Why does our civilization evoke feelings of unhappiness, anger and anxiety?

In this book, Sigmund Freud did a brilliant attempt to explain the discontents of our civilization, touching on our deepest psychoanalytical desires and impulses.

*Read on and get the key ideas in about 20 mins.*
CHAPTER 1:

Key Takeaways

Sigmund Freud starts off with some valuable insights on religion, the ego and the human psyche.

° Sigmund thinks of religion as an illusion. However, one of his dearest and wisest friends claims that there CAN exist a source of religious sentiment and energy. In the book, this source is described as an ‘oceanic feeling’, a feeling of an indissoluble bond, of being one with the external world as a whole and that – at the same time - accompanies us everywhere we go.

° Sigmund acknowledges this feeling and understands it may be present in a lot of “religious” people. However, he himself indicates having a hard time to experience this ‘oceanic feeling’; He compares it to the one feeling of which all of us can be certain it exists: the feeling of our self or the ego. This sense of self, Sigmund explains, would not easily be able to compromise its boundaries with something from the ‘outside’. In other words: it is not very inclusive. However, Sigmund noticed that this can happen, i.e. in a state of love. In this state, all boundaries between ourselves (our ego) and the object outside of us melt away.

° Sigmund argues that – as new-born infants – our ego’s include everything. Later, as soon as we start to have desires (for example, for the mother’s breast), the ego separates itself from an external world. As Sigmund puts it: “Our present ego-feeling is not more than a shrunken residue of a much more inclusive feeling which correspond to a more intimate bond between the ego and the world around it”

° Sigmund then concludes that the past can be preserved in our mental life. He therefore traces this ‘oceanic feeling’ back to an early phase of our ego-feeling. But he doesn’t think this feeling is a source of religious energy. Rather, he perceives religion as a kind of ‘out way’ to the danger from the external world, which the ego categorizes as ‘threatening’, since our ego always wants to avoid pain and maximize pleasure.

CHAPTER 2:

° According to Freud, the purpose of religion is that it alleviates the harshness of life. Freud argues that life –for many of us – is too hard, bringing too many pains, disappointments and impossible tasks. Religion proposes a viable out way. Besides religion, Freud argues that there are 3 other ‘palliative measures’ to escape this harshness of life:

1) Powerful deflections (science)
2) Substitutive satisfactions (art)
3) Intoxicating substances (alcohol and drugs)

° Freud says that the main purpose of life is happiness. Mankind strives for being happy and to remain so. What does happiness mean according to Freud? Simple: maximizing feelings of
pleasure and avoiding feelings of pain and displeasure. However, this ‘pleasure principle’ is not in alignment with the way we are wired, especially if we perceive happiness – and thus pleasure - as the (sudden) satisfaction of our needs. The following quote summarizes this brilliantly:

“When any situation that is desired by the pleasure principle is prolonged, it only produces a feeling of mild contentment. We are so made that we can derive intense enjoyment only from a contrast and very little from a state of things”

Basically, what Freud is telling us here, is that human beings are not wired to live in a perpetual happy, ‘pleasure state’. Once our needs are fulfilled, extra pleasure will not make us happier.

* Furthermore, Freud defines 3 main sources of suffering and pain:

1. Our own body, which is doomed to decay
2. The external world
3. Our relations to other men, which Freud defines as the most painful one.

Against these sources of suffering and pain, mankind developed several strategies to avoid these in order to be ‘happy’.

- **Voluntary isolation**: keeping oneself aloof from other people and the external world. From this, Freud argues, people can derive the ‘happiness of quietness’.
- **Participating in the community, engaging oneself for other men and the external world**: working for the good of ‘all’, including oneself.
- **Influencing our own organism’s feelings**: This can be done in several ways: the first way is by chemical influences – like intoxication – which causes us pleasurable sensations and make us insensitive of our pain. The second way is to influence our instinctual impulses, seeking to master the internal sources of our needs. This is what the Eastern Zen Buddhists would recommend.
- **Psychical and intellectual work**: creating joy out of creating something as an artist or solving a problem as a scientist. Here, we derive happiness and joy from internal, psychical processes.

Freud argues that the search for happiness can never be fulfilled. However, it is our job to do all the possible efforts to bring it nearer to fulfillment by various means. Which paths or means are used to become happy will totally depend on the person. There is no golden rule that applies to everyone. Every man should find out for himself what makes him happy. As Freud quotes:

“The man who is predominantly erotic will give first preference to his emotional relationships to other people. The narcissistic man, who inclines to be self-sufficient, will seek his main satisfactions in his internal mental processes. The man of action will never give up the external world on which he can try out his strength.”
CHAPTER 3:

In this part, Freud dives deeper into our third source of suffering and pain: our relations to other men, or as Freud calls it: civilization.

* Freud argues that the creation of a civilization has not made mankind happier than before. On the contrary. Most of our suffering is due to our civilized world. Before our civilization arose - during our primitive times – mankind had few wants and needs, and lived a very simple and happy life. Now - despite all the recent technological and scientific advancements - people are not feeling very comfortable and happy in the present-day civilization.

* Freud doesn’t condemn our civilization totally. Civilization has brought us all kinds of cultural tools and achievements – from making fire to creating a telephone – But at the same time, Freud notices that all this doesn’t make us happier.

* So what are the downsides of our civilization then? Among Freud, civilization has put serious restrictions on the freedom of each individual and the satisfaction of his powerful instincts. It lies in the nature of individuals to claim his or her liberty against the will of the group. As Freud quotes:

  “The members of the community restrict themselves in their possibilities of satisfaction, whereas the individual knew no such restrictions.”

Civilization requires beauty, cleanliness and order. These are all aspects that – by nature – are not useful and of vital necessity for the individual. This all together leads to what Freud calls ‘cultural frustration’, which is dominating most of the social relationships between human beings.

Let’s now ask a more important question: For which sake (WHY) did our civilization arise then?

<<Read On>>

CHAPTER 4:

* Freud argues that the roots of our civilization can be found in our “ape-like pre-history”. During that time, mankind already adopted the habit of forming families.

* There were 2 foundations on which these families were based:
  1) The compulsion to WORK TOGETHER to deal with the external world.
  2) The power of LOVE: As Freud quotes: “Love made the man unwilling to be deprived of his sexual object – the women - , and made the women unwilling to be deprived of the children.

* Freud differentiated 2 types of love:
1) Genital love (based on sex)
2) Universal, aim-inhibited love

“The readiness for a universal love of mankind and the world represents the highest standpoint which man can reach.”

Although genital love leads to the formation of new families, aim-inhibited and universal love leads to close friendships. The downside of genital love is its exclusiveness, something universal love doesn’t suffer from.

So... Can that love survive in our modern civilization?

Not really. Freud argues that our civilization threatens love with substantial restrictions. The problem is that civilization brings together people in large unities. However, the family will never give the individual up to that. Especially when that family is really close, they will often find it easy to cut themselves out of a wider group of people.

Another problem Freud mentions is that civilization restricts our sexual life. It confronts the man with a lot of difficult and complex tasks. This takes the men away from his duties as a father and a husband. It creates ‘sexual frustration’ on both sides of the relation. Freud even argues that the “requirement” of having only one sexual life (monogamy) cuts off sexual enjoyment. Civilization typically does not like sexuality as a source of pleasure. Buy why? People don’t have –just like our ape-like ancestors- a biological basis for monogamy. We are – by nature – sexual creatures. This sexual restriction, Freud argues, creates unhappiness in our modern civilization.

CHAPTER 5:

Freud begins this chapter with the following quote: “Civilization demands other sacrifices besides that of sexual satisfaction.”

So which sacrifice?

Among Freud, the other sacrifice refers to mankind’s aggressive instincts. Besides our sexual instinct, mankind is also aggressive by nature.

This inclination to aggressiveness continuously disturbs human relations as civilization is forced to limit man’s aggressive instincts → think of the ideal commandments our civilized world repeats over and over: “Love thy neighbor as thyself”. This is just to keep the peace in our civilization. However, Freud argues that the restriction of these impulses is against mankind’s nature and therefore make him feel frustrated and unhappy.

As Freud summarizes:
“If civilization imposes such great sacrifices not only on man’s sexuality but on his aggressiveness, we can understand better why it is hard for him to be happy in that civilization. In fact, primitive man was better off in knowing no such restrictions.”

CHAPTER 6:

Here, Freud elaborates on the inclination of mankind to be aggressive and destructive and its danger for our civilization. He quotes:

“In all that follows I adopt the standpoint, therefore, that the inclination to aggression is an original, self-subsisting instinctual disposition in man, and I return to my view that it constitutes the greatest impediment to civilization.”

° This instinct of aggressiveness and destruction must provide the ego with a fulfillment of its vital needs and with control over nature.

° Civilization, Freud argues, must represent the struggle between the instinct of life and the instinct of destruction. Briefly, the evolution of civilization may be described as “the struggle for life of all human species”.

CHAPTER 7:

➔ In this chapter, Freud asks himself the question:

“What means does civilization now use in order to inhibit this aggressiveness - which is part of mankind’s nature - and make it ‘harmless’?”

➔ Freud argues that our aggression – which is not allowed to be put out – is introjected and internalized again. In other words, it is sent back from where it came from. In fact, this aggression turns itself against our own ego in the form of what Freud calls our ‘super-ego’. This super-ego, in the form of our conscience, now puts into action against the ego the same harsh aggressiveness that the ego would have liked to satisfy on other, external individuals.

This tension between the harsh super-ego and the ego causes a feeling of guilt (and unhappiness) and expresses itself as a need for punishment. This feeling of guilt arises as soon as a person intends to do –or has done- something ‘bad’, which is basically everything that threatens the loss of love.

➔ To this feeling of guilt, there are 2 origins – which come in chronological order -

1) One arising from the fear of an authority
2) One arising from the fear of the super-ego

➔ Freud describes the relation between these 2 origins brilliantly in the next quote:
“Originally, renunciation of instinct was the result of the fear of an external authority: one renounced one’s satisfactions in order not to lose its love from others. If one has carried out this renunciation, one is, as it were, ‘quits’ with the authority and no sense of guilt should remain. But with fear of the super-ego the case is different. Here, instinctual renunciation is not enough, for the wish and desire persists and cannot be concealed from the super-ego. Thus, in spite of renunciation of that has been made, a sense of guilt comes about.”

→ The super-ego torments the sinful ego with the same feeling of anxiety as does the authority and is constantly on the watch for opportunities of getting it punished by the external world.

→ Freud believed that –besides a threatened external unhappiness via a loss of love and punishment of the external authority- this tension of the sense of guilt has caused a **permanent internal unhappiness**.

→ Our civilization, which is characterized by the eternal battle between the trends of love and death, continuously reinforces this feeling of guilt and therefore the discontents of mankind.

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<th>Key Takeaways</th>
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<td>- Civilization caused <strong>a loss of happiness through the heightening of a sense of guilt.</strong></td>
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<td>- If our aggressive and sexual impulses are <strong>suppressed</strong>, they get internalized and made over to the super-ego which will transform it in a sense of guilt.</td>
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<td>- <strong>Super-ego</strong> = agency which has been inferred by us; <strong>Conscience</strong> = function we ascribe to that agency, keeping a watch over the actions and intentions of the ego and judging them.</td>
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<td>- <strong>The sense of guilt</strong> comes from the harshness of the super-ego, or the severity of our conscience. It is caused by the tension between the ego’s strivings (instincts) and the demands of the super-ego.</td>
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<td>- <strong>The sense of guilt</strong> already exists before the super-ego. In fact, it is a derivative of the conflict between the need for the authority’s love and the urge towards instinctual satisfaction.</td>
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<td>- <strong>Individual ↔ Civilization</strong>: “In the process of individual development, the main accent falls mostly on the egoistic urge, the urge towards happiness. But in the process of civilization things are different. Here by far the most important thing is the aim of creating a unity out the individual human beings. It is true that the aim of happiness is still there, but it is pushed into the background.”</td>
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