

The Promise of Happiness Put to the Test by Psychoanalysis: Freud Confronts Modernity

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“Freud is outdated.” This is a phrase I have heard from colleagues or psychology students. The problem is not to criticize Freud, but it is discouraging to hear such critiques from people who have not read him, or have misread him. So what does “Freud is outdated” actually mean? I believe it means: the Freudian method doesn’t work, it does not bring happiness.

Written almost a century ago, *Civilization and Its Discontents*² reflected on the sources of human unhappiness. Freud’s analysis is bleak: not only does living within culture fail to bring happiness, but perhaps civilization itself contains the seeds of misery. Contemporary methods of positive psychology, according to their proponents, could remedy this. Is what Freud said in 1930 about the causes of human unhappiness outdated, or does he still say something profoundly relevant that we refuse to hear?

Being unhappy on a global scale seems likely. Conflicts, wars, and genocides have never ceased, and it would be reckless to assert with certainty that humanity is moving toward peace. One also needs access to food, water, and shelter. But this list—which ensures survival and protects against need—is not a guarantee of happiness. And the question of need is not in the field of psychoanalysis, since its focus is desire. Psychically, need and desire are very different: needs have objects to satisfy them, while desire has none (satisfying a need, like eating, does not necessarily make desire disappear).

We are threatened by suffering on three fronts, writes Freud: by our own bodies, by the external world, and by our relationships with others. Of these, the last occupies a special place, as we seem unwilling to admit it may be as immutable a source of suffering as the others. Our institutions are thought to protect us from misfortune, whereas according to Freud, they may conceal an “invincible law of nature,” a suffering rooted in our own psychic constitution.

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² Freud, S. (1930). *Civilization and Its Discontents*. Translated by James Strachey. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1961.

Neither communism nor capitalism has curtailed human power struggles and aggression. Communism, in abolishing private property, approached what it sought to overcome, while capitalism has “succeeded” only by excluding from analysis the social inequalities it produces and the disastrous effects of industrialization on the planet. This failure is rooted in the fact that aggression among humans was not created by private property: it existed in primitive times, long before private property. Conquistadors imagining “happy savages” quickly changed their view, and Freud never fully embraced the “noble savage” myth, seeing in a society without social organization the risk that the strongest individual would impose his sexual and instinctual interests on others.

The establishment of law poses a crucial problem. It relies on sacrificing personal drives and limiting individual gratification, which generates discontent. Freud notes the difficulty of persuading humans to trade freedom for drive repression, as they will always defend individual pleasure against collective will. Freud thus arrives at a seemingly paradoxical conclusion: what we call culture is largely responsible for our misery. He adheres to his second dualism of drives, considering aggression a primitive, autonomous human disposition and the greatest obstacle to civilization.

In *Happycracy*³, E. Illouz and E. Cabanas describe the emergence of positive psychology, now dominant. In the U.S. during the 1960s/70s, the liberal current influenced by Bentham posited that politics should enhance individual happiness, marking a subtle paradigm shift: until then, politics treated happiness as a collective matter. Intersecting with this current and the mythology of the self-made man, positive psychology emerged, proposing happiness as the new horizon of the self. By the late 1990s, in a break with psychoanalysis, Martin Seligman—later president of the American Psychological Association—shifted focus: psychology had erred by dwelling on unhappiness; it should concentrate on the positive to develop human capacities for happiness.

Early funders included the U.S. military, investing \$145 million in the *Comprehensive Soldier Fitness* program to boost troop morale, mitigate PTSD, and even return soldiers to combat. Coca-Cola later invested to increase employee well-being and productivity. Today, in some companies, positive psychology is used in HR to create a “good workplace atmosphere” or during termination interviews, aiming to leave employees with the impression of future opportunities.

By emphasizing “individual responsibility,” Illouz concludes that positive psychology transforms unhappiness into personal failure while framing happiness and success as the results of internal dispositions.

Positive psychology raises both political and clinical concerns. Politically, by framing happiness as an individual matter, it fosters social demobilization; clinically, by turning suffering into an “enemy of the sound psyche,” it risks making subjects impermeable to their own suffering and that of others—or even generating shame about it.

Returning to *Civilization and Its Discontents*, we see that abolishing private property did not prevent wealth accumulation, and capitalism has done little to promote equality. Human

³ Cabanas, E. Illouz, E. *Manufacturing Happy Citizens: How the Science and Industry of Happiness Control Our Lives* —Politiy Press (2019).

aggression is masked in desire: even in a society with sufficient resources for all, distribution is unequal. As Sacha Guitry quipped about restaurants: “*No sooner am I served than I look at what's on my neighbor's plate.*”

Positive psychology, when tied to experimental research, produces standardized care techniques applicable to any pathology, regardless of the individual. This presents a clinical paradox: “clinical” means being at the patient’s bedside, referring to the singular caregiver-patient relationship when no treatment exists. Standardizing methods requires first standardizing suffering, implicitly sidelining what is unique in each patient’s history. Listening in a standardized way almost reverses the role of speech: “it helps to talk about it” ceases to mean “*it helps to talk about what I don't understand about myself and my suffering to a specialist,*” and instead becomes: “*it helps to not tell the specialist what is wrong.*” In other words, if the specialist knows “*what I have*” (diagnosis), then perhaps the proven therapeutic technique “*they have*” can be applied.

Yet “discovering your true self” or “enhancing personal potential” by ignoring others’ opinions resembles a regression to the pleasure principle. In a sense, positive psychology proposes 1) changing one’s perspective on events, and 2) indulging the pleasure principle (as Freud described in response to R. Rolland⁴).

While withdrawing from social ties may bring temporary relief, it does not guarantee happiness. Certainly, others limit pleasure, but this disturbance may express the life drive, and avoiding all discomfort may lean toward the death drive.

Culture, Freud argues, conceals this: it makes humans believe they are inherently good and only defensive when attacked, whereas they carry constitutive aggression. Happiness is unattainable and not part of the universe’s order. Freud notes, however, a few compensations can make life bearable and pleasurable: the body and its pleasures—sexuality, drugs—and others, through sublimation. Art, illusory relative to reality, is psychically effective, even if its satisfaction, like solving a problem, remains partial—a “light narcotic.” Other wisdom traditions advocate moderation, reducing discomfort by relativizing unsatisfied drives.

But the idea of constant happiness is simply false: there is no ascent without descent, and an ascent inverted is already a descent. Psychoanalysis promises nothing in this regard, making it a poor sophist: it does not tell others what they want to hear, and this is why the analyst speaks little—so that the subject hears what they are asking.

So, is Freud outdated? His technique does not work, and listening to the demand for happiness does not produce happiness. Does this mean failure? The death drive functions as a reality we cannot fully escape. Ignoring reality denies the complexity of the human psyche; we cannot be content with “*if it's complicated, it doesn't exist*” or “*if it's complicated, you're making it complicated.*”

In relationships and culture, the death drive infiltrates collective frustrations, entangled in civilization itself. In positive psychology, it hides within individualism, limiting social relations and reactivating the pleasure principle. Much of psychoanalytic work names the world, not necessarily changing it. We may deny or acknowledge the death drive.

⁴ *Civilization and Its Discontents* (already mentioned). Romain Rolland’s letter to Sigmund Freud dated from 5 December 1927 introduces the notion of the ‘oceanic feeling’. Published in *Un beau visage à tous sens. Choix de lettres de Romain Rolland*, Paris, Albin-Michel, 1967, p.264-266.

"If you want peace, prepare for war⁵," Freud concluded in *The Future of an Illusion*. One might paraphrase: *"If you want happiness (or to limit unhappiness), prepare for the death drive."*

Freud is outdated. But he always has been.

⁵ Freud, S. (1961). *The Future of an Illusion* (J. Strachey, Trans.). New York: W. W. Norton & Company. (Original work published 1927)