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Civilization And Its Discontents



Synopsis

Freud's seminal volume of twentieth-century cultural thought grounded in psychoanalytic theory, now with a new introduction by Christopher Hitchens. Written in the decade before Freud's death, *Civilization and Its Discontents* may be his most famous and most brilliant work. It has been praised, dissected, lambasted, interpreted, and reinterpreted. Originally published in 1930, it seeks to answer several questions fundamental to human society and its organization: What influences led to the creation of civilization? Why and how did it come to be? What determines civilization's trajectory? Freud's theories on the effect of the knowledge of death on human existence and the birth of art are central to his work. Of the various English translations of Freud's major works to appear in his lifetime, only Norton's Standard Edition, under the general editorship of James Strachey, was authorized by Freud himself. This new edition includes both an introduction by the renowned cultural critic and writer Christopher Hitchens as well as Peter Gay's classic biographical note on Freud.

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Customer Reviews

Sigmund Freud, whatever the variations in his posthumous reputation, remains the most compelling, daring, and persuasive analyst of the human condition we have. His psychoanalytic theories of sexuality, sublimation, repression, etc., offer original insights that profoundly influenced the course of Western consciousness in the 20th century. In addition to his gifts as a thinker, Freud was a master stylist, a man whose luminous prose and skillful argumentation make reading him a genuine

pleasure. "Civilization and Its Discontents," one of Freud's last works, remains one of his most vital and important. Don't be fooled by its brevity; this is a deeply complex and wide-ranging examination of Western civilization and its tensions. Freud speculates about the origins of our modern societies, the difficulties of assimilating ourselves to them given our own individual psyches, and ends the book with a rather pessimistic look forward. Clearly, Freud felt that civilization's "discontents" were an unresolvable fact of life. What makes "Civilization and Its Discontents" so fascinating is Freud's application of psychoanalysis to Western society as a whole. He examines how the factors at play in our own psyches--family conflicts, sexual desire, guilt, the "death instinct," and the eternal battle between our own self-interest and the interests of the human species at large--cause the problems that human beings encounter on a daily basis. As always with Freud, his ideas are put forward not as a final statement, but as a tentative first step. This is one of Freud's indispensable texts, and its accessible and absorbing style make it an ideal introduction for those who are seeking to discover this colossal mind for the first time. A must read.

I read this book at age 18 after getting interested in psychiatry by an author named Karl Menninger. Freud's essay, Civilization and Its Discontents, has had the greatest impact on my life out of any book or experience. Within this short book he had taken my whole view of the world, turned it upside-down, and added an exclamation point. To understand this book doesn't require great intellectual power but rather mental capacity i.e, a capacity to receive a massive dose of pessimism! I would add almost as a warning that Freud's implied philosophy is almost conducive to depression in a maladjusted mind! If you want hope or faith, this is not for you. Regardless, everybody should read this book.

'Civilization and its Discontents' is Freud's miniature opus. It is a superficial masterpiece that stretches further than any of his other works; he is reaching for an explanation for human nature in terms of the id-ego-superego structure of the individual as he exists in civilization. For Freud, human beings are characterized by Eros (Sex Drive) and Thanatos (Death Drive), which remain in opposition to one another. This small book is filled with as many interesting ideas as any work of modern philosophy. Freud adopts (perhaps a bit hastily), a Nietzschean position with regard to the role of religion and institutions of social morality which curb and shape primordial human drives. As a result, human beings, and civilizations as a whole remain unsatisfied and suffer from neuroses. He concludes with a discussion of human aggression, which manifests itself in the form of communalized human aggression. He wonders as to whether or not human beings will be able to

overcome this drive. It seems to me that this question remains the most important for human beings in the 21st century. Will we be able to overcome our Thanatos and survive the destructive powers that we have created? I suspect that Freud will be better remembered as a thinker and philosopher than as an analyst or doctor precisely because he asks the questions that remain relevant for civilization today, and are likely to remain imperative in the future.

Many people today believe that Sigmund Freud was obsessed with sex. However, most of these assumptions are based upon what another person said of Freud and almost never upon a careful reading of Freud's work. These people do not see the fact that Freud writes on more than sexuality, he also analyzes and researches the study of mankind. Sigmund Freud attacks the question why we do things the way we do head on and answers to the best of his reason. Therefore, Sigmund Freud was truly a man of his time and his debate on mankind was a very innovative method to answer mankind's most serious issues. Man is an aggressive being and civilization is the means which humanity withholds its primal urges in check. At least Freud believes so and shows support for this thesis by referring to mankind's constant need to restrain its inherent passions despite all of the controls placed by society. I believe that Freud was definitely on to something with this point. He is right when he states that man is essentially an anti-social, anti-cultural being. One could look down through the pages of history and see war after war, violent act after violent primarily as a result of the inherent greed for power and a passionate thirst for more than one's own. This is one of the many reasons why communism is impossible, man is a selfish being and always desires more than he possesses. He will do what is necessary to increase his holding at the expense of his fellows. I believe that Nietzsche and Freud are in agreement at this point. However, Nietzsche believes that the masses attempt to quell this passion and label that as noble. I believe that Freud does not think it is possible to restrain this aggressiveness and mankind is only able to cover it up in a semblance of control which we label civilization. Though I see merit in both men's argument, my reaction is that there is another solution. I believe in Christian perspective that "by beholding we become changed" and with a personal relationship with Christ one is capable of achieving victory over that aggression. Freud argues that the need for self-preservation is often disrupted by a "social anxiety". This anxiety is a state in which individuals are controlled by the opinions of others towards them. Freud contends that the majority of society is ruled by this anxiety. His solution to this is a "higher stage" attainable by rising above the need to care about how others perceive one's conduct. This implies that behavior controlled by social conventions is more primitive than behavior controlled by the individual. According to Freud, morality is not an issue of socially determined shame, but a

matter of internalized primal guilt. This guilt is the basis for beliefs such as an original sin and is the main catalyst in mankind's aggression. I doubt that this is the most flattering perspective to look upon our own nature, but Freud's argument does contain a lot of merit. We read earlier in *Walden* that "the mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation" and I believe Freud saw this desperation as a direct result of the affects of social anxiety. We see this today in the pop culture where in order to fit in an individual must conform to the trends in fashion. We see it in the work environment where the worker flatters his boss. We see it in the political world where politicians say and do what is necessary to keep public opinions high. We are so drawn into the belief that the opinions of others matters that we spend the majority of our time and money on things we don't need to impress people we don't care about. After reading *Civilization and Its Discontents* I am not under the impression that Freud is correct about everything. However, I am able to respect his writing as an important critical look at society which still has merit even today. Perhaps our world would be a better place if all of its inhabitants stop to think of why they do the things they do and what are the effects of their actions. Perhaps mankind would improve if we learned how to control our inherent aggression and to not worry about other people's opinions. Perhaps this is merely wishful thinking on my part.

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