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Happiness and Culture:

A Reappraisal of Freud's Civilization and Its Discontents

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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

There is an ancient fable about happiness that I would like to share with you before beginning my talk. It goes something like this: Once upon a time there was a young prince who was terribly unhappy, and there was nothing the king could do to bring his son out of his doldrums. The kingís advisors finally told him 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, they finally located a poor farmer who they discovered, much to their relief, was supremely happy. But much to their dismay, they discovered that this poor but contented soul didnít 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 inherently enigmatic and elusive, and that for all our efforts to obtain it, it always seems just beyond our reach, no matter how hard we try or how devoted we are to our quest. For many, the very idea of happiness is viewed as a form of denial or delusion, perhaps a manic episode. After all, mental health professionals 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 this 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 our suffering, they do little in the way of making us happier human beings.

Yet, the vast majority of people who come to psychoanalysts for help 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 analytic patients that some how or other, psychoanalysis will succeed where all their previous efforts to become happy have failed. Perhaps the observation that most of our patients leave their analysis no happier than when they began can be explained by a recent article in the New York Times which reports that even though people today say they value happiness over money, they also admit that they donít want to work for it!

This afternoon I want to explore the question as to whether psychoanalysis has anything to do with such expectations, by reviewing Freudís observations on the nature of happiness and, specifically, the relation between happiness and culture. Freud devoted an entire book to this topic, published in English as Civilization and Its Discontents, in 1930. Although this was Freudís most popular work, it is widely acknowledged that its title is somewhat misleading.

According to Strachey (in Freud, 1930, pp. 59-60), the original title Freud chose for this book was Das Unglück in der Kultur, a rough translation of which would be something along the lines of "Unhappiness in Culture" or, better still, "Society." A more literal translation of the German Unglück into English would be "misfortune," or simply, "bad luck." In German, the concept of happiness is commonly conceived as good fortune, or a stroke of luck. Freud subsequently changed the German Unglück in the title to Unbehagen, a term that Strachey notes is more difficult to translate into English, but suggested that the French "malaise," which means a state of discomfort or uneasiness, and even dis-ease, would have made an apt choice. When the book was translated into

English, however, in 1930, Freud proposed the title, Manís Discomfort with Civilization, to his translator, Joan Riviere. Ignoring Freudís recommendation, Riviere chose the title, Civilization and Its Discontents instead, and for all its faults, this is the title weíve been stuck with ever since.

Naturally, Freudís own 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 question were primarily rooted in the Europe of the late nineteenth century and the Greek Classical literature that every educated European studied at university. Every culture in the world has its own term for happiness, and every culture in history has tried to find ways of obtaining it. Although every culture more or less agrees that happiness is desirable, not all cultures agree as to what happiness entails. My aim this afternoon is to examine Freudís views about happiness and with determining the role contemporary psychoanalysis plays in a typical patientís quest for it.

Everyone in this room is probably familiar with Freudís notorious comment about the relation between psychoanalysis and happiness -- that the aim of analysis is to "transform hysterical suffering into common unhappiness" -- but few analysts, I suspect, could tell you where Freud makes this remark. In fact, Freud made this cautionary statement about the limited role psychoanalysis 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 the book. Since we have all heard variations on what Freud was presumed to have said, it may prove useful to see 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. [Thus] with a mental life
that has been restored to health you will be better armed against that unhappiness." (p. 305)

At the very least, one is liable to agree that Freudís statement about the relation between happiness and psychoanalysis is a surprisingly enigmatic way of ending a book whose purpose was to inform his suspicious Viennese colleagues about the nature of his novel treatment method, psychoanalysis. More surprising still, Freud waited until 1930 -- nine years before his death and thirty-five years after his book on hysteria was published -- to 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 the war when Freud returned to this important subject. Yet, his famous statement about unhappiness (and implicitly, happiness itself) and analysis had been made before The Great War, long before he 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 psychoanalysis could be expected to offer!

Culture and Unhappiness

Before I turn to Freudís views about the relation between happiness and therapy, I want to say something about Freudís intellectual and cultural environment. For the time being, let us suppose that human suffering and unhappiness are virtually the same thing. Later, weíll take a closer look at Freudís distinction between psychological suffering -- epitomized by, but not limited to, neurosis -- and common unhappiness. Freudís views on happiness and unhappiness are derived from many of the great philosophers over the past two thousand years or so, including Heraclitus and Empedocles in the Pre-Socratic era, Plato and Aristotle, the Westís greatest philosophers, the Cynics, Stoics, and Sceptics in the Hellenistic era, 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 these philosophers argue that life challenges us from the moment we are born with pain, frustration, and disappointment, and that it confronts us with tasks that are extremely difficult to perform, and which 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 more difficult, and that this state of affairs persists throughout our existence until finally we are faced with the inevitability of our death.

In fact, so much of our lives is focused on one form of suffering or another that we spend a great deal of our time pursuing relief from the burdens that our trials thrust upon us, from one day to the next, and so on. Freud, the great systematizer, believed we could cluster the devices we typically employ for obtaining relief into three categories: 1) the first are what he terms deflections from our suffering, such as work and intellectual activity, which help keep us preoccupied from the weight of our misery; 2) the second are substitutive satisfactions, characterized by the pleasure or happiness we derive from art and entertainment, which serve to diminish our suffering; and 3) the third category involves intoxicating substances which render us insensitive to the pain that is otherwise inescapable. All three figure to one degree or other in all our lives, and all three are readily available to us, but if we devote ourselves to just one of them we become addicted to it, and the happiness or pleasure it previously afforded diminishes, accordingly. Though Freudís formula is consistent with the basic outline of his drive theory, it is perfectly amenable to virtually any theoretical formulation one might prefer. In fact, it makes perfect sense to me even without a supporting theory of any kind, because we can confirm its efficacy solely from the fruits of our experience, including what we have learned as psychoanalytic patients or practitioners.

Yet, none of the methods Freud enumerates ever succeed to the degree we would like

them to, no matter how clever, resourceful, or enlightened we are in our pursuit to gain mastery over our emotions. 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 sorry nature of our existence ultimately serve?

This is a question that has been examined from the beginning of recorded history, and we have yet to find a satisfactory answer. Of course, we are all familiar with Freudís dismissal of the religious argument which he outlines in Civilization and Its Discontents and its earlier, companion publication, The Future of an Illusion (1927), which more of less suggests (depending on the religion in question) that human suffering is something of a "test" and a means of preparation for a future life that becomes available only if we are willing to endure our suffering on this earth with a benign sense of acceptance. For those who donít have recourse to such a comforting solution, theyíre left to wonder what to do with their suffering and to ponder its effects on their attitude about life and, of course, their death.

Naturally, the question of suffering is uppermost on the minds of anyone who turns to psychoanalytic treatment, since relief from their suffering is the principal motivating factor that brings people to therapy in the first place. About that I will say more in a moment, but first, what are the effects of a life of pain and frustration on the human soul? How does this suffering affect us and what does it inspire us to seek from life to relieve it, not only in spite of our suffering but because of it? For Freud (1930), 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 (p. 76). Suffering and happiness, then, enjoy a complementary relationship. It is because of suffering that we seek a happy state whose purpose is to alleviate it -- and when we obtain happiness, naturally we want to preserve it as a means of insulating ourselves against the inevitability of suffering again. But the quest for happiness is not as simple as it appears, because the nature of happiness is such that we typically experience it, not as simply "relieving" our suffering but, more importantly, as a source of well being in its own right, a point that Freud doesnít appear to emphasize. In fact, we must ask ourselves if it is even possible to attain genuine happiness if our sole purpose in obtaining it is to serve a utilitarian relief from suffering at the expense of everything else.

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 -- and one, I submit, that the majority of analytic patients struggle with throughout the course of their treatment experience.

The Sources of Unhappiness

But what are the principal sources -- or "causes" -- of our suffering? The first is perhaps the most obvious: Our own body, which, according to Freud (1930), "is doomed to decay and dissolution," and even relies on pain and anxiety as warning signals (p. 21). And though we donít give it much thought until disaster strikes, we cannot deny that the

external world is a constant source of suffering which, says Freud, "[periodically] rages against us with overwhelming and merciless forces of destruction" (p. 77), in the form of hurricane, earthquake, flooding, and the like. But ultimately, by far the most pervasive source of suffering is our relationships with other human beings, the consequence of which, according to Freud, is more painful to us than any other suffering we can endure.

Freudís emphasis on the third of these three sources of suffering is worth noting, not only because it is the only source of suffering that psychoanalysis can have the slightest degree of influence on, but because this is the one area about which Freudís critics claim he had the least to say. Despite his emphasis on biology -- and his, arguably, "over-emphasis" on the pervasive presence of sexuality in our symptoms -- at bottom, Freud argued that our interpersonal relationships constitute the most painful experiences of which we are humanly capable 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 vindictiveness is, as every one of us knows, legion. Hence, some people opt to avoid relationships altogether -- or at any rate, the most intimate forms of relation -- in their abandon to protect themselves from being rejected, frustrated, and disappointed by others. Of course, this strategy is never entirely successful, because there is also no greater source of happiness than in our associations with other people, whether they be lovers, spouses, friends, children, comrades-in-arm, colleagues, and the like. Without them we feel unremittingly unhappy, and due to the weight of isolation, alienation, and loneliness, we are eventually obliged to seek an alternative means of relief from our self-imposed isolation.

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 unparalleled? 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 us: the so-called "oceanic" feeling that a friend of Freudís described as the kernel of the religious experience. Consistent with certain forms of love, this feeling was described to him as something 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 admitted to never having experienced such a feeling himself and even questioned whether it could be described as a "feeling" at all. It seemed more likely to him that the oceanic feeling is the consequence of an idea that one finds pleasing and which, in turn, results in the feeling it elicits secondarily. In fact, Freud found the notion that one could ever feel "at one" with society so alien to his experience that he wrote Civilization and Its Discontents in order to offer an alternative explanation for the source of this alleged sensation. He concluded that the only experience any of us ever has of this feeling is during the earliest stages of infancy, when the child is welcomed into the bosom of its family. As the child develops, however, and discovers that the paradise it enjoys with its mother is doomed, it seeks alternative sources for this feeling of "oneness" that had

previously required virtually no effort on its part, whatsoever.

Based on this formulation, Freud appears to reserve the word happiness for any experience which serves to return us to that original, momentary bliss that our relationships with others often promise, but ultimately are unable to approximate. Thus happiness is fleeting because we experience it in contrast to the drudgery and frustration that our daily existence entails. Though we are loathe to admit this, we cannot be happy all of the time. If we were hypothetically capable of preserving the happiness that we occasionally enjoy, our life would soon become boring and the happiness we had previously cherished would evaporate into that familiar state of anxiety that characterizes our existence. Then, the quest for happiness would begin all over again, only to be doomed to erosion the moment we succeed in approximating it again, and so on and so forth. This observation can best be summarized with the adage: no honeymoon can last forever -- a phenomenon to which all analytic patients must become reconciled once the honeymoon they enjoy with their analyst begins to disappoint.

Neurotic Misery and Common Unhappiness

This somewhat gloomy portrayal of happiness is not the whole story, however. Though Freud fancied himself a realist and felt that the analystís role is to impress upon patients realities that they are want to avoid, he also believed this bitter medicine holds out hope for a far richer existence than the neurotic had been capable of before analysis.

I would now like to revisit Freudís earlier, enigmatic thesis, that the goal of analysis is to prepare us for common unhappiness. It seems to me this comment -- if it is to make any sense at all -- hinges on Freudís distinction between hysterical (or for all intents and purposes, neurotic) misery and common unhappiness. The distinction between these two forms of suffering are more or less predicated on two other distinctions that are in turn critical to psychoanalysis: the first concerns the distinction between the etiology of the respective sources of human suffering and the second concerns a distinction between the respective experiences of each, which is to say, between pathological suffering and unhappiness. Unfortunately, Freudís impatience with philosophical reflection prevented him from examining his enigmatic statement more thoroughly. But having made this statement, he raised a philosophical question about the nature of human misery and what, if anything, psychoanalysis can do about it.

Throughout Freudís analytic career, he confronted his patients with a choice: either do something about the sorry condition they were in, or accept it. The ability to choose one or the other and to resign oneself to the choice one has made is, in Freudís estimation, the hallmark of mental health -- even when the outcome leads to an increase in suffering! We saw earlier that Freud assigned the possible causes of unhappiness to three principal sources: 1) physical disability or infirmity; 2) natural calamities; and 3) our relationships with other human beings. Moreover, of these three sources of unhappiness, our relationships with others is the source of the greatest unhappiness we can experience. But what do these three sources of unhappiness have to do with the motives that typically bring people into therapy? Of the three, only the third -- oneís relationship with others --

serves as an ostensible motive, but problems with other people isńt necessarily evidence of psychopathology. Besides, these three sources of unhappiness ostensibly have little to do with the kind of suffering that patients initially complain about. In fact, when talking about unhappiness, Freud says nothing about the most common presenting symptoms with which we are familiar, such as alienation, depression, or anxiety, in other words, unbearable feelings. Why is anxiety, for example, or alienation, omitted from the causes of unhappiness instead of merely symptomatic of it?

The answer to this question is no easy matter to explain if, indeed, neurotic or pathological misery must be distinguished from "common unhappiness." In Freudís estimation, the neurotic has difficulty in accepting the brutal choice all analytic patients, sooner or later, must face in the course of their analysis. Freud made his most eloquent portrayal of the neuroticís plight in an early, relatively minor paper, "Future Prospects on Psycho-Analytic Therapy," published in 1910. Quoting Freud (1910):

> 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 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 found that the typical analytic patient rebels against this choice and devotes his efforts to devising a "third" but inherently magical choice instead: to pine away his life in fantasy or bitterness, waiting for the day when fate -- in the form of good fortune -- will reward him for his obstinate refusal to face up to the realities of life. This so-called third choice, as all of us know, is the ingeniously fashioned neurotic symptom (sometimes called a compromise formation), to which the neurotic clings no matter how unreasonable or illogical it seems. Thus the neurotic solution provides a respite from unhappiness in the form of anticipation of what we long for, but at a price that is more costly than it warrants: the consequent conflict that we end up imposing on ourselves.

This formula for the etiology of neurotic conflict also explains why Freud made a distinction between the respective sources of neurotic misery and common unhappiness. Freud perceived the causes of unhappiness to originate from outside the individual and, therefore, due to circumstances that are impossible to control. This is why he concluded that fate plays a decisive role in the etiology of happiness and unhappiness alike. On the other hand, neurotic and other psychological conflicts do not, strictly speaking, originate from outside but, rather, from "within." In fact, our conflicts are with ourselves, though the inspiration for these conflicts derive from those very relationships with others that we cannot, no matter how much we want to, control. Consequently, one could argue that unhappiness may cause one to become neurotic when an individual is unable to either accept his unhappiness or, as Freud proposes, do something about it.

Thus the analytic task, based on Freudís 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 -- the former being the result of circumstances beyond our control, whereas the latter is a creature of our own device -- is the qualitative experience of each different or identical? Typically, the neurotic is unable to tell the difference. But even if neurotics are incapable of making this distinction, Freud expects that the psychoanalyst is able to, or should be, by extrapolating the respective sources of the patientís misery. Sometime after the fact, when a patient, for example, has 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 psychopathology.

Alternative Conceptions of Happiness

Yet, a nagging question persists in Freudís carefully wrought distinction between neurotic misery and unhappiness. Why is the newfound serenity that patients sometimes achieve as a consequence of their analysis not a feature of Freudís conception of happiness? In fact, isnít serenity -- which is to say, being at peace with oneself -- a valid characterization of happiness? Moreover, isnít this characterization of happiness one that is not at the mercy of fate and misfortune, but one we can accrue for ourselves, with concerted effort and perseverance? As we saw earlier, 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 oneís way. Every culture has its own term for happiness -- in Spanish, for example, it is felicidad, which, in English, is "felicity," meaning joy -- 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 cultureís conception of happiness. Periods of prolonged peace or war, for example, can alter a cultureís notion of happiness, but not necessarily in ways we can predict. Although Freud didnít explicitly say so, his 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 are not limited to or necessarily dependent on good fortune, and compare them with how Freud conceived the outcome of therapy. In other words, is the serenity that Freud believed is possible to obtain as a consequence of analysis consistent with other conceptions of happiness, either in present-day cultures or at earlier epochs in history?

In fact, there are two Greek terms that are usually translated into English as happiness. The most common one is eudaimonia, the nature of which is complicated because different authors offer various conceptions of it. Some philosophers are 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 are more concerned with the source of it, whether, for example, it depends entirely on external circumstances beyond our control, or if itís something we can strive for and achieve and is a consequence of our efforts. Most people identify happiness with feeling happy and, thus, feeling pleased, so that happiness is identified with feeling pleasure. This conception of happiness, however, is of marginal significance in the Greek literature on eudaimonia. In fact, one of the most protracted arguments among the Greeks concerns the relationship between pleasure and eudaimonia. There are numerous arguments, for example, throughout Platoís dialogues where the nature of pleasure is discussed, including the relationship between pleasure and suffering, and pleasure and happiness. Plato also anticipated a fundamental principle in Freudís conception of neurosis when he argued that in order to obtain pleasure you must be able to endure hardship. Moreover, Plato argues that happiness cannot be reduced to the simple experience of pleasure, because happiness is rooted in the feeling that one is "in the game," so to speak, of life, and not merely a bystander.

On the other hand, Platoís teacher, Socrates, argued that despite the importance that pleasure occupies in our lives, genuine happiness is not incumbent on good fortune or the feeling of pleasure, but follows from living a virtuous life, including a capacity for honesty and openheartedness. Socrates argued that as long as a person is virtuous it doesnít matter if his life is saddled with hardship and difficulty, because virtue is impervious to external circumstances, so that as long as you are virtuous you will be happy. Thus for Socrates, happiness cannot be reduced to a feeling because it is your life as a whole that is happy (or not), whereas pleasure is episodic, something you feel now and 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 basically make you the person you are. Moreover, happiness isnít the consequence of achieving the conventional standard of success, but the result of becoming self-aware. In other words, Socrates views happiness as the capacity to make sense of your life, by determining how its components come together.

But this raises a critical question: Can you obtain happiness through a form of ethical practice that is impervious to external events, or is happiness at least partially dependent on external circumstances, in which case we are always at the mercy of others for our happiness? This is the principal argument that runs throughout the Classical literature on happiness. This dilemma is also reflected in Freudís views about the outcome of psychoanalysis, which we will turn to shortly. Aristotle -- whom Freud studied when a student of Brentano -- integrated Socratesís and Platoís respective views about happiness and concluded that happiness (or eudaimonia) depends on both living a virtuous life and external circumstances, or fate. 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 individual who only looks out for himself may obtain enviable pleasures, but he will not be happy because his relationships with others will be self-serving and this will eventually come back to haunt him, thus injuring his narcissism.

Because Aristotle integrated the least controversial features of Platoís and Socratesís respective notions of happiness -- that it is both the consequence of character and fate,

effort as well as good luck -- his views are the least radical and the most common sensical of the Greek philosophers, and hence the most popular and historically influential. Aristotle possessed an uncanny ability to make complex ideas clear and appealing, and he was also the most lucid commentator on the nature of eudaimonia, which means "to flourish," or to make your life a success. Though this sounds suspiciously conventional, Aristotle added that pursuing success by any means will inevitably lead to guilt and, hence, suffering, so to flourish in the sense he intends it is more complicated than it sounds. Even if Aristotleís views about happiness arenít the most radical in Greek philosophy, they have proved to be the most practical and made the biggest impression on Freudís views about suffering.

After Aristotleís death Greek philosophy entered the Hellenistic Era, which lasted about three hundred years. The main philosophers in this period were the Stoics, Epicureans, and the Sceptics. The Hellenistic philosophers are important because they were even more interested in the nature of happiness than Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle had been, and conceived philosophy as a form of "therapy" for healing the human soul. It was also during this period that the second term for happiness I alluded to earlier -- in addition to eudaimonia -- came into prominence, ataraxia. Loosely translated as serenity or equanimity, ataraxia minimizes both the role of pleasure and environmental factors. The Hellenistic philosophers who promoted ataraxia were the Sceptics and the Stoics, who developed a method for achieving ataraxia through non-intellectual means. Even though the Sceptics werenít an important influence on Freudís conception of happiness, their method for achieving ataraxia, the capacity to suspend judgement, had an important impact on the two most important technical principles in classical psychoanalysis, free association and neutrality. Whereas the Sceptics equated the ability to rid ourselves of neurotic conflicts with happiness, Freud saw it as simply a means to reducing neurotic suffering, which he concluded doesnít necessarily make us happier. So what form of happiness does ataraxia offer?

The principal feature of ataraxia -- or better, equanimity -- is the ability to face lifeís frustrations and setbacks with what the Sceptics described as "unperturbedness" -- in other words, not becoming anxious or upset when something goes wrong. An apt example of this was the serenity with which Socrates faced his own death, which served as the example on which Stoic and Sceptic philosophers modeled themselves. The Hellenistic philosophers, Anaxarchus and Seneca, similarly met their untimely deaths with equanimity when, like Socrates before them, they were executed for no good reason. In each case, all these philosophers accepted their deaths in exactly the same manner in which they lived their lives, free from fear or bitterness irrespective of how life treated them. Freudís subsequent adoption of free association and neutrality, as the ideal attitudes with which to carry out the work of analysis, obviously owes something to the Sceptics. But Freud doubted it is unlikely that anyone is capable of obtaining such serenity as a permanent feature of their character.

Happiness as Chance

Two thousand years hence, philosophers are still debating whether it is possible to become happy by any means other than chance. In Freudís case, he believed that fate plays the larger role, but he also advocated a state of equanimity -- free association for the patient, neutrality for the analyst -- with which to guide us through the troubled waters of analysis. I will now return to Freudís views on the matter and examine how his conception of happiness compares with the arguments we explored from antiquity.

Though Freud was a creature of his culture and his views about happiness were rooted in his experience, he was also a severe critic of culture and viewed society as the source of our unhappiness. In fact, this is the central premise of Civilization and its Discontents. Before bringing my exploration of Freudís views about happiness to a conclusion, however, I want to say something about two pivotal themes in Freudís conception of psychoanalysis that are particularly illuminating to those of us who are clinicians. The first concerns his conception of the transference and the second concerns his observations about the nature of guilt.

One of the reasons Freud rejected happiness as a goal of analysis was the way he conceived the transference -- that all patients harbor fantasies about what the analyst will do to make them happy. In Freudís opinion, this amounts to eliciting the analystís love -- the easy way, he would say, of obtaining momentary happiness, without having to work for it! Thus, following from Freudís views about the role of abstinence in the analytic relationship, the analyst is obligated to thwart such longings, instead of helping them come true. In other words, it is through disillusionment that analysis effects its power to transform the neurotic from a hopeless "dreamer" into an individual who is willing to take life by the horns and accept its conditions.

Similarly, Freudís views about guilt play an equally important role in our unhappiness. Society, Freud reminds us, is not intent on supporting our endeavors, but in spoiling them. As Freud puts it,

What we call our civilization is largely responsible for our misery. . .
[Moreover], 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)

[In other words], the price we pay for our advance in civilization is a loss of
happiness through the heightening of . . . guilt. (p. 134)

And in a footnote Freud, citing Shakespeare, adds

"Thus conscience does make cowards of us all. . ." (p. 134)

Freudís principal thesis about guilt is that once we internalize the guilt society imposes on us, our conscience becomes our worst enemy. Of course, our conscience helps to keep us in line, and this serves the motives of others very well, but often at the sacrifice of our own happiness. As one would imagine, Freud was dubious of moral philosophers who promote self-effacing contributions to society, not out of benevolence, but because of the (unconscious) social pressure to do so. The line between generosity and guilt is notoriously difficult to draw, and even the most successful analysis cannot inoculate us from the relentless pressures to conform. If we can overcome at least some of the guilt that society imposes on us, our chances for happiness can only increase. Freud wasnít insensitive to our quest for happiness, nor did he believe that happiness is impossible; he simply observed that it is elusive and that our efforts to procure it are only partially successful.

As we have seen, the Greeks placed considerable importance on the experience of happiness as well as the means of obtaining it. Their arguments about the nature of pleasure, though complicated, undoubtedly influenced Freudís thesis that life is governed by a striving for pleasure. On closer examination, however, Freudís 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 oneís prospects for happiness. Unlike the Epicureans, Freud did not equate pleasure with happiness.

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 still 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, whereas healthy individuals are able to bear hardships in order to maximize their chances for happiness. Thus the capacity for risk and the courage to take chances play a pivotal role in becoming a more viable person and, hence, 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 in 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 one who typically plays it safe in order to minimize the risk of disappointment. Seen in this light, psychoanalysis offers the neurotic a second chance at happiness, by coming out of his self-imposed exile and placing his future prospects at risk.

This makes for interesting commentary on those analysts -- as far as I can see, the majority of them -- who see the psychoanalytic setting as a safe harbor, with the emphasis on "safety." Perhaps one of the reasons for Freudís decline in popularity among contemporary analysts is because they feel he was reckless with patients and because so

many of his analyses were considered failures. Implicit in Freudís 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 that neurotics fear the most. From this angle, happiness doesnít depend on the quota of our successes, but 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 simply be "in the game."

Conclusion

In conclusion, there are three conceptions of happiness we have looked at today: 1) the first equates it with a feeling of pleasure or well-being that is episodic and depends on fate; 2) the second is the satisfaction of having done something with oneís life and is the consequence of both personal effort and good fortune; 3) and finally, the third is a state of equanimity that depends entirely on our efforts and is consequently impervious to misfortune. These three forms of happiness are not, however, mutually exclusive; we can accept all three as an intrinsic part of our existence and pursue the ones that are responsive to our efforts, while developing a means within ourselves to react with serenity when fate deals us one of its inevitable blows. Moreover, all three have a place in the psychoanalytic situation and are just as applicable to the analyst as they are to the patient.

In the final analysis, happiness isnít 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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