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on being civil

We live in societies and civilizations. In fact, I am here writing this philosophical essay because of civilization. This piece of art I am creating is part of a greater structure of society. Today, we act within a highly advanced system of civilization that has existed for thousands of years. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, civilization is, “a developed or advanced state of human society.” As beings living in society and civilization, we are compelled to abide by certain rules. For example, civilization tells us to create and invent and it says that we should separate ourselves from nature by being civil (i.e. hygiene, manners, and anything, really, that gets rid of the filth of the Earth). Civilization is seen in cities around the world and is representative of man’s mental and physical victories over nature. Civilization holds the products of intellectual thought and exhibits how man has learned to master the Earth. Instead of living in nature like animals, humans live above nature, both in the spirited world and in the physical world. Civilization is the greater understanding of man’s achievements in culture, politics, religion, technology, and more. “Civilization is a triumph of mind over matter, of reason over instinct, and of the distinctly human over mankind’s animal nature” (Guisepi). Civilization is not a recent invention or creation. Even in the Torah and the Bible, small societies are represented. One of the greatest examples of early civilization is Ancient Greece. Greece is evidence of (almost) everything society is today, for it was a haven for politics, intellectualism, philosophy, artistic creation, and technological and scientific innovation. We understand Ancient Greek culture through reading the artistic dialogues

of Plato or the narrative stories of Xenophon. Ancient Greece as a civilization was highly organized, sophisticated, and controlled.

Plato, the ancient Greek philosopher, is perhaps one of the most influential societal visionaries. In his *Republic*, Socrates engages in a philosophical debate about the roots of truth and justice. Over the course of the discussion, the characters in the story decide that the best way to find justice and truth is by constructing their version of an ideal society. This artistic, philosophical, and intellectual creation of society is testimony of the early roots of civilization. This text in particular speaks about how civilization works and how it should function. In the dialogue itself, there are many indications of advanced societal relationships. Even the way this debate occurs is remarkable for its time - various cultured individuals sitting around having a deep philosophical discussion is rare today, even in our highly advanced system of society. More importantly, however, than offering a new conception of civilization, Socrates, in Plato's dialogue, presents a multi-dimensional critique of the current standards of society.

Over one thousand years later, Sigmund Freud completed a similar task. Though his texts are not considered to be literary works of art, he still offered a penetrating exegesis of modern civilization. In his critique, Freud was more concerned with the relationships between individuals and their effect on greater society, while Plato was more preoccupied with justice and the truth. Plato used his critique of civilization to examine a greater philosophical cause. Even though Freud's interpretation of society came long after Plato's *Republic*, it still is relevant to the ancient civilization; the ideas presented are consistent, to a certain extent. For example, both texts discuss desire,

delusion and dreams, and discipline and control. It is even possible to think of Freud's text *Civilization and Its Discontents* as a sort of response to the civilization created in *The Republic*.

In this essay, I first examine and deconstruct the society Plato creates in his *Republic* and investigate what it says about desire, self-discipline, and dreams. I then present Freud's criticism of civilization and decipher its teachings about pleasure, control, and delusion. I will then attempt to use Freud's critique of society to come to a new understanding of Plato's constructed civilization. I seek to show *how* Sigmund Freud's *Civilization and Its Discontents* can be used to analyze, understand, and critique, the society and culture created and presented in Plato's *Republic*.

Plato's *Republic* is a philosophical dialogue. It begins with a conversation about justice and "the good" and quickly develops into a deep debate about how society should be structured. *The Republic* is a rich book, and to offer a summary of it is difficult and almost impossible. I will only examine the sections that discuss the origins of society and its related effects on the state and the individual. Socrates, in Plato's words, sets out to investigate justice in a large setting. "...if we were able to look at a community coming into existence, we might be able to see how justice and injustice originate in it" (Plato 369a). He decides to look at community evolution to discover how justice functions within it. Soon after he identifies his task, he explicitly recognizes man's dependence on others as the root of civilization. "Society originates, then...because the individual is not self-sufficient, but has many needs which he can't supply himself" (Plato 369b). Therefore, to Plato, civilization is about the exchanges between individuals and living life in common. "For such mutual exchange was the reason for its

foundation...And that will require a market, and a currency as the medium of exchange” (Plato 371b-c). Part of civilization is a functional economy and a system of trade. These structures help men interact with each other.

So far, Plato has discussed all that he calls “society.” For Plato, a true civilization is indicative of a much bigger society with splendor, more people, greater amounts of land, and more varied professions. Socrates now restates his goal: “We are to study not only the origins of society, but also society when it enjoys the luxuries of civilization” (Plato 372e). For Plato, society is only a functioning system, while civilization maximizes the potential of society. In addition to doctors, actors, farmers, sculptors, and cosmeticians, a civilization also requires a functioning army. “And so we should make it our business, if we can, to choose men with suitable natural aptitudes for the defense of our state” (Plato 374e). Plato’s focus evolves again. *The Republic* began with the individual, moved on to societies, or small groups of individuals, and now begins to construct a city and a state.

Plato’s city-state is a constructed for perfection. It is representative of “good.” “Then it will obviously have the qualities of wisdom, courage, self-discipline, and justice” (Plato 427e). This city inherently values control, for one of the founding principles is self-mastery. In Plato’s eyes, perfection is about gaining control over nature. In addition to this type of authority, Plato also constructs class systems regarding knowledge, for only the elite will hold higher knowledge of philosophy. In other words, Plato’s city is constructed around the separations of individuals. Plato attributes this higher knowledge to the Guardians, or those who naturally possess judgement (Plato 429a). Plato now identifies self-discipline as a type of authority in his state and

part of what makes one “good.” “Self-discipline...is surely a kind of order, a control of certain desires and appetites” (Plato 430e). Being master of oneself means gaining control over inherent and natural desires. It is mastering all sorts of pleasures, including those of the body and mind. To Plato, self-discipline creates harmony. “...self-discipline stretches across the whole scale. It produces a harmony between its strongest and weakest and middle elements...” (Plato 432a). Self-discipline is what in Plato’s city, bridges the gaps between the classes. It controls the people equally and ensures that they do what is just. Plato says that the state he has constructed in *The Republic* is the best kind of city, for it is “good and true.” While discussing imperfect societies, Plato again realizes desire and pleasure and says that it is what is wrong with natural man. “I think that some of the unnecessary pleasures and desires are lawless and violent” (Plato 571b). Plato says that what is inherent in man must be overcome. He explicitly names dreams as irrational and lacking reason. “The sort that wake while we sleep, when the reasonable and humane part of us is asleep and its control relaxed, and our fierce bestial nature...rouses itself and has its fling and tries to secure its own kind of satisfaction” (Plato 571c). He says that this wild beast exists in all of us and that is part of nature that must be conquered. “...even in the outwardly most respectable of us there is a terribly bestial and immoral type of desire, which manifests itself particularly in dreams” (Plato 572b). Plato uses dreams and self-discipline to explicate a discussion on the evils of pleasure and desire and the achievements of civilization.

Freud’s *Civilization and Its Discontents* is a very different type of text when compared to Plato’s *Republic*. First and foremost, it is not a dialogue. Freud’s work also presents an analysis of society instead of a construction of a society. In addition, Freud

was more concerned with analyzing the motivations of the relationships between individual men, instead of seeking greater truth and justice. Freud begins his critique with a discussion on passion and religion in the individual, but he quickly moves to explicate happiness in civilization. He cites an inherent wild beast as the root of happiness in a civilized individual. "The feeling of happiness derived from the satisfaction of a wild instinctual impulse untamed by the ego is incomparably more intense than that derived from sating an instinct that has been tamed" (Freud 29). This taming of an intense inherent feeling is only a way to overcome suffering in civilization and to gain authority over the natural world, which is the purported reason for why civilizations are created. While society is focused on controlling instinct, civilization has created replacements for joy and happiness to help people forget their true misery. Art is one of these mild enjoyments. "Nevertheless the mild narcosis induced in us by art can do no more than bring about a transient withdrawal from the pressure of vital needs, and it is not strong enough to make us forget real misery" (Freud 31). Even though this art effectively distracts us from our suffering, it is a false happiness that does not last. Religion, too, is a way one can forget misery, to Freud He says religion creates a new reality by offering rigid systems of control that lead towards a happiness for all.

"Religion restricts this play of choice and adaptation [in nature], since it imposes equally on everyone its own path to the acquisition of happiness and protection from suffering. Its technique consists in depressing the value of life and distorting the picture of the real world in a delusional manner..." (Freud 36).

Religion is another falsity in life. Here, it offers distorted protection from nature. Freud cites art as one step towards creating new realities, but religion wholly induces delusional practices and thoughts in men.

Freud now moves to a more detailed conversation about control and mastery over nature. Freud believes civilization is man's attempt at overcoming nature, but it has not, so far, succeeded. "We shall never completely master nature; and our bodily organism, itself a part of that nature, will always remain a transient structure with a limited capacity for adaptation and achievement" (Freud 37). Freud still believes in and has hope for the body. He notes that we have attempted to use our minds to dominate the physical world. Freud also cites three sources of suffering, one of which acknowledges the superiority of nature (Freud 37). Turning back to false happiness, Freud even says that we are not happy in our current civilized state and that we keep attempting to recreate our natural happiness. Freud now examines our control over nature in even more detail. He says that one of the main goals of civilization is, "to protect man against nature..." (Freud 42). He believes that man's goal is to "use" the Earth by controlling it both mentally and physically. "...the control over fire stands out as a quite extraordinary and unexampled achievement..." (Freud 42). For Freud, man's "taming" of fire clearly represents the greater goal of civilization. He also says that man's construction of houses on top of the Earth shows how man has gained authority over it (Freud 42). Freud has so far examined society as a whole, but he now moves to examine the effects of society on an individual.

Freud explicates the conditions of civilization. Each requirement fits into the greater category of control over the natural. For Freud, individual hygiene and

cleanliness are major interests of civilization. It is essential for man to have dominance over what happens in the world. He says civilization is an attempt to “free” man, but it has only imposed more restrictions on him. “The liberty of the individual is no gift of civilization...The development of civilization imposes restrictions on it, and justice demands that no one shall escape those restrictions” (Freud 49). Freud believes that society attempts to regulate relationships, which itself defeats the greater goal of freedom and justice. Society places power. Freud is explicit in noting that it is the individual who has lost in society. Systems that bring people together and regulate those interactions ignores the individual needs of human beings.

Freud continues his discussion of the individual by examining the specific relationships between people. Freud continues to note that civilization is an imposition on natural life and existence. He now analyzes societies’ faults through desire and love. “On the one hand love comes into opposition to the interests of civilization; on the other, civilization threatens love with substantial restrictions” (Freud 58). Here, civilization is a control mechanism that restricts one of our remaining natural expressions of our natural being. Freud says that as society intrudes on personal and sexual life, it continues to grow society as a whole. “The tendency on the part of civilization to restrict sexual life is no less clear than its other tendency to expand the cultural unit” (Freud 59). The “achievements” of civilization have led to the end of sexual expression and desire. “Taboos, laws, and customs impose further restrictions, which affect both men and women” (Freud 59). All that civilization is proud of is all that is wrong with it, to Freud. Sexuality and desire are damaged and weakened. “The sexual life of civilized man is notwithstanding severely impaired...” (Freud 61). For Freud,

civilization represents a structure of authority that includes induced delusion and control over desire, pleasure, and natural (and often sexual) existence.

Even though Freud's critique of civilization is from a relatively modern perspective, many of the ideals of Plato's society are items and subjects of Freud's criticism. Plato constructs a society full of rigid and authoritative systems of control. The top achievements of Plato's civilization represent the downfall of and the control of the natural world, the world that Freud is a great advocate for. Plato respects regulated relationships between people while Freud values the natural individual. Plato's representation of desire is almost exactly opposite to Freud's philosophy. Freud would say that the taming of the wild beast inherent to human beings is an attempt to subdue nature, overcome civilized man's suffering, and to replace happiness. Freud would believe that the very artist that Plato is himself (he has indeed created a literary work of art) is only Plato's way of distracting himself from his inner pain and suffering. Freud would believe that Plato's construction of society is actually a product of civilization and that Plato creates his text to express his own internal suffering. Freud indirectly responds to Plato's belief in mastering one's pleasures in an effort to produce harmony by saying that man will never truly overcome nature and that our attempts to control and tame our instincts is in response to our fear of nature. Freud identifies Plato's disrespect for inherent pleasure and the Earth as a fear of and discomfort with the natural world. While Plato views dreams as the wild beast in all men that must be overcome by society, Freud views civilization as a delusion of man or, in other words, a dream. What Plato recognizes as virtues of man, Freud identifies as downfalls of man.

Today, we are all products of civilization and are constantly surrounded by its achievements and failures. Plato's *Republic* is a product of civilization for it offers a critique and a new vision for the future. Freud's *Civilization and Its Discontents* is also a product of society, as if civilization did not exist, Freud's philosophical and psychological opinions would not exist. This essay is also a result of society. Not only are the texts that I discuss products of civilizations, but my own ability to make new philosophical claims has been granted to me by society. Freud would object to many, if not all, of Plato's ideas, for Plato advocates for the control of nature, while Freud stands for a return to nature.

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