

## Civilisation and its discontents (1930): Reflections on happiness

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Early in 1993, I visited Vienna and went to Freud's house at 19 Bergasse and it was there that I bought my first Freud volume, *Civilisation and its discontents*, published in 1930. It's a small book in size and this probably influenced my decision to buy it, it was cheap and small enough to squeeze into my already full pack. After reading it, I soon came to see it as a giant of a book, full of remarkable insights into human culture and its struggles with happiness and I have always recommended it to any one who is interested in learning something about psychoanalysis. The individual pursuit of so-called happiness has been an enormous pre-occupation of modern times and for many, the lack of it is their source of suffering. So to mark the occasion of Freud's birthday today I have chosen to make some remarks on happiness as Freud saw it.

Freud understood that happiness was a problem for the human subject. The pleasure principle runs against our need to live within culture and all its regulations. For Freud, happiness, in the strictest sense of the word, was only experienced in short-lived brief moments of satisfaction when needs were satisfied. It was therefore only ever episodic. In fact Freud knew that prolonged satisfaction of the pleasure principle only produce mild contentment and therefore the human subject only ever experienced happiness from the emergence of a contrast. Happiness was not to be regarded as an overall state, mood or situation. Once we become used to it, it seems to disappear.

According to Freud, happiness is the exception to the rule, the rule being that unhappiness and suffering comes at us, uncontrollably, from several sources, from the body, and the external world. While this may seem pessimistic to many, Freud was only being rigorous about his observations of his object of study, that is, human suffering. The neurotic subject is the result of this struggle between self-preservation in the avoidance of un-pleasure and demands of the libido. Romantic love, isolation from others and addiction are offered by Freud as partial solutions, but we all know the many pitfalls that each of these has. But in chapter two of *Civilisation and its discontents*, Freud says something else:

“there is indeed another and better path: that of becoming a member of the human community and with the help of a technique guided by science, going over to the attack against nature and subjecting her to the human will.”

So the project of becoming happy, strictly speaking, is an impossible one, but rather than advocating that the endeavour be abandoned, Freud understood the importance, indeed the inevitable need of the human subject to keep insisting in the struggle and to maintain our striving towards happiness. There is no one pathway to happiness, each must find their own way and decide whether the aim is gaining pleasure or avoiding un-pleasure. Happiness as far as it can be recognised as possible is therefore “a problem of the economics of the individual libido”. Once again to quote Freud:

“ There is no golden rule that applies to everyone: every man must find out for himself in what particular fashion he can be saved. It is a question of how much real satisfaction he can expect to get from the external world, how far he is led to make himself independent of it and finally how much

strength he feels he has for altering the world to suit his wishes.”

I think Freud is here presenting us with the opposing forces of human drive and human desire, that the problem of the individual libido is a problem between the clash of self-preservation, or the avoidance of unhappiness versus desire, or using Freud's language, the human will, used in the service of becoming a productive member of the community or as Lacan would emphasise, the importance of social bonds and discourse with others.

Social bonds or the entry into discourse using language allows for the possibility of the human will or for human desire to divert our attention away from the effects of going beyond the pleasure principle, that is to drown in a sea of jouissance as Lacan called it. If discourse and jouissance begin from the same point, they represent different pathways and the result of following the path of discourse allows for the possibility of brief moments of happiness. These brief moments might be regarded as what Lacan called surplus jouissance, tiny bits of confined and restricted happiness along the path of neurosis. Happiness might therefore be considered as a by-product and not a realistic aim in and of itself, as Freud has already explained. We are restricted to small doses of happiness and destined to wait, in anticipation, for the next brief instalment.

#### **References**

Freud, S. (1961 [1930]). *Civilisation and its discontents*, SE 21, 57-145.