pleasurable work is a play which is also embeds socially useful factors. As he recognizes, work is to be pleasurable when it has been selected by free choice. Accordingly, freely chosen, pleasurable work involves a reciprocal relationship between the internal and external worlds of the worker. By means of sublimation (neutralization and displacement) the internal and external worlds move toward reconciliation. Neurosis, Freud observes that, occurs in the absence of successful sublimation and it sustains the structure of modern civilized cultural activity. So we can see that the successful repression (sublimation and defence mechanism) and neutralization of instinctual energies is an essential factor of a healthy human society. Thus, it has been considered as a positive part of the development of self in modern civilization. But at the same time, Freud realizes that the culture inflicts considerable psychic damage upon individuals. It cultivates



neurosis and obsessive behaviour through its stringent rules and regulations concerning mastery of the passions. Yet this repression is never complete.

In *Civilization and its Discontents*, Freud does not offer any solution to the problems of the renunciation of instinct (repression) that civilised society requires and the lack of individual happiness it can guarantee. But, Freud strongly argues: “Civilization has to use its utmost efforts in order to set limits to man’s aggressive instincts and to hold the manifestation of them in check by physical reaction-formation (Freud, 1973).”<sup>21</sup> Thus, no rational society can ever have this system. People cannot just do whatever they want to do. Thus, man needs to restrain his destructive instincts by conforming to some socially useful norms. This is exactly the reason why Freud fully accepts the necessity and virtue of repression.

It is important to note that through conceptualizing civilization, Freud unfolds the conditions that involves on the formation of the self. For Freud, reconciliation of the external and internal world or the interpersonal relationship is central to the constitution and reproduction of the self. Self is embedded in the context of social, cultural and political life. Thus, self is a constructed phenomenon. In other words, self is established through individual actions and choices, the patterning of thoughts, feelings and desires, and the structure of subjective experience in relation to the social order. While, Freud declares that human self exists with a kind of incompleteness and insufficiency. It means that unsuccessful gratification (repression/sublimation of instinctual energy) of the desire makes self incomplete. Thus, in the Freudian sense, instinctual renunciation or repression becomes an inevitable one in the development and survival of the civilization. Yet, we can see that Freudian observations are relevant for tracing the exercise of domination upon the inner world of the self. It opens an urge for the possibilities of human emancipation.

#### Notes

1. The term *civilization* emerged late in the eighteenth century in France. In about 1732, ‘civilization’ was still only a term in jurisprudence: it denoted an act of justice or a judgment, which turned a criminal trial into civil proceedings. Its modern meaning ‘the process of becoming civilized’ appeared in 1752, from the pen of the French statesman and economist Anne Robert Jacques Turgot. In the new sense, civilization meant broadly the civilized peoples: on the other, primitive savages or barbarians. From France, the word civilization rapidly spread through Europe, the new word ‘civilization’ was accompanied the old word; culture. Thinkers often use the terms culture and civilization as having different implications. Culture refers to moral value systems and to intellectual and aesthetic

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achievements and the word civilization refers to material and technological accomplishment.

2. The notion repression is one of the most basic concepts in Freudian psychoanalytic theory. Repression, for Freud, is the process by which certain thoughts or memories and wishes are barred from consciousness and confined to the unconscious.
3. Freud uses the concept of self in a manner that different from modern philosophical tradition. He occupies the words 'id', 'ego', and 'super ego' or 'conscious', 'pre-conscious' and 'unconscious' instead of the term self which is varied from Cartesian 'cogito'(self or subject) that is indivisible, fixed and innate in nature.
4. Freud, Sigmund. (translated & edited by Strachey, James). 1961. *Civilization and its Discontents*. (W.W. Norton & Company, INC., New York. p.36.
5. Ibid.
6. In Freud, the notion sublimation is a type of defence mechanism; in which socially unacceptable impulses and drives are transformed into socially acceptable actions or behaviors.
7. Freud, Sigmund. (translated & edited by Strachey, James). 1961. *Civilization and its Discontents*. (W.W. Norton & Company, INC., New York. p.43.
8. In his work, 'The Ego and the Id' (1923), Freud presented his so called 'structural model'- 'the ego', 'the Id', and 'the super ego'. For Freud, the concept of 'super ego' is a moral agency which judges and censures the ego. It functions as a censorship.
9. Freud, Sigmund. (translated & edited by Strachey, James). 1961. *Civilization and its Discontents*. (W.W. Norton & Company, INC., New York. p.44.
10. Defense mechanisms are denotative of specific patterns of psychic action, employed to eliminate from the awareness of the total personality any of the external and internal stimuli resulting from the damming up of infantile instinctual tensions and narcissistic mortifications.
11. Freud, Sigmund. (translated & edited by Strachey, James). 1961. *Civilization and its Discontents*. (W.W. Norton & Company, INC., New York. p.24.
12. Pleasure principle, defines Freud, as psychological processes and actions are primarily governed by the gratification of needs and the avoidance or discharge of unpleasurable tension. It is governed by the id in contrast to the reality principle.

13. Reality principle is, in the terminology of psychoanalytic theory, the chief governing principle of the ego, exercising control over the behavior to meet the conditions imposed by external reality, thereby acting as a moderating influence on the pleasure principle.
14. Freud, Sigmund. (translated & edited by Strachey, James). 1961. *Civilization and its Discontents*. (W.W. Norton & Company, INC., New York. p.78. It also mentions on Totem and Taboo (1912-'13), Standard edition, Vol.13, p.143.
15. Ibid, p.78.
16. Ibid, p.82.
17. Ibid, p.23.
18. The Oedipus complex is an unconscious set of loving and hostile desires which the subject experiences in relation to its parents; the subject desires one parent, and thus enters into rivalry with the other parent.
19. Freud, Sigmund. 1973. 'Civilization and its Discontents' in Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, vol. XXI, London: Hogarth Press, 1973,
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21. Ibid, p.49.

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