

# Existential Freud:

## Converting Neurotic Misery into Common Unhappiness

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Much will be gained if [psychoanalysis] can succeed in transforming hysterical misery into common unhappiness. With a mental life that has been restored to health [the individual] will be better armed against that unhappiness.

Sigmund Freud

I would like to begin my talk this morning by sharing with you an ancient fable about happiness and the difficulty we typically encounter in its quest. Once upon a time there was a young prince who was inconsolably unhappy, and there was nothing his father the king could do to bring his son out of the doldrums. The king's advisors conferred for days seeking a solution and finally told the king that the only thing that could cure the prince of his misery was to obtain the shirt of a happy man. After searching far and wide throughout the vast kingdom, the king's advisors finally located a poor farmer who they discovered, much to their relief, was supremely happy. But much to their dismay, they also discovered that this poor but contented soul did not own a shirt!

The moral of this story can be interpreted any number of ways, but they all point to one inescapable conclusion: Happiness is enigmatic and elusive, and for all our efforts to obtain it, it always seems just beyond our reach. For many, the very idea of happiness is viewed sceptically. For them it is nothing more than a form of denial or a delusion, perhaps a manic episode. After all, psychotherapists are supposed to be concerned with healing sick minds, not improving healthy ones. Moreover, for all the prosperity Americans currently enjoy — a standard of living that has long been the envy of the world — all the money in the world, according to that old adage, cannot buy happiness. Each year we spend billions of dollars on the latest anti-depressant or anti-anxiety medication, but for all their success in relieving suffering, they do little in the way of making us happier human beings.

Yet, the vast majority of people who come to psychotherapists complain, not about this or that ailment, but of being unhappy in their lives. Whether we like it or not, there is an expectation among therapy patients that somehow or other, psychotherapy will succeed where all their previous efforts to become happy have failed. Perhaps the observation that most of our patients leave therapy no happier than when they began can be explained by a recent article in the *New York Times* which reports that, even though people typically say they value happiness over money, they also admit that they don't really want to work for it!

So what does the topic of happiness have to do with Sigmund Freud and our quest to find strength and meaning in our lives? In fact, Freud had a lot to say about it, and happiness was a topic that preoccupied him all his life. Freud devoted an entire book to this topic, published in English as *Civilization and Its Discontents*, in 1930. This book was not only Freud's best selling work, it was also his most philosophical effort. It was his deepest meditation on the meaning of life and, just as importantly, why we suffer.

Naturally, Freud's culture played a role in his conception of happiness, though there is little evidence that either Viennese, Austrian, German, or Jewish cultures played a decisive role in his views about the human condition. In fact, his conclusions about this problem were primarily rooted in late nineteenth and twentieth-century Europe and the Greek Classical literature that every educated European encountered at university. Every culture in the world has its own term for happiness, and all of them have tried to find ways of obtaining it. Although all cultures agree that happiness is desirable, not all of them agree what happiness entails. My objective this morning is to examine Freud's views about happiness and its relation to unhappiness, while determining the extent to which Freud's views about it are existential in nature.

Everyone in this room is probably familiar with Freud's famous comment about the relation between psychoanalysis and happiness — that the aim of analysis is to “transform

hysterical misery into common unhappiness.” Freud made this cautionary statement about the limited role that therapy plays in procuring happiness all the way back in 1895, in the book he co-authored with Josef Breuer, *Studies on Hysteria* (1893-1895), buried on the very last page of that book. Since everyone typically treats this citation as pessimistic in nature, I thought that it might be of interest to share what he actually said, and the context in which he said it. (Quoting Freud):

When I have promised my patients help or improvement . . . I have often been faced by this objection: “Why, you tell me yourself that my illness is probably connected with my circumstances and the events of my life, [and that] you cannot alter these in any way. How do you propose to help me, then?” And I have been able to make this reply: “No doubt fate would find it easier than I do to relieve you of your illness. But you will be able to convince yourself that much will be gained if we succeed in transforming your hysterical misery into common unhappiness. [For] with a mental life that has been restored to health you will be better armed against that unhappiness.” (p. 305)

Whether or not this view is indeed pessimistic, we can probably agree that Freud’s statement about the relation between happiness and psychotherapy is a surprisingly enigmatic way of ending a book whose purpose was to inform his Viennese colleagues about the nature of the novel treatment method that he had just invented. More surprising

still, Freud waited until 1930 — nine years before his death and thirty-five years after his book on hysteria was published — to explicitly resume his query into the nature and causes of unhappiness. Obviously, he had a lot of time to think about it during the interim. By 1930 the world had suffered its first World War, arguably the most horrifying war in history, and life in both Germany and Austria had been profoundly affected by that war when Freud returned to this important subject. Yet, his famous statement about unhappiness (and implicitly, happiness itself) and therapy had been made two decades before World War I, long before Freud became identified with the alleged pessimism of his later years. Certainly, nothing happened in the interim that made Freud any less pessimistic about the human condition and what measure of relief from unhappiness psychotherapy could be expected to offer!

### **Culture and Unhappiness**

Freud's views about happiness were not actually invented by him, but were derived from many of the West's great philosophers over the past two thousand years or so, including Heraclitus and Empedocles in the Pre-Socratic era, Plato and Aristotle, the West's greatest philosophers, the Cynics, Stoics, and sceptics from the Hellenistic era of Alexander the Great, and more recently the sixteenth-century essayist and philosopher, Michel de Montaigne, and more recently still Schopenhauer and Nietzsche. Freud studied virtually all of these philosophers in his youth or, later, in his maturity. In the main, all of them argued that life challenges us from the moment we are born with pain, frustration, and

disappointment, and that life confronts us with tasks that are extremely difficult to perform, and that leave scars that are impossible to erase. Though as children we are convinced things will become easier as we grow older, experience tells us the opposite — that life becomes increasingly more difficult, and that this state of affairs persists throughout our existence until finally we are faced with the inevitability of our death.

There's no denying that Freud's take on the human condition is unconventional by contemporary North American standards. This is because it was predominantly born from a European, post-World War One, existential perspective that is anathema to the typically pragmatic American mind-set. Whereas in this country psychoanalysis was enthusiastically embraced as a tool of psychiatry in its never-ending war on mental illness, in Vienna and other European capitals such as Berlin, Paris, and London psychoanalysis was marginalized by psychiatry and became a refuge for artists, writers, and intellectuals — and anyone wealthy enough to pay for a six-times-a-week analysis. Many of Freud's patients came to see analysis as a means of facing the harsh realities of living instead of a device for the simple relief of their symptoms.

Yet, this paradox presented Freud's patients — most of whom came to see him from all over the world — with a quandary: Everyone goes into therapy because they suffer and want their suffering to diminish. In fact, without the motivation to sacrifice whatever it takes to effect a change in one's life, the prospective analytic patient, Freud suggested,

should be refused. Since the beginning of Western thought philosophers, physicians, and religious leaders have been concerned with the nature of suffering, its ostensible causes, and its elusive relief. From earliest times we have sought to understand what our suffering is about and how to relieve, accommodate, or accept it. Freud, though trained as a physician, was never willing to accept the strictly medical approach to suffering: To relieve it by any means possible, whatever the cost. Freud knew from personal experience that *life entails suffering*. The patients he treated suffered miserably, yet seemed peculiarly intolerant of it. Because their desire for happiness elicited considerable frustration, they instinctively suppressed those desires they believed were causing them to suffer. How could psychoanalysis help them? Whatever kind of anguish analysis may be suitable for relieving, Freud knew that it could not be expected to relieve the kinds of suffering that life inevitably exacts on us. This is because life subjects us to suffering. Life, in turn, eases the burden of suffering with momentary respites of pleasure and the promise of fleeting, if not lasting happiness. In Freud's opinion we are only capable of experiencing happiness in the first place because we suffer, but we compound our suffering even more when we aspire to procure happiness obsessively. How can any person be expected to come to terms with this equation, which by its nature entails more suffering, not less?

Freud argued in *Civilization And Its Discontents* that neurotics find this equation unacceptable because they feel, to varying degrees, that life is cheating them. They grow to resent their suffering and become increasingly desperate to rise above it by any means

possible. In their desperation to relieve their suffering, however, they often overlook what their anguish is trying to tell them. They become so preoccupied with eradicating their unhappiness they forget that if you reduce your life to relieving misery alone your chances for happiness will be accordingly diminished. These were the very people that Freud wanted to help, but he knew that he could not help them by colluding in their efforts to lessen their suffering, but by *increasing* it, in Zen-like fashion! Let me explain what Freud had in mind.

Freud knew that if the patients he treated had any chance of success, he would have to reeducate them about the role that suffering plays in our lives. Taking from Aristotle, Freud believed that every human action is in pursuit of the good, but the problem lies in each person's conception of the good, and such conceptions can serve us well or lead us to ruin. So what conception of the good did Aristotle advocate? Aristotle believed that the good life can be equated with the pursuit of happiness, but he also observed that, for most people, pleasure is the focus of their lives and, consequently, how they conceive happiness. Aristotle believed there was a good far nobler and more reliable good than pleasure, which is virtue, not because virtue serves utilitarian aims (such as relief from suffering), but because virtue is its own reward. In other words, whereas most people pursue happiness by accruing wealth and pursuing pleasurable activities, Aristotle argued that people who are short-sighted will always be miserable because they are missing out on the more subtle nuances of life, such as the importance of family, friends, and our



contributions to society. Consequently, the virtuous person is happy — at any rate *with himself* — while the person who pursues only pleasures is always in danger of losing them and, so, is relentlessly plagued with anxiety. Theirs is a no-win proposition.

So what is the highest virtue? According to Aristotle, honesty — the capacity to be honest with others but, more importantly, the capacity to be honest, or more authentic, with oneself. The problem Freud faced was in persuading his patients to follow this counsel, that is, to delay gratification until therapy had a chance to make a difference in their lives. Like Aristotle, Freud believed that the capacity for honesty hinges on the strength of character each person possesses and is capable of developing further. *So the first thing every therapist must learn is that you don't build character by conceiving of ways to relieve suffering, but by developing the strength to bear it.* This makes the outcome of therapy ambiguous, and sometimes tragic. This is because the kind of suffering therapy is capable of relieving isn't the pain of suffering, specifically, but the alienation we experience when we know that the life we are living is a lie. The ability to overcome this lie, by becoming more honest with ourselves, can relieve the alienation, but not the anguish that the slings and arrows of misfortune invariably exact on all of us.

It should be apparent by now that the standard Freud was using for the outcome of therapy was far more complicated than the simple reduction of symptoms. In fact, he is talking about something most people probably don't ordinarily equate with relief from

mental distress, but something along the lines of character building, or personal integrity, or what Buddhists call Nirvana. What is peculiar to how Freud conceived psychotherapy is its singular approach to suffering, embodied in the rule of abstinence and his so-called classical technique, which holds that a certain amount of suffering must be endured in order to accrue the full benefit of what therapy can offer. While contemporary psychoanalysts as well as non-analytic therapists are experimenting with ways of *relaxing* this aspect of their psychotherapy regimen, none opt to entirely abandon it, because we all recognize that suffering is an inevitable part of therapy. So the question comes down to *how much* suffering are we talking about? *what kind* of suffering does psychotherapy subject us to? and what are the *varieties of contexts* in which therapy patients are expected to encounter such suffering, and surmount it?

When we look at the ways we typically try to mitigate our suffering it appears that our principal technique is *distraction*. For the most part, entertainment, movies, television, literature, the symphony, concerts and so on are all ways of taking our minds off of our suffering and insulating ourselves from it, if only temporarily. Even the media, comprised of newspapers, magazines, the internet, iPhones and iPads, which are all fantastic sources of information, are for the most part used to put our minds elsewhere, anywhere, that can relieve us, if only momentarily, from the stresses, frustrations, and despair that are not only unavoidable, but relentless.

Yet, none of the methods we utilize to distract ourselves ever succeed to the degree we would like them to, no matter how clever, resourceful, or enlightened in our pursuit to gain mastery over our feelings. This raises the inevitable question as to why life is so difficult and, allowing that we agree this difficulty is intractable and more or less consistent with living, what purpose does the troubling nature of our existence ultimately serve?

Naturally, the question of suffering is uppermost on the minds of anyone who turns to psychotherapy. So how does this suffering affect us and what does it inspire us to seek from life in order to relieve it? For Freud the answer to this question was never in doubt: Our suffering inevitably causes us to seek happiness, to want to become happy and, ultimately, to remain so for as long as possible. But our quest for happiness isn't so simple, because its nature is such that we typically experience it, not as a simple "relief" from suffering but, more importantly, as a source of well being in its own right. In fact, we have to ask ourselves if it is even possible to attain genuine happiness if our sole purpose is to relieve our suffering any time it arises?

Most of us would probably agree that relief from pain and the incidence of happiness are not the same thing, though it is probably the most difficult distinction that any human being is ever asked to consider.

## **The Sources of Unhappiness**

But what are the principal sources — or “causes” — of our suffering? Naturally illness and infirmity are constant sources of frustration, unpleasure, even despair. And all of us are subject to environmental forces completely beyond our control, including earthquakes, hurricanes and the like that take an unpredictable toll on our livelihoods, and perhaps life itself. But these aren’t the kinds of suffering that typically bring people into therapy. Freud observed that the most pervasive source of suffering is our relationships with other people, and that the types of suffering these relationships engender are far more painful than any other kind of suffering we can endure. At bottom, it is our interpersonal relationships that constitute our most painful experiences and, moreover, the bedrock of what it means to be human.

Not surprisingly, all human beings seek ways of avoiding such suffering, and the ingenuity with which we are capable of engaging in all manner of scheming, denial, and deceit is, as we all know, legion. Not surprisingly, some people opt to avoid relationships altogether — or at any rate, the most intimate forms of relation — in their efforts to protect themselves from being rejected, frustrated, or disappointed by others. This strategy is never entirely successful, because there is also no greater source of happiness than our relationships with other people, whether they be lovers, spouses, friends, children, comrades-in-arm, colleagues, and so on. Without such relations we feel unremittingly unhappy, and due to

the weight of isolation, alienation, and loneliness their absence occasions, we are eventually obliged to seek an alternative means to relieve our self-imposed exile.

But why, we must wonder, do our relationships with others cause such suffering? And, if Freud is correct, why should it be the one source of suffering that is paramount? What do other human beings promise that is, ultimately, thwarted? Freud suspected that the answer to this question lay in a quest that endures throughout our existence and which never ceases to compel: the so-called “oceanic” feeling that a friend of Freud’s described as the kernel of the religious experience. Consistent with certain forms of love, this feeling was described to him as akin to eternity, a feeling, says Freud (1930), “of an indissoluble bond, of being one with the external world as a whole” (p. 65). Freud suspected that this feeling originates during the earliest stages of infancy, when the child is welcomed into the bosom of its family. The baby’s attachment to its mother, however, is by degrees dissipated over the course of childhood and is left to seek alternative sources of this feeling of “oneness.” But is it really possible, asked Freud, to ever approximate such a feeling again, except in the most fleeting circumstances, such as falling in love, or the drug experience?

Based on this formulation, Freud reserved the word happiness for any experience that serves to return us to that original, momentary bliss that our relationships with others often promise, but ultimately cannot sustain. Happiness is fleeting because we experience it in

contrast to the frustration that everyday existence entails. Though we are loathe to admit it, we cannot be happy all of the time. This observation can best be summarized with the adage: no honeymoon can last forever — a phenomenon to which all therapy patients become reconciled once the honeymoon they enjoy with their therapist evaporates.

### **Neurotic Misery and Common Unhappiness**

This admittedly gloomy portrayal of happiness is not the whole story, however. Though Freud fancied himself a realist and believed that the therapist's role is to impress on his patients realities they want to avoid, he also believed this bitter medicine holds out the hope for a far richer existence than the neurotic had previously been capable of.

I would now like to revisit Freud's earlier, enigmatic thesis, that the goal of therapy is to prepare us for common unhappiness. It seems to me this comment — if it makes any sense at all — hinges on Freud's distinction between neurotic misery and common unhappiness. The distinction between these two forms of suffering are more or less predicated on two other distinctions that are also critical to psychotherapy. The first is how we distinguish between the respective *sources* of our suffering, and the second concerns the distinction between our respective *experiences* of each, which is to say, between neurotic suffering on the one hand, and unhappiness on the other. In other words, are unhappiness and neurotic suffering the same? Freud believed they are *not*, and that the only reason psychotherapy is even possible is *because* they are not.

Throughout his career, Freud confronted his patients with a simple, if admittedly brutal choice: *either do something about the condition you are in, or accept it*. The ability to choose one or the other, and to commit oneself to the choice one has made was, in Freud's estimation, the hallmark of mental health — even when the outcome results in an increase in suffering! We saw earlier that Freud assigned the most painful source of unhappiness to our relationships with other people. But problems with other people are not necessarily evidence of neurosis. In Freud's opinion, the neurotic has problems accepting the brutal choice all therapy patients, sooner or later, have to face. So what does Freud mean by the term, neurosis, and how does it differ from the ordinary day to day problems that everyone encounters? Freud made his most eloquent portrayal of the neurotic's plight in another early paper, "Future Prospects on Psycho-Analytic Therapy," published in 1910. (Quoting Freud):

A certain number of people, faced in their lives by conflicts which they have found too difficult to solve, have taken flight into neurosis and in this way won an unmistakable, although in the long run too costly, gain from [their] illness. What will these people have to do if their flight into illness is barred by the indiscreet revelations of psychoanalysis? *They will have to be honest, confess to the [forces] that are at work in them, face the conflict, fight for what they want, or go without it.* (pp. 149-150) [Emphasis added]

Freud believed that the typical therapy patient rebels against this choice and devotes his or her efforts to devising a “third” but inherently magical choice instead: to pine away their life in fantasy or bitterness, waiting for the day when fate — in the form of blind luck — will reward them for their refusal to face up to their own contribution to their suffering. This so-called third choice is Freud’s ingeniously conceived neurotic symptom, to which we cling no matter how unreasonable or illogical it often is. In other words, it is the suffering *that we unwittingly impose on ourselves* that is the source of our neuroses, and consequently the only kind of suffering that therapy is capable of relieving.

This formula for the etiology of neurotic conflict also explains why Freud makes a calculated distinction between the respective sources of neurotic misery on the one hand, and common unhappiness on the other. Freud perceived the causes of unhappiness to originate from *outside* the individual and, therefore, caused by circumstances beyond our control. This is why fate plays a decisive role in happiness and unhappiness alike. On the other hand, neurotic conflicts don’t, strictly speaking, originate from outside but, rather, from “within.” Our neurotic conflicts are with *ourselves*, though the inspiration for them derive from those very relationships with others that we cannot, no matter how much we may want to, control. Consequently, simple unhappiness, though distinct from neurosis, may cause us *to become* neurotic when we’re unable to either accept our unhappiness or, as Freud proposes, do something about it.



So the goal of therapy, based on Freud's hypothesis, is to become more effective in fostering happiness in our lives but, when this fails, to accept our unhappiness, and move on.

But if the etiology of common unhappiness and neurotic misery differ, is the *qualitative experience* of each different, or the same? Typically, the neurotic cannot tell the difference. But even if therapy patients are unable to make this distinction, Freud expects that the psychotherapist *is* able to, or should be, by tracking down the respective *sources* of a given patient's suffering. Sometime after the fact, when a patient, for example, has finally succeeded in abandoning the "third choice scenario," he, too, will become capable of discerning the difference between ordinary frustration — in other words, "common unhappiness" — and the sense of unreality and alienation that are symptomatic of neurotic conflicts.

### **Alternative Conceptions of Happiness**

Yet, a nagging question persists in Freud's carefully wrought distinction between neurotic misery and unhappiness. If unhappiness is the goal of therapy, then how does one become happy? Moreover, what does it mean to be happy, and why is it not the goal of therapy?

The German word for unhappiness, *Unglück*, means misfortune, whereas the German word for happiness, *Glück*, means fortune or good luck. The idea is to be lucky or fortunate in life, as when things are going your way. Every culture has its own term for happiness — in Spanish, for example, it is *felicidad*, which, in English, is “felicity,” meaning fortuitous — and while the etymology oftentimes derives from the same root, the respective meanings, nuance, and emphasis can vary enormously. Moreover, history also plays an important role in a culture’s conception of happiness. Periods of prolonged peace or war, for example, can alter a culture’s notion of suffering, but not necessarily in ways we can predict. Freud’s knowledge of Ancient Greek culture and language and his fascination with history gave him a sophisticated appreciation of what human suffering entails and how all cultures throughout history have grappled with the same dilemmas and misfortunes. I would now like to take a moment to review other conceptions of happiness that aren’t limited to or necessarily dependent on good fortune, and how they influenced Freud’s conception of therapy.

There are actually two Greek terms that are usually translated into English as happiness. The most common one is *eudaimonia*. Some philosophers were concerned with the experience of *eudaimonia*, whether it can be reduced to a feeling that comes and goes, or a state or condition that is enduring. Other philosophers were more concerned with how to obtain it, whether, for example, it depends entirely on circumstances beyond our control, or if there is something we can do to further our happiness. Most people identify

happiness with *feeling* happy, which is to say, feeling *pleased*, so this conception of happiness amounts to feeling good. This view of happiness, however, was of marginal significance in the Greek literature on *eudaimonia*. There are numerous arguments throughout Plato's dialogues where the nature of pleasure is discussed, including the relationship between pleasure and happiness. Plato also anticipated a fundamental principle in Freud's conception of neurosis when he argued that in order to obtain pleasures in life you must endure hardships. Plato argues that happiness cannot be reduced to simple pleasures, because genuine happiness is feeling that one is "in the game" of life, and not a mere bystander. As we know, some games you win, and some games you lose. The point Plato is making is to be *in* the game, win or lose.

On the other hand, Plato's teacher, Socrates, argued that as long as a person is virtuous it doesn't matter if his life is saddled with misfortune, because virtue is impervious to external factors. As long as you are virtuous you will be happy, and you alone can determine whether you are a virtuous person or not. Moreover, happiness cannot be reduced to a feeling because it concerns your life as a whole, as you have lived it to the present moment. Pleasure, on the other hand, is episodic, something you feel now and then, so it comes and goes. If it's not a feeling, but your life, that determines happiness, then you cannot be happy one moment and unhappy the next, because happiness is the ability to live your life by a set of principles that make you the person you are. Socrates, who was poor all his life, wasn't concerned with achieving conventional success, but

aspired to be self-aware. He believed that happiness is incumbent on my ability to *make sense* of my life while knowing how its components fit together.

But this raises another question: Can you achieve happiness through a form of practice that is impervious to external events, or is happiness at least partially dependent on circumstances you cannot control, which would imply that you are always at the mercy of other people? This is the one question that pervades the Classical literature on happiness. Aristotle — whom Freud studied at university when he was a student of Brentano — integrated Socrates's and Plato's respective views about happiness and concluded that happiness, or *eudaimonia*, depends on both living a virtuous life *and* external circumstances, or luck. In adopting this view, Aristotle agreed that pleasure is a necessary component to happiness, but not sufficient for it. In his view the greedy or narcissistic person who only looks out for himself may obtain enviable pleasures, but he will never be happy because his relationships with others will be precarious.

For Aristotle, *eudaimonia* is best described as a “state of flourishing,” what we experience when we have made our life a success. When our life is not flourishing, we have to bear periods of unhappiness, which may be interminable.

After Aristotle's death the debate about happiness was dominated by the Hellenistic philosophers, comprised of the Stoics, Epicureans, and sceptics. What they shared in

common was that they conceived philosophy as a therapy for healing the human soul. It was during this period that the second Greek term for happiness, *ataraxia*, achieved prominence. Loosely translated as serenity or equanimity, *ataraxia* is not incumbent on either pleasure or environmental factors. Nor is it a state of flourishing.

The principal feature of *ataraxia* — or serenity — is the ability to face life's frustrations and disappointments with an attitude that the sceptics described as unflappable, as a state of "unperturbedness" — in other words, the ability to keep your cool when something goes wrong, which is often. An apt example of this was the serenity with which Socrates faced his own death, which served as the model for all subsequent Greek philosophers. As is commonly known, Socrates accepted his death in the same manner that he lived his life, free from fear or anxiety.

### **Happiness and Chance**

Though Freud was a creature of his culture and his views about happiness were rooted in his experience, he was also a critic of the culture he lived in and viewed society as the principal source of unhappiness. This is the central premise of *Civilization and its Discontents*. In order to bring my exploration of the existential dimension to Freud's views about happiness to a conclusion, I'd like to say something about two pivotal themes in Freud's thinking that are especially relevant. The first concerns his conception of the transference, and the second concerns the nature of guilt.

One of the reasons Freud rejected happiness as a goal of therapy was due to the way he conceived the transference — that all patients harbor fantasies about what their therapist will do to make them happy. In Freud’s opinion, this amounts to eliciting the therapist’s love — the easy way, he would say, of obtaining momentary happiness, without having to work for it. Freud believed that the therapist is obligated to thwart such longings, while remaining sympathetic to their anguish. He believed it is through *disillusionment* that therapy effects its power to transform the neurotic from a hopeless “dreamer” into a person who can take life by the horns and accept its conditions, and deal with it.

Freud’s views about guilt play an equally important role in his views about happiness. Society, Freud reminds us, is not disposed to supporting our endeavors, but in spoiling them. As Freud puts it, (Quoting Freud):

What we call our civilization is largely responsible for our misery. . . a person becomes neurotic because he cannot tolerate the amount of frustration which society imposes on him in the service of its cultural ideals. . . [Therefore, any] reduction in those demands should result in a return to possibilities of happiness.

(1930, p. 86-87)

. . . the price we pay for our advance in civilization is a loss of happiness through the heightening of . . . guilt. (p. 134)

Freud's principal thesis about guilt is that once we internalize the prohibitions society imposes on us, our conscience, when it assumes unforgiving proportions, becomes our worst enemy. Our conscience helps keep us in line, and this serves the motives of *others* very well, but often at the sacrifice of *our own* happiness. This was why Freud was dubious of moral philosophers who promote self-effacing contributions to society, not out of benevolence, but because of the social obligation to do so, or guilt. The line between generosity and guilt is notoriously difficult to draw, and even the most successful therapy cannot inoculate us from the relentless pressure to conform at the expense of our innermost desires. If we can overcome at least some of the guilt that society and our families impose on us, and act on the basis of what we truly wish for and believe, our chances for happiness can only increase.

Plato's arguments about the nature of pleasure, though sometimes contradictory, no doubt influenced Freud's thesis that life is governed by the Pleasure Principle, a striving for pleasure. On closer examination, however, Freud's conception of pleasure — more an ontological category than a simple emotion — includes the experience of pain and the capacity to delay gratification in order to further one's chances for happiness. Unlike the Epicureans, Freud did not equate happiness with pleasure or success, but with our *pursuit* of the goals that matter to us, whether we succeed or fail.

A few years before he wrote *Civilization and its Discontents* Freud revised his earlier views about suffering and replaced the Pleasure Principle with the “Life” or Love Principle — Eros — which he juxtaposed against Thanatos, his controversial thesis of a “death drive.” In this formulation, individuals who are incapable of bearing frustration “deaden” their capacity for pleasure in order to minimize the pain of disappointment. Healthy individuals are able to bear hardships long enough to maximize their chances for success. This means that the capacity for risk and the courage to *take chances* play a crucial role in becoming a more viable person and, so, a happier one.

On this note, it is interesting that the etymological root of the English term for happy derives from the Middle English “hap,” meaning *chance*. This can be taken two ways. The first is consistent with the common sense understanding of happiness as good fortune, or a stroke of luck, in other words, a *chance happening*. We also characterize the unlucky person as one who is “hapless.” But the other meaning of happenstance emphasizes the element of risk in life and the chances we take in our endeavors. For example, Freud saw the neurotic as a person who typically plays it safe in order to minimize the risk of disappointment. Seen in this light, psychotherapy offers the neurotic a second chance at happiness, by coming out of his self-imposed exile and putting his aspirations on the line.



This makes for interesting commentary on those therapists — as far as I can see, the majority of them — who see the therapy setting as a safe harbor, with the emphasis on safety. Perhaps one of the reasons for Freud’s decline in popularity among contemporary therapists is because they feel he was reckless with patients and because so many of his treatments were failures. Implicit in Freud’s technical writings is the view that in order to increase our chances for happiness, we must place ourselves at risk, including our chances at love — the risk the neurotic fears the most. From this angle, happiness doesn’t depend on the quota of our successes, but on the satisfaction derived from knowing that we are willing to *be* at risk in the first place, win or lose. Or as Plato put it, to be “in the game.”

In the final analysis, happiness isn’t solely dependent on the degree to which a life flourishes, or the passive happenstance of lady luck smiling on us, but on the virtue of participating in the game of life, and playing the game the best we can.

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