

THE EFFECTS OF CIVILIZATION ON EMOTIONAL LIFE IN THE
THOUGHT OF ROUSSEAU AND FREUD

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April 28, 1980

The purpose of this paper is to provide some points of reference for considering the problem of the effects of civilization on emotional life. Particular attention will be paid to the views of Freud and Rousseau as modern reference points for this topic. I shall refer to the views of other thinkers as well, in order to highlight the specific character of the outlooks of Rousseau and Freud on this problem.

The notions represented by the term "civilization" and by the phrase "emotional life" can be found in the work of almost every major thinker or poet in the Western Tradition. Of particular importance as a reference point for the views of Rousseau and Freud is the traditional articulation of the "repressive" effect of civilization on emotional life. The full development of this theme is attained as early as Sophocles' Antigone. Sophocles portrays the relation between civilization and emotional life as a conflict between two essential "ethical powers."¹ Creon embodies the power of the polis, or civilization in a rough sense, and Antigone represents the claims of the oikos, or emotional life. The resolution of the conflict between these powers is one of tragic compromise: Antigone is forced to submit to the demands of the polis, but Creon's victory and vindication as a ruler leaves him unhappy.[?] Whether a mode of repression that results in unhappiness can validly be called a condition of

emotion on both sides -
?
but yes

"progress" in civilization becomes a major question for Rousseau and Freud.²

A reference point for a different aspect of the problem of civilization and emotional life can be found in Plato's Republic, II, 369a-374a. In order to consider the nature of justice and injustice, Socrates and Glaucon construct a "city in thought." They build at first what seems to be a "healthy city," in which the standard of living appears primitive[?] but all the basic needs of its inhabitants are apparently satisfied. It seems that no problem of justice or of a conflict between civilization and emotional life could ever arise in this city. However, Glaucon, a young man of "culture" and very strong needs, indicates that he would be very dissatisfied with life in such a city. He accuses Socrates of making the dwellers in a healthy city "have their feast without relishes," and rejects this way of life as fit only for a "city of sows." They then construct a city more in tune with Glaucon's extravagant wishes, but find that they are now faced with the prospect of a "feverish city," a city forced to commit injustices against other cities and against its own citizens, and in need of "many doctors" to prevent its social substance from lapsing into total enervation. The explosion of an essentially benign and primitive instinct into a system of infinite desires, and the necessity of maintaining or recovering some kind

of emotional health in the midst of this historically inevitable development, become major themes in the modern discussion of the relation between civilization and emotional life.

In order to outline this topic more clearly in its modern context, it will be helpful to witness the tendency to peer into the dual nature of the problem and then to step around it in two thinkers of some modern influence, Hume and Kant. Hume's overall concern, like that of Rousseau and Freud, is with the prospects for happiness in civilized society. Hume seems more confident than the others, however, that the problem of unhappiness as a condition of civilized progress can be solved. He is particularly optimistic about the ability of civilized men to make reason "the slave of the passions," in such a way that the emotional needs can be satisfied by being directed into socially safe and useful channels. Hume benignly assumes that "whatever restraint they [the conventions of society or of reason] impose on the passions of men, they are the real offspring of those passions, and are only a more artful and refin'd way of satisfying them."³ Hume's view represents the modern utilitarian tradition of confidence in the ultimate harmony of civilization and emotional life.

Kant, following Rousseau, has no illusions about the ability of reason to serve as an instrument in satisfying

emotional needs. Reason is not only unable, for Kant (and for Rousseau with one qualification), to serve as a means of attaining happiness, but also is a catalyst in the explosion of a few primitive natural desires into an infinite number of artificial wants: ✓

Reason is not, however, competent to guide the will safely with regard to its objects and the satisfaction of all our needs (which it in part multiplies), and to this end an innate instinct would have led with far more certainty.⁴

Kant and Rousseau are perhaps better attuned than Hume is to the problems posed by the ^{??}purely artificial needs generated by civilization, and especially to the weakness of reason in meeting them because of its complicity (and that of the imagination) in their formation. However, Hume as well as Rousseau attempt to face the problem of human unhappiness within the context of its origin - of civilization and emotional life. ~~Kant~~ Having restricted the function of reason primarily to the "vocation" intended for it by "nature" - that of rendering the will morally good ^{Kant} - retains the prospect of complete happiness as an ideal, but cedes its realization to the Reason of a Just Sovereign in another world. Kant's "transcendental" response to the problem of civilization and emotional life does address a concern that Rousseau shares: that reason

too condensed

retain or recover a "practical" or purely moral function even in the midst of an advanced though corrupt civilization. But Rousseau disagrees with Kant on just how this goal should be accomplished, for Rousseau and Freud after him are much more sensitive than Kant to the price that is paid for reason's ignoring or merely opposing the inclinations. ✓

Thus far several reference points for focusing in on the problem of civilization and emotional life have been traced through. The virtue of the approaches of Rousseau and Freud lies in the way in which they penetrate below the surface of the problem and then refuse to run away from it. In order to exhibit their ideas on this topic, I shall draw on Rousseau's educational theory in Emile, and then highlight its points of convergence with and divergence from Freud's outlook in Civilization and Its Discontents.

While Rousseau's main concern in his First Discourse is with the deterioration of morality and justice that accompanies the development of civilization, the theory of education outline in Emile shows how a Kantian, "moralistic" response to the problem can be circumvented. Rousseau treats the problem of civilization and emotional life in the context of child psychology and educational development, and comes to the conclusion that emotional health, or a disposition capable of being integrally

satisfied, is a necessary condition of the morally successful use of reason.

→ 'contemporary' condition
vs.
'precondition'?

According to Rousseau, a child is born with certain basic needs but is too weak to satisfy them. The way in which his family and educators respond to this situation completely determines whether the child will be capable of emotional health as an adult. There are no original vices in the human heart, and the first promptings of nature in children are always "good" in a non-moral sense:

Whether he makes or mars matters not, provided he causes a change, and every change is an action. If he seems more ready to destroy, it is not from malice, but because construction is slow while destruction is rapid; the latter agrees better with his natural impetuosity.⁵

Vices can enter into the child's playful but weak emotional disposition and become fixed only from the outside.⁶ Only when certain external causes have modified the original, innate passion of self-love (amour de soi), can its benign, non-moral aim be transformed into the vicious aims of self-esteem (amour propre).⁷ Rousseau depicts the inborn passion as the source of a "river" that can easily become swollen by the "tributaries" of thousands of artificial wants and vices induced by external prejudices and conventions.⁸

His first twelve years of weakness are the critical period for the child's future emotional health. Rousseau

lays down three basic educational principles to be followed in this span of the child's life:

1. Help him only in cases of real need, and only in such a humiliating way that he will want to learn how to satisfy his own needs.

2. Let him enjoy his own weak natural powers, and impose no restraint on his activities other than the "punishments of experience" or the appearance thereof.

3. Foster no growth of his imagination.

Each of these principles expresses the negative character of the child's education through about twelve years of age. The basic insight underlying them all is that the weakness of children can be augmented by too early an introduction to civilized ways. The vices or false needs of civilization must somehow be prevented from entering the child's emotional disposition and rendering him still weaker and more prone to other vices, until he become strong enough to satisfy all his basic, true needs.

The first principle specifically directs the educator to the dangers of "coddling," or helping the child to the point at which his requests become commands. His desires are thus kept from any artificial encouragement, so that the growth of the child's powers to satisfy his desires will have a good chance of catching up with their merely natural growth.

The second principle requires placing no social

restraints on the child's behavior unless they are concealed as constraints of nature or "necessity." In permitting the child the free use and growth of his natural powers, the educator allows the compulsion of the external world of nature only to define the limits of the child's actions. The child learns patience and courage in facing the conditions imposed by nature, whereas he learns only hatred and vengeance by encountering the wrath of his parents or tutor. Worse still than moral punishment is moral persuasion, which produces vanity, envy, and greed as side effects of the child's "good behavior." The point of the second principle is that the punishments of experience alone enhance resourcefulness.

If he is educated according to the first two principles, the child achieves a sense of self-control, or of being able to attain an integral satisfaction of his basic needs within purely natural limits on his powers. The ~~thi~~rd principle refers to another danger that might upset the balance between the child's natural needs and his abilities to satisfy them. When a growing imagination leads to a situation in which false needs or imaginary desires outrun the child's abilities to satisfy them, a relative weakness or proneness to vice is the result. Rousseau, no less than Kant, is sensitive to the problem

that "happiness is an ideal not of reason but of imagination,"¹⁰ but Rousseau's strategy is to prevent the child's imagination from growing, until he attains the power of satisfying all his natural needs. Whatever might encourage imaginative rapture, such as story-telling, religious instruction, or book-learning, is ruled out by the tutor until then. Since the child requires no substitute satisfactions anyway, he need not be provided with the traditional vehicles of them.

Around the age of twelve, the child should have a strong, healthy body and emotional disposition as the potential instruments of reason, and will be able to exercise reason and judgment, in conjunction with imagination, in a useful way. Because of his calm passions and indifference to the opinions of others, the child will be ready to "work like a peasant and think like a philosopher, if he is not to become as idle as a savage."¹¹

Freud and Rousseau would agree that

Those who wish to retain in the social order the primitive sentiments of nature do not know what they ask. Ever contradicting himself, ever wavering between duty and inclination, he will be neither man nor citizen; he will be good for nothing either to himself or to others. He will be the modern man ... a bourgeois.¹²

and that

a person who is born with a specially unfavorable instinctual constitution, and who has not properly

THE CHILD'S ACQUISITION OF REASON AND IMAGINATION WILL THEN BE SIMULTANEOUS WITH A SELECTIVE INTRODUCTION TO THE VICES AND WAYS OF THE WORLD, IN SUCH A WAY THAT HIS EMOTIONAL CONSTITUTION IS "IMMUNIZED" BY THEIR PERNICIOUS EFFECTS.

undergone the transformation and rearrangement of his libidinal components which is indispensable for later achievements, will find it hard to obtain happiness from his external situation, especially if he is faced with tasks of some difficulty.¹³

For Freud, individual emotional life is affected by the demands of civilization in much the same way as for Rousseau. For individuals, at least, the program of the "pleasure principle" ordains happiness as the purpose of human life. But the necessities of the external world, of "things" and of "others" for Freud as well as for Rousseau,¹⁴ normally permit no possibility of carrying this principle through, without deflections, substitute satisfactions, or the use of intoxicating substances. Men usually learn to moderate their claims to happiness under the demands of civilization, and recognize that happiness can be indirectly and partially attained by observing a "reality principle." The claims of the original principle for full happiness or integral satisfaction of the instincts remain in force, however, and find expression in unconscious or imaginary wishes and in the allurements of perversions or forbidden activities. All but a minority, who are able to find full though sublimated satisfaction of their basic drives in scientific work or artistic creation, are indeed condemned, in

Freud's view, to an unhappy oscillation between the pleasure principle of emotional life and the reality principle of civilization.

However, Freud differs somewhat from Rousseau with respect to the prospects of mitigating the problem of civilization and emotional life by means of education. There are two main differences, the first relating to the socio-historical situation that each thinker faces, and the second relating to the theory of human nature that each thinker holds.

Firstly, Rousseau restricts his education of "the man" to the wealthy classes of society, since the poor are apparently educated by nature itself and face none of the corrupting demands of civilized life.¹⁵ In so far as the majority of "the poor" of the eighteenth century were peasants firmly rooted (if "languishing" and "forgotten") in the countryside, Rousseau's view is perhaps understandable. The fate of the general as well as of the individual emotional health in Rousseau's time would thus depend on whether the individuals of the elite classes received Rousseau's type of education.

However, the objective situation of the underlying population has been radically altered during the historical period of industrial development intervening between the time of Rousseau and that of Freud. The great majority

of Rousseau's "poor" have been assimilated into an industrial or white-collar working class, most of whom have become as mobile and as subject to the requirements and corruption of civilized life as any "bourgeois" of the eighteenth century. If general emotional health is to be maintained in contemporary civilization, Rousseau's type of education has to be extended to the children of factory workers and petty officials, so that they will be able to achieve the same kind of sublimated satisfaction from this kind of work as they would from art or science (assuming that there is the same overall restriction of this class of men to their position in the relations of production as there was in the eighteenth century).

Even if Rousseau's type of education could be "democratized" in this way to bring it up to date with the current needs of the general emotional life, Freud might question whether the aims of this educational program could be carried through even for a single individual. He might raise the same objection to Rousseau's theory of education as he does to the socialist program of the abolition of private property: neither goes to the core of the problem of civilization and emotional life, because both are too "idealistic" in their conceptions of human nature.¹⁶ For Freud, the

instinct of aggression or destructiveness is an innate, indestructible feature of human nature as well as of all organic life. This instinct ^hundergoes deflections and aim inhibitions and seeks substitute satisfactions under the influence of the reality principle, in much the same way as does the sex drive. The problem of civilization and emotional life is seen in its full depth in the encounter of the twofold character of the human sex-aggression instinct with the demands of civilized society:

When an instinctual trend undergoes repression, its libidinal elements are turned into symptoms [neuroses], and its aggressive components into a sense of guilt [revenge against the self or others].¹⁷

In Freud's view, the sense of guilt, and the instinct of aggression as its source, would remain as major threats to human happiness even in societies in which the socialist economic and Rousseauian educational programs had been carried out. X ✓

With some difficulty, Rousseau might be able to answer both of these objections. The first objection, that that the great majority of people in contemporary civilization are in need of Rousseau's type of education, can be overcome if there are enough tutors to go around. But if this requirement were not already a monumental

task in itself, what is needed to overcome the second objection seems even more awesome. The tutor in most if not all cases has to be the child's own father. Or rather, the father in each case must be transformed into a tutor. Rousseau and Freud do not in fact disagree on the presence of an innate aggressive impulse in human nature.¹⁸ They disagree only on the ways in which this impulse is modified by the child's environment and, critically, how it is responded to by other people. For Freud, the aggressive impulse of the child is inevitably checked by the father, in the process of repressing the elements of infantile and pregenital sexuality and in blocking the Oedipal relation to the mother generally. The child develops a "superego" from the energy of his own aggressive impulse, which is repressed and "introjected" in his first encounters with his father. The superego becomes the agency of the child's sense of guilt, which serves the demands of civilization by repressing or deflecting further desire for integral satisfaction of the erotic-aggressive impulse. At the same time, the superego and the sense of guilt emanating from it constitute a threat to civilization, by permitting no sublimated outlet for the aggressive element.¹⁹ For Rousseau, however, to the extent that the father can be transformed into or replaced by the tutor, the attack of the father on the child's aggressive instinct

is transformed into permitted expression (while the child is still very weak) and then eased into sublimated activity (Emile in the garden and workshop).

The basic views of Rousseau and Freud on the problem of civilization and emotional life are thus broadly convergent. The critical divergence occurs in Rousseau's attempt to replace the "primal father" with a "primal tutor."

nice —

This is good,
and as far as
it goes, sound.
It'd have been
improved by
an attempt to
trace the differences
between F & R back
to differences
in fundamental
assumptions —
A ~

Notes

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2. Rousseau, Jean Jacques, Emile. Edited by R.L. Archer. New York: Barron's Educational Series, Inc., 1964, pp. 72-75. Freud, Sigmund, Civilization and Its Discontents. Edited by James Strachey. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1962, pp. 50-52.

3. Hume, David, A Treatise of Human Nature. Edited by L.A. Selby-Bigge. Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1968, p. 526.

4. Kant, Immanuel, Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals. Translated by Lewis White Beck. New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1969, p. 15.

5. Rousseau, supra note 2, pp. 84-85.

6. Ibid., pp. 97-98.

7. Ibid., p. 181.

8. Ibid., p. 180.

9. Ibid., p. 85.

10. Kant, supra note 4, p. 41.

11. Rousseau, supra note 2, p. 158.

12. Ibid., p. 60.

13. Freud, supra note 2, p. 31.

14. Ibid., p. 24. Rousseau, supra note 2, p. 56.

15. Rousseau, supra note 2, p. 71.

16. Freud, supra note 2, pp. 59-62, 90.

17. Ibid., p. 86.

18. cf. p. 6, note 5.

19. Freud, supra note 2, pp. 79-80, 88-89.