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Love Thy Neighbour

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Abstract

This article will attempt to interrogate the title of the conference, *Human Rights: Why do we respond and why do we turn away?* via the tension that exists between the questions *why do we respond?* and *why do we turn away*? This tension will be explored from the perspective of psychoanalytic discourse, departing from Freud's work *Civilisation and its Discontents* wherein he asserts that there is a fundamental impossibility at the heart of human subjectivity to 'love thy neighbour as thyself,' because there is an inherent division (*spaltung*), an alterity or otherness at the very experience of being. This otherness, Lacan, in his return to Freud, will formulate as being related to the fact that we are speaking-beings, *parlêtres*, parasited by language, subject of the unconscious and the real of a body with which each must find a way.

Keywords: Alterity; Aggression; Civilisation and its discontents; Freud, Sigmund, 1856-1939; Human Rights; Lacan, J. (Jacques), 1901-1981; Psychoanalysis; Speaking-subject; Subjectivity; Unconscious; Violence

Civilisation and Its Discontents

Firstly, I would like to thank Drs. Lucie Corcoran, Patricia Frazer, Mr. Cathal O'Keeffe and Dublin Business School for organising this conference here today on such an important and challenging theme. I was very much taken by the elements of the title of the conference—firstly the concept of *Human* Rights and secondly the tension that appears in the questions *why do we respond?* and *why do we turn away*? This phrase emphasises that not only is it *not* a given that we respond to the plight of our fellow man but also how we respond—and furthermore begs the question of why we respond at all. I would like to take up this theme from the perspective of psychoanalysis and its understanding of subjectivity, that is, what it is to be human and what is it that determines either response.

I will attempt to interrogate this tension of response via Freud's seminal work entitled *Civilisation and its Discontents*[1] together with the concepts of contemporary psychoanalytic discourse, particularly those of Jacques Lacan.

In *Civilisation and its Discontents*, Freud attempts to understand the purpose of civilisation, culture, and society, in what manner can each one find a place within it, and at

[1] *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. J. Strachey with Anna Freud et al., vol. 21, *The Future of an Illusion, Civilisation and Its Discontents and Other Works* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1927; Vintage, 2001).

what cost. For Freud there is no innate goodness or morality in man; at the very heart of the human subject—that is, the subject of the unconscious—there is an aggressive and inherent conflict, a conflict at the very heart of subjectivity that accounts for not only the violence, aggression and cruelty enacted against one's fellow man but also toward himself, against himself as evidenced by the multifarious forms of self destructive behaviours that can be carried out.

This may, on the face of it, seem a very negative and pessimistic viewpoint, and one that is not palatable to our twenty-first-century sensibilities, but if one takes a moment to consider this in earnest, how else might one understand the various atrocities and acts of violence that characterise the progress and development of humanity over the millennia? It is not sufficient to decry these acts as those of evil—because in so doing we are guilty of turning away and relegating them as abhorrent anomalies or pathologies, when in fact the very structure and foundation of the civilised world from its inception is founded upon a history of violence. Freud did not turn away from attempting to understand this question, just as he did not turn away in the face of a confrontation with human suffering and madness. What Freud did and continues to do via his teaching, is to take seriously the suffering of the human being precisely via the act of listening, and in so doing raises that suffering to the dignity of speech. And let us say that speech, free speech, if there is such a thing, is one human right that has never been as precious as it is today, and one that has to be fought for—something that I will return to later on.

But to return to one of the elements of the conference title—that of *Human rights*—this concept in itself supports Freud's perspective. The very fact that the *right* to be recognised as human, the *right* to be recognised as equal to one's fellow man, the very fact that such rights had to be written and codified in law points to the this very idea that it is not innately in man's nature to value his fellow as his equal or even as human at all. The human rights movement is not new—in fact its beginnings have been traced by the United Nations to the year 539 BC when Cyrus the Great freed the slaves of Babylon, declaring all people had the right to choose their religion and the right to racial equality. This document and its provisions served as the inspiration for some of the articles of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*.[2] Yet one can see that codifying such rights is not sufficient to cease their transgression. From 539 BC up to 2019 AD, this has been a struggle and fight for recognition, the recognition of humanity that continues. Why? Because as Freud asserts in his text, there is something inherent in man that seeks to master and dominate—he puts it like this;

> The element of truth behind all this, which people are so ready to disavow, is that men are not gentle creatures who want to be loved, and who at most can defend themselves if they are attacked; they are on the contrary, creatures amongst whose instinctual endowments is to be reckoned a powerful share of aggressiveness. As a result their neighbour is for them not only a potential helper or sexual object, but also someone who tempts them to satisfy their aggressiveness on him, to exploit his capacity for work without compensation, to use him sexually without his consent, to seize his possessions, to humiliate him, to cause him pain, to torture and to kill him.[3]

For Freud, the purpose of every civilisation, culture and society is to regulate the relations between men, to proscribe and enact laws—symbolic laws that attempt to curtail this aggressivity—and to find alternative routes through which it may find palatable means of

[2] UN General Assembly, resolution 217 A, Universal Declaration of Human Rights, A/RES/217 ¶ 73 (10 December 1948), https://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/.

[3] *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. J. Strachey with Anna Freud et al. (London: The Hogarth Press, 1927; Vintage, 2001), 21:111. Citations refer to the Vintage edition

expression; that is, be transformed and put to work in a useful way that serves the common good.[4]

Coming-into-Being

But what is this aggression at the heart of subjectivity? For Freud there is a correlation between the development of the individual and that of the society into which he is born. Here there is the question of how it is we become humanised.

Lacanian psychoanalysis asserts that we are born without any innate identity, without any recognition of our own existence or that of others. That is something that is taken up over time via exchanges with those around us—through the exchange of the infant and the caregiver—an exchange that is enacted via language. Through this exchange, identifications, such as name, gender, and ideals of what it is to be a member of this family unit (and its culture), are presented to the child. In other words, it is via this external Other that who we are *coming-to-be* is founded. To put it another way, our experiences and naming of who, what and why we are in the world, comes to us from outside, via language, via a system of meaning that pre-exists us and into which we have to find a way—but one that will *never* fully nominate our experience of ourselves. Something always escapes—something that remains outside of language, the piece we can never fully find the words for—which means there is always an element within us that we experience as *otherness*. We are in many ways an enigma to ourselves. What this creates is an internal division (*spaltung*), a conflict between how we experience ourselves and 'who' we present to the world of others. This internal otherness is problematic, experienced as moments in which we do not recognise ourselves in our own thoughts or actions, moments where something *Other* acts in and on us.

In order to fit the ideals of this family—to be cared for, approved of, loved, there are certain things that must be sacrificed. The aggressive and libidinal impulses or drives of the child are regulated by the parental Other; in other words, the body and its search for pleasure and satisfaction becomes pacified by language. These drives find other forms of expression via the social bond. Every society and culture is founded upon the renunciation or sacrifice of some aspect of our freedom in order to participate within it.[5]

Renunciation and the Stranger

For Freud, every innovation and creative aspect of human cultural endeavour and the bonds between men are founded on this curtailing of and transformation of these drives. This sacrifice is offered in order that we receive the protection in the coming together of individuals in a grouping on the basis of shared identifications, values, codes of living, religion or national identity for instance.[6] So certain identifications and modes of being are sanctioned, whilst others are excluded. But there always remains a tension whereby that which has been sacrificed threatens to return and is often manifested in an individual or group who are not 'like us' or who do not share the values or common ideals of the group/society/community. In order for any set of elements to exist, there must always be that which is excluded from the set.

The subject is sustained by the community to which he belongs. The problem is how to identify the one who does not belong. When a community solution is strong, this internal *otherness* can find a means of expression and be mobilised by that community or leader of said community against the stranger who threatens their ideals/identifications by virtue of the fact that this other appears to be enjoying that which the group has sacrificed or threatens to take

[4] Ibid., p. 97.
[5] Ibid., pp. 95-96.
[6] Ibid., pp. 115-116.

something from them.[7] In other words, *I see in the stranger that which I have given up yet still want to enjoy!* Or as Freud asserts, I put into him that otherness which I recognise in myself and wish to deny.[8] And so the stranger, the outsider, becomes the one who is persecuted. Difference, alterity, is experienced as threatening, and something upon which aggressive and violent means can be used. Racism for instance has a structural fundament which demonstrates and assures each of their belonging to a community via the persecution of otherness/of difference.

But this otherness as stated is not only to be found in the outsider. And that is why for Freud the ideal of 'love thy neighbour as thyself' is problematic.[9] If I see myself in my neighbour, I also recognise in him the aggressive and destructive drives that I wish to deny in myself. And that is why even the coming together of people on the basis of identifications of sameness will inevitably foster aggression and intolerance.

So for Freud, the question for each society is to find the means to recognise and harness these drives and find ways to deal with them. The invention of religions and paternalistic institutions and societies are some of the devices that he identified as having varying degrees of success in so doing.[10]

The Contemporary Subject of Civilisation

But here we are in the twenty-first century, far away from the edict of 'love thy neighbour'. We are enlightened, educated, civilised and beyond such extremes of hatred and violence surely?

The twentieth and twenty-first centuries have seen a modification of social groupings, the decline of paternalistic societies, the founding of common markets, globalisation and the rise of capitalism and meritocracies that have engendered and shaped mass individualism—that is, we have now become entrepreneurs of ourselves, curators of our own brand to exploit and to be consumed. We are rewarded for being 'ourselves', for striving to achieve and produce, where social class or educational opportunity is no longer an impediment to success. And the political zeitgeist certainly encourages and speaks to that ideal of success and autonomy. The consequence of these modifications of groupings and the rise of mass individualism is in part the decline and breaking up of those old forms of communities/societies based on a common ideal or purpose, which for Freud had served to harness and manage those aggressive drives in a form that has the possibility to be transformed and put to work.

So how does the contemporary social bond recognise, make space and 'treat', these drives when the old form of identifications no longer underpin contemporary society? In one way we could say we have never had such freedoms. And yet in another, we have never been so subjugated. For Freud as stated, to be a part of the social bond incurs a price—a sacrifice of personal freedom and satisfaction and this in itself engenders a certain suffering or discontent for each one who partakes.[11]

Each era has its own forms of suffering, and in the twenty-first century we can certainly say that depression, anxiety and addiction are the signifiers *par excellence* that represent contemporary forms. If, as Freud points out, a society or community fails to recognise and offer a means of expression for the aggressive and destructive drives that are embodied in each one,

[7] Ibid., pp.139-145.
[8] Ibid., p. 111.
[9] Ibid., pp. 109-112.
[10] Ibid., pp. 123-133.
[11] Ibid., p. 86.

then rather than manifest outwardly, these drives fall back onto the subject in various forms of aggressive and self-destructive behaviours. So rather than the enactment of aggression and violence upon one's neighbour, such forces turn back onto the individual. And so in this era we see the rise and epidemic of individual suffering on a massive scale. We are living in what the philosopher Han Byung-Chul names as a 'burnout society'.[12] The problem for the individual is how to localise and identify the cause of this subjective suffering.

The recent global economic collapse and the various forms of political and national crises across the globe have offered, in part, a solution. Successful political regimes have been able to recognise and speak to such discontent by once again employing the rhetoric of the outsider, the stranger who threatens internal stability and personal freedoms, and hence we see the erection of borders, walls and the exclusion once more of the other. We once again are witness to the rise of racism and religious intolerance and the displacement of peoples. In such discourse, humanity is reduced to quotas, and 'problem populations' to be dealt with in a form of language that eradicates singularity and silences human suffering.

For psychoanalysis that which is denied or refused will always return, will always repeat and the silent drive of aggression will always find its particular mode of expression within the social bond—whatever the era—because for psychoanalysis, the aggression and violence that threaten humanity live in the very heart of humanity. The question remains, *how can we respond?*

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[12] Han Byung-Chul, *The Burnout Society*, trans. E. Butler (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015).