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“Our so-called civilization itself is to blame for a great part of our misery,” Freud declares in “Civilization and its Discontents” (44). In the book, Freud brings questions of the universal human condition to the limelight. Why are human beings “discontent”? Why does misery exist in seemingly all aspects of human life? Among these questions, one stands above the rest: in a world increasingly tailored to them (through stability in shelter and food), why are human beings still so uneasy and anxious? Freud suggests that civilization might be the answer.

How can civilization be the cause of human misery? Freud begins his counterintuitive argument by acknowledging the efforts it makes in ameliorating human misery. In the beginning of mankind’s history, human beings focused on the basic needs of sustenance and shelter. As they defended themselves from the external world and its inhabitants, the primary concern became safety. The primary misery became the lack thereof, and civilization soon emerged as the answer to that misery. Human beings began to group together and form civilizations; as they did so, technology sprung into existence and was incorporated into everyday life. Civilization grew to encompass both technology and regulations governing people and their interactions with the world. Human beings’ primary concern was no longer safety, as they were no longer so vulnerable. Yet, human beings still experienced misery and unease. Why?

“Power over nature is not the only condition of human happiness,” Freud explains (44). As human beings developed civilizations, they traded one misery for another: they traded happiness, in the form of freedom, for safety. Civilization forces human beings to renounce that which naturally gives them pleasure; more specifically, they are forced to renounce aggression and sex. For example, monogamous marriage and social customs restricting the use of a “sexual

object” goes entirely against human beings’ natural impulses. In fact, even the purpose of a “sexual object” changes from fulfilling a basic want to procreation; one uses a “sexual object” not for oneself, but for the preservation of the civilization. In addition, human beings are also forced to renounce their aggression. The desire to harm others is simply not tolerated in society, as vulnerability from others is actually what society was made to guard against. The “natural instinct of aggressiveness...opposes this program of civilization,” Freud explains (103). Unease at not being able to pursue the pleasure principle as much as possible, and unease at being forced to stifle their natural impulses, results in misery. “Men are not gentle, friendly creatures,” so for civilization to function as designed, natural instincts must be restrained; otherwise, the society will collapse (85).

Additionally, through “cheap pleasures,” even civilization’s achievements in technology cause human beings misery (47). For example, Freud argues that the “cheap pleasure” in hearing the voice of his faraway child wouldn’t have occurred if railroads didn’t exist in the first place. If boats didn’t exist, then he wouldn’t have the “cheap pleasure” of knowing that his friend reached shore. Freud ends his argument with the strongest example: why do human beings want the “cheap pleasure” of a long life, when it is only “full of hardship and starved of joys” (48)? Freud’s ambivalence towards civilization’s accomplishments builds on the premise that they only provide these “cheap pleasures.” True happiness, he argues, does not come via civilization. Instead, civilization actively restricts human beings’ pursuit of the pleasure principle, preventing them from maximizing pleasure and minimizing suffering. Civilization, Freud argues, only serves to give human beings “cheap pleasures,” ones that eventually cause them to reach towards death with willing hands.