



Reflections on War and Death

Sigmund Freud

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Anyone, as Freud tells us in *Reflections on War and Death*, forced to react against his own impulses may be described as a hypocrite, whether he is conscious of it or not. One might even venture to assert—it is still Freud's argument—that our contemporary civilisation favours this sort of hypocrisy and that there are more civilised hypocrites than truly cultured persons, and it is even a question whether a certain amount of hypocrisy is not indispensable to maintain civilisation. When this travesty of civilisation, this infallible state that has regimented and dragooned its citizens into obedience, goes to war, Freud is pained but not surprised that it makes free use of every injustice, of every act of violence that would dishonour the individual, that it employs not only permissible cunning but conscious lies and intentional deception against the enemy, that it absolves itself from guarantees and treaties by which it was bound to other states and makes unabashed confession of its greed and aspiration to power. For conscience, the idea of right and wrong, in the Freudian sense, is not the inexorable judge that teachers of ethics say it is: it has its origin in nothing but "social fear," and whereas in times of peace the state forbids the individual to do wrong, not because it wishes to do away with wrongdoing but because it wishes to monopolise it, like salt or tobacco, it suspends its reproach in times of war. The suppression of evil desires also ceases, and men, finding the moral ties loosened between large human units, commit acts of cruelty, treachery, deception and brutality the very possibility of which would have been considered incompatible with their degree of culture.

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Sarah Shahid says

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Phoenix says

"We remember the old saying:

Si vis pacem, para bellum. - If you wish peace, prepare for war.

The times call for a paraphrase:

Si vis vitam, para mortem. - If you wish life, prepare for death."

War and death, tied, entangled to their very essence until...

"Only the dead have seen the end of war."

Sarah Khaled says

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Shalan al shammary says

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Barry Belmont says

A two part review for a two part book.

The Disappointments of War. "[T]he state forbids [the citizen] to do wrong not because it wishes to do away with wrongdoing but because it wishes to monopolize it" – if only this sentence were to resonant with others the way it does with me.

Our Attitude Towards Death. May, when the time comes, some eulogy for me contain the first seven paragraphs of this work.

Chandrashekar BC says

Are we hypocrites? That's what Freud argues in this book. He analysis (again) the WAR we fought and the way we manifests DEATH through the eyes of subconscious. Along the path of the civilization ,we have even let the hypocrisy creeping in our subconconscious and hence in the daily life. He argument he tells that the current civilization there are more hypocrites than the cultured persons. This civilized society has let people do the permissible amount of cunningness, treachery, cruelty, deceptions for the self gain. (May it for individual, Govt or Nation). He draws examples from the current events and the history.

In the second section he explains more the manifestation of DEATH by the current world. He compares its understanding among the humans from prehistoric periods, middle ages and modern world. We are far away from understanding the truth behind death, and this wrong understanding of death is letting more cruelty and blind believes grow within us. Though Freud rationalizes quite effectively all these points , still it opens many doors to the readers to question his view points, which is normal to any new theory (Especially the psychology ones)

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Tyler says

"The very emphasis of the commandment 'Thou shalt not kill' makes it certain that we spring from an endless ancestry of murderers for whom the lust for killing was in the blood, as possibly it is to this day with ourselves"

In the first section on war, Freud, using psychoanalysis, reflects on society's disillusionment with WW1, noting the hypocrisies of nation states, which demonise the Subaltern and the enemy, controlling the individual and forcing him to fight and die, whilst repressing him and monopolising resources.

In the second section Freud moves on to discuss death, religion and the illusions we create around death. Here we see a precursor to Freud's later work 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle', a key work which focuses on the instinctual death drive. Freud's theorises that death isn't contained in the unconscious. The Unconscious id is concerned only with pleasure, and since thoughts or acceptance of death would prevent the animistic spirit, the unconscious rejects death (it doesn't repress it, the belief simply isn't there). It is this bizarre relationship with death that causes us to imagine ghosts and demons, afterlives and such. We cannot imagine 'nothingness', we as humans are naturally destructive and pleasure seeking, and our own death would be evolutionary counterproductive, therefore it does not compute. Arising from this are a strange set of fetishisms around death and the deceased, but underlying it are instinctual death wishes and a misunderstanding, by the Unconscious of death.

Freud's thoughts on War certainly pale in comparison to his thoughts on death, but both are insightful, and offer another great instalment of Freud's sociological and cultural critique. There are a couple of problems with Freud's theorising, regardless of how attractive and useful it is. He relies heavily on an appeal to nature fallacy, and he cannot move from his fixed idea of human nature. Rather than seeing human nature as flexible, he maintains the view that the Unconscious has not just animalistic and human instincts, but fixed 'instinctual impulses' which is problematic, and brought into question by rivalling anthropologies like Engels'

and more modern takes such as Chris Ryan's work on sexuality (compared to this work, influenced largely by Freud's earlier 'Totem and Taboo').

There can be ways of reconciliation, but these must be added in.

Nonetheless, a great work by Freud.

Nick says

Probably the most interesting thing I've read by Freud. It starts off giving a tepid defense of Germany during ww1, and an anti-war shpiel, which sounds both libertarian-humanist and reactionary-revisionist-nationalist to modern ears. Then goes on to discuss death itself and how we think about it, from a number of different perspectives. Death in war vs death in normal life. Death of a loved one which traumatizes us, vs other deaths which we don't really care about it. Our own death which we refuse to seriously consider. And then perhaps some more controversial things. The unconscious desire to kill under certain conditions. And perhaps to die. He of course largely connects the way we think about death to the way in which primitive man deals with it. They, he thinks, just want to kill things which inhibit them from fulfilling their natural human impulses. So our instincts drive us to hate and kill and thats just how it is. Yet, we dont like it when certain specific people die, so we act like death itself is bad. So theres some kind of contradiction there. Which comes to a fine point when you consider war. Blahblah.

sofia says

La breve durata aumenta l'incanto delle bellezze umane.

Barbara Wahl says

Caducità o due pagine che riluciono

Due paginette al centro di un libercolo molto corto, letto soltanto, credo, da chi ha specifico interesse psicanalitico.

Ma quelle due paginette sono un diamante.

Certo mi interesso da sempre alla psicanalisi. Ma diciamo pure che il tema del vuoto e le distinzioni tra il vuoto risentito dal depresso paranoide, distinto dallo schizioide, il quale non ha niente a che vedere con il narcisista...possono essere davvero indigeste. E i conflitti tra il Sè e l'Io? per non parlare delle profonde differenze tra la delusione e la disillusione...Ma se lasciamo tutto questo da parte e leggiamo il breve testo di Freud, tutto si illumina. Si può gustare sin dall'inizio il suo brano:

"Non molto tempo fa , in compagnia di un amico silenzioso e di un poeta già famoso nonostante la sua giovane età, feci una passeggiata in una contrada estiva in piena fioritura. Il poeta ammirava la bellezza della natura intorno a noi ma non ne traeva gioia. Lo turbava il pensiero che tutta quella bellezza era destinata a perire, che col sopraggiungere dell'inverno sarebbe scomparsa: come del resto ogni bellezza umana, come tutto ciò che di bello e di nobile gli uomini hanno creato o potranno creare. Tutto ciò che egli avrebbe altrimenti amato e ammirato gli sembrava svilito dalla caducità a cui era destinato."

Da qui, in pochi paragrafi passiamo alla riflessione sul godimento nel suo rapporto con il tempo, al senso di lutto e all'investimento libidico nella vita e, infine, alla condizione nella quale, momentaneamente, la civiltà precipita a seguito della guerra.

Pagine dense, intense nella lettura odierna, che pongono la domanda: "Ma quegli altri beni, ora perduti,

hanno perso davvero per noi il loro valore, perché si sono dimostrati così precari e incapaci di resistere?" Freud non è soltanto un grande pensatore, un grande scienziato, un grande filosofo, per me è, innanzitutto, un grande scrittore.

Jamadagni Pariti says

An interesting insight into the psyche of the human mind, the book by the greatest psychoanalyst of the century, gives you a glimpse into the workings of your mind in regard to war and the concept of death.

Alejandro Teruel says

An early forerunner to *Civilization and its discontents*, in this pessimistic essay Freud dismisses the disillusionment felt at the outbreak of World War I as the (predictable) collapse of an illusion about the nature of civilization. For Freud, society had made up an unsustainable illusion about the nature of man, denying and repressing people's true feelings about death. In particular, just beneath the veneer of civilization, the unconscious mind is, according to Freud, particularly liable to wish death to any object that thwarts its desires; thus its ambivalent attitude towards loved ones.

Throughout his life, Freud would come back to the idea of the death wish, struggling to place its importance in his theories. Was it simply a wish? Was it much more than that, Thanatos, a death or destructive instinct as important as and counterweighing Eros? What was its relationship to the ego and the libido? Was it an important weapon in the superego's arsenal, to be used in threatening and carrying out self-punishment?

In this essay, Freud barely scratches at the surface of this idea; he intuitively understands the importance of the death wish, argues at the strength with which it is repressed and at the hypocrisy that entails politely downplaying it or pretending its non-existence and wonders at the extent to which such attitudes underlie civilization itself:

Thus there are many more hypocrites than truly civilized persons -indeed it is a debatable point whether a certain degree of civilized hypocrisy be not indispensable for the maintenance of civilization...

Freud clearly implies that we have to acknowledge the death wish to face reality:

Is it not for us to confess that in our civilized attitude towards death we are once more living psychologically beyond our means, and must reform and give death its due?

but concludes stoically and over-harshly:

If you would endure life, be prepared for death.

Well worth reading.

Adrian Sprague says

"The state demands the utmost obedience and sacrifice of its citizens, but at the same time it treats them as children through an excess of secrecy and a censorship of news and expression of opinion which render the minds of those who are thus intellectually repressed defenseless against every unfavorable situation and every wild rumor."

It's crazy how relevant this is in today's society

Jon(athan) Nakapalau says

interesting perspective on the balance between war and injustice - and how society 'weights' that balance even as the scales start to break down - as the individual is forced to make progressively violent choices that will destroy any hope of reconciliation.

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Israa says

This book was an introduction to Freud for me. In part I of the book, he argues that human beings are not inherently good and that many of us who do good, do so for selfish purposes. In his opinion, this suppression of our "natural state" is dangerous.

In his reflections on death, he describes the ways in which we are too far removed from death. He argues that "If you wish life, prepare for death".

I continued to be disturbed by his use of the words "civilized" and "primitive" and it was definitely a shock to me reading the following so near the beginning of the book: "We expected that the great ruling nations of the white race, the leaders of mankind, who had cultivated world wide interests, and to whom we owe the technical progress in the control of nature as well as the creation of artistic and scientific cultural standards—we expected that these nations would find some other way of settling their differences and

conflicting interests."

Overall an interesting read and well written.

Zachary says

I did not read this particular edition, but rather the one in the Penguin series of Freud's works. I'm reviewing each text separately because it would be absurd to review each individual work as a whole.
