

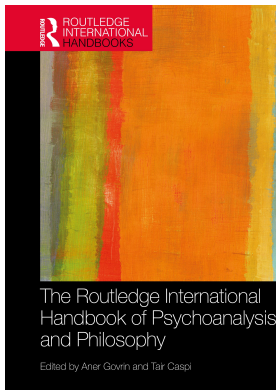
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ETHICS OF DISCONTENT

Shai Frogel

This chapter analyzes the ethics of psychoanalysis. Ethics is not used here in the sense of morality or in the sense of an ethical code, as it is often used today, but in its original philosophical meaning of a stance regarding human good life. In the history of philosophy, two great works carry the title “Ethics” – those of Aristotle and Spinoza. Both works present a stance regarding human good life, which is based on their conception of the human psyche. The present chapter applies this conception of ethics in examining the ethics of psychoanalysis.

Freud made great efforts to convince his scientific colleagues that psychoanalysis is not an ethical stance but a science. However, in his essays on culture, he lays out a very clear ethical view maintaining that secular existence is superior to a religious one, using his psychological theory to justify this stance. Furthermore, as his thinking progresses, he puts increasing weight on the cultural aspect of the psyche, which obliges him to replace his earlier biological terms with ethical ones.

This line of thought links Freud and psychoanalysis with the development of modern secular ethics. Modern secular ethics begins with Spinoza’s *Ethics*, where he explains our moral values in psychological terms rather than in religious ones and relates human good life to intellectual self-emancipation and not to religious faith. It continues with Nietzsche’s declaration on the “death of God” and his redefinition of human existence in psychological terms rather than metaphysical ones. The claim in this paper is that Freud takes this psychological turn in human thought further and proposes a new ethics that rejects religious and metaphysical ideas of salvation in the name of the reality principle and highlights the conflictual existence of the modern individual. This ethics underlies psychoanalysis and grants its philosophical justification.

Ethics: The Question of Human Good Life

The purpose of philosophy, according to Socrates, is achieving a good life or “a good spirit” (*eudemonia*). He advises achieving this goal through a dialogue that allows the interlocutors to heal any contradictions they have in their souls for a better understanding of their existence.¹ This recognition is, according to this view, the origin of both virtue and happiness, since it allows for a life guided by the truth. Socrates does not label this practice ethics, but his philosophical activity actually outlines the meaning of this concept in traditional philosophy.

Aristotle's and Spinoza's "Ethics" follow Socrates' path; both introduce a practice of existential enhancement based on their psychological theory.² Freud did the same. I therefore propose understanding psychoanalysis as an ethical stance. Furthermore, similar to Socrates, Aristotle, and Spinoza, Freud probes the connection between human good life and morality. The Oedipus complex, an idea that Freud assumes to underlie both individual psychology and culture, illustrates this point well by linking together primary desires and basic cultural taboos. However, before delving deeper in a discussion of the ethics of psychoanalysis, further clarification of the philosophical concept of ethics is required.

Aristotle's *Ethics* begins with an unequivocal statement:

Every craft and every inquiry, and similarly actions and choices, are thought to aim at some good; that is way the good has rightly been declared to be that at which all things aim.

(Aristotle, 2014, p. 215 [1094a])

The concept of the good is central to ethical discussion. It is only natural therefore, that Aristotle begins his work by a logical elucidation of the concept. Logically, he argues, the concept of the good stands for accomplishing a certain purpose. To judge whether something is good or bad, one must therefore know its purpose. Since ethics deals with the question of a good human life, one must first ask what the purpose of human life is. Surprising as it may sound, Aristotle thinks that the answer to this question is simple and accepted by most humans:

Verbally, pretty well everyone agrees; for both the general run of people and the refined say that it is happiness and assume that living well and faring well are the same thing as being happy.

(*ibid.*, p. 218 [1095a])

Aristotle uses this broad acceptance as the point of departure for his investigation.³ After probing the true meaning of human happiness, he concludes that happiness means realizing one's virtue, since "every virtue both brings into good condition the thing of which it is the virtue and also makes it perform its task well" (*ibid.*, p. 244 [1106a]). Aristotle emphasizes that "By human virtue we mean not that of the body but that of the soul; and happiness we call an activity of soul" (*ibid.*, p. 235 [1102a]).

Therefore, he analyzes the human soul and concludes that there are two kinds of human virtue: intellectual and moral. The first is developed by learning and the second by habit. Aristotle's ethical discussion focuses on the second, given the practical rather than theoretical context of his discussion. In spite of that, he ends his discussion with the conclusion that "happiness, therefore, must be some form of contemplation" (*ibid.*, p. 364 [1178b]). He explains this conclusion saying that contrary to our intellectual virtue, our moral virtue also involves emotions that partially depends on external circumstances. Aristotle acknowledges that living a purely contemplative life is impossible, since human existence is also physical and social. This recalls Socrates, who claims that human beings cannot be wise but mostly becoming "lovers of wisdom" (philosophers). In Aristotle's ethical view, then, a life of contemplation is an ideal rather than a realistic goal. Like a lighthouse, it should guide human existence.

Over 2,000 years after Aristotle, Spinoza defines the goal of his *Ethics* in the same way:

I pass on now to explain those things which must necessarily follow from the essence of God or the Being eternal and infinite; not indeed to explain all these things, for we

have demonstrated (Proposition 16, part I) that an infinitude of things must follow in an infinite number of ways – but to consider those things only which may conduct us as it were by the hand to the knowledge of the human mind and its highest happiness.

(Spinoza, 2001, p. 45)

Spinoza's *Ethics* begins with an ontological proof of the immanent nature of reality. However, the above quotation, which is the short introduction to part two of his work, defines the purpose of the entire work: "knowledge of the human mind and its highest happiness" (ibid.). He argues that the intellect, being the essence of the human mind, is the source of both human morality and happiness. Morality, according to Spinoza, derives from our ability to universalize psychological affects through our intellect, and is a necessary condition for achieving superior human happiness, which he defines as *amor Dei intellectualis* (intellectual love of God). This concept of happiness could be interpreted as a modern articulation of the Socratic idea of philosophy (love of wisdom) and Aristotle's definition of happiness as a contemplative life. Yet, the intellect is not alone in the philosophers' definition of happiness. It is accompanied by the concept of desire (*philia/amor*), which is crucial in a discussion of the ethics of psychoanalysis. Spinoza, similar to Plato and Aristotle, sees ethical development as elevating human desire from its emotional state to an intellectual one.

Freud rejects the traditional philosophical view of a rational psyche, claiming that instincts and drives make the core of our psychological life and not the intellect. Our psyche, according to this view, has biological origins and is not metaphysical. Freud was not the first to express this view, but he was one of the first to formulate a systematic psychological theory based on this assumption. Psychoanalysis developed to be an original view of the human psyche. It rejects the old metaphysical views of philosophy and religion while also conflicting with the scientific psychology, which reduces human psychology to mere empirical facts. Freud's orientation in developing his theory of psychoanalysis was initially biological. Yet as his work progressed, he realized that the human psyche is as much a cultural phenomenon as a biological one. His conceptualizations of the Oedipus complex and the super-ego are genuine outcomes of this realization. It also made him introduce ethical terms into his psychoanalytic theory and discussing culture in his essays. In those essays, Freud explores the interrelations between culture and individual psychology but also the secular ethical ground of psychoanalysis. He claims that religious faith is a deeply illusion whose historical role has ended, and the time has come to overcome it. This idea links Freud and psychoanalysis with the emergent secular ethics in modern thought. The beginnings of this ethics are commonly thought to go back to Spinoza's *Ethics*, where he rejects the idea of a transcendent God and argues in favor of ethics based on human understanding and not on faith. Nietzsche's symbolic declaration on the "death of God" and his call for reevaluation of human values was another important philosophical milestone in the development of this ethics. Nietzsche recognized himself the similarity between Spinoza's central ideas and his, while Freud admitted that Nietzsche's ideas preceded his thought.⁴ This historical and philosophical linkage is the subject of the next section, where I show how Spinoza's and Nietzsche's thought paved the way for the ethics of psychoanalysis.

Secular Ethics: From Ethical Psychology to Psychological Ethics

As shown in the first part of this chapter, ethics is concerned with human good life. Because monotheistic religion monopolized western culture, the origin and authority of ethics have related to the transcendent God. Morality and happiness have been regarded as the products of religious faith, and sinning as the cause of psychological distress. One might name this approach "ethical psychology", where the ethical outlook determines the psychological one. In this

section, the central argument is that secular ethics has turned this perspective upside down by deriving human ethics from human psychology, creating a psychological ethics. The basic assumption underlying ethics of this kind is that investigation of the human psyche is a prerequisite in formulating an ethical outlook. In fact, this is how secular modern thinkers have revived Aristotle's approach to ethics. Freud's theory of psychoanalysis is part of the historical turn begun by Spinoza and brought significantly closer to psychoanalysis in Nietzsche's philosophy.

Spinoza: Immanent Ethics

Spinoza's immanent ontology and ethics were born from the modern spirit of the natural sciences. In his time, natural scientists began explaining natural phenomena by the laws of nature and not a transcendent cause. Indeed, these sciences secularized nature by disconnecting its laws from God. Spinoza's philosophy continued this revolution by giving it an ontological justification and by formulating an ethical view to suit it.

The first truth of Spinoza's philosophy is that reality is necessarily one whole and could not be otherwise since the idea of a transcendent reality (i.e., a reality beyond reality) is self-contradictory. By this, Spinoza excludes the possibility of a transcendent God, and maintains that the concepts of God and Nature refer to the same thing (*Deus sive Natura*), which is the only infinite reality. He rejects the old image of two worlds, heaven and earth, and replaces it by that of one world ruled by its own laws. This new ontology calls for formulating a new kind of ethics, based on the immanent nature of human beings and not on a transcendent authority.

Spinoza formulates a new ethics that is built on four central hypotheses which he validates in different parts of *Ethics*:

- 1 The intellect is the active aspect and essence of the human mind (Part II, under the title: "Nature and the Origin of the Mind").
- 2 The affects are the passive aspect and bondage of the human mind (Part III, under the title: "Origin and the Nature of Affects").
- 3 Morality is an outcome of the intellectualization of the affects (Part IV, under the title: "On Human Bondage").
- 4 Happiness means intellectual emancipation (Part V, under the title: "Of the Power of the Intellect").

Spinoza's ethics regards humans as rational beings whose existence is also determined by affects. This explains our need for moral concepts, which are intellectualizations of our feelings of joy and sorrow towards achieving happiness. In this process, the intellect releases the mind of the bondage of the affects and directs it towards self-emancipation. Moral concepts are, then, human inventions expressing human weakness and passivity (affects) but also power and activity (intellect). This explains Spinoza's definition of happiness as *amor dei intellectualis* (intellectual love of God), which stands for loving reality in its entirety as a consequence of intellectual emancipation. Despite mentioning God in the definition of happiness, this is secular ethics because God refers here to reality as a whole and not to a divine and transcendent authority. Underlying this ethics is human understanding rather than faith, and its purpose does not go beyond the actual life of human beings. As Spinoza puts it, "A free man thinks of nothing less than of death, and his wisdom is not a meditation upon death but upon life" (Spinoza, 2001, p. 212).

Spinoza brings ethics back from God's heaven to the actual human existence on earth. This signifies a psychological turn in the understanding of human ethics that originates from rejecting the transcendent world and the consequent need to formulate ethics in immanent terms. In

formulating his ethics, Spinoza uses the psychological terms “affects” and “intellect” to argue that the shift from a life determined by affects to a life that is increasingly guided by the intellect enhances human existence. The intellect makes humans live up to their common essence, thus making a moral life possible. Morality, however, is not a purpose of itself but a means to achieving a better human existence. Since the intellect is the essence of the human mind, a full accomplishment of its potential is the only way to reach the most elevated state of human existence, which Spinoza names *amor dei intellectualis*. At this level of existence, the intellect alone determines one’s desire (love), directing it towards the reality as a whole (God). By formulating his concept of happiness in terms of desire, Spinoza relates both to the ancient Greek idea of philosophy (love of wisdom) and to the new ethics of desire, psychoanalysis.⁵

Psychoanalysis does not share, however, Spinoza’s metaphysical language and his belief that human beings are rational. The philosopher who takes the new secular view a step further towards psychoanalysis is Friedrich Nietzsche. To Spinoza’s rejection of the transcendent God, Nietzsche adds the rejection of the metaphysical idea of human essence. Historical and biological forces determine individual human existence, he argues, and not a common essence, and this process is mostly unconscious. New ethics is therefore required that recognizes the individuality of each human being and is not based on the idea of a common good. “And how should there be a ‘common good!’”, he writes in *Beyond Good and Evil*. “The term contradicts itself: whatever can be common always has little value” (Nietzsche, 1989, p. 53). Nietzsche’s philosophy replaces the abstractions of traditional philosophy, including Spinoza’s, with the concrete life of the human individual. He does it by rejecting the idea of metaphysical truth, which he interprets as hostile to life, and therefore a bad foundation for human ethics. Instead, he proposes new ethics of life, which corresponds better to the view that human beings are organisms with a historical consciousness rather than metaphysical entities locked in physical bodies.

Nietzsche: Ethics of Life

“There are no moral phenomena at all”, Nietzsche argues in his book *Beyond Good and Evil*, “but only a moral interpretation of phenomena” (ibid., p. 85). This statement is often mentioned to indicate Nietzsche’s radical and even nihilistic thought. In the present context, however, it may serve to demonstrate a continuity between Spinoza’s and Nietzsche’s thought. Long before Nietzsche, Spinoza argued that morality is not embodied in the structure of the world but is a human invention based on an interpretation of the world from the human perspective. Yet there is a crucial difference between their approaches: while Spinoza argues for moral universalism based on a common human essence, Nietzsche argues for moral individualism based on human individuality. This difference represents a turn from the old concept of ethics of truth to the Nietzsche’s new concept of ethics of life.

In his introduction to *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche accuses traditional religion and philosophy of planting wrong ideas in the minds of people. The most dangerous, he argues is “Plato’s invention of the pure spirit and the good as such” (ibid., p. 2). He argues that such utopian ideas generate hostility towards actual life by judging it as poor, bad, and false. In his earlier book *The Gay Science*, he already suggested that these failed and dangerous ideas originate in the will to truth, which could be interpreted, he suggests, as a concealed will to death:

Charitably interpreted, such a resolve might perhaps be a Quixotism, a minor slightly mad enthusiasm; but it might also be something more serious, namely, a principle that is hostile to life and destructive – “Will to truth” – that might be a concealed will to death.
(Nietzsche, 1974, p. 282)

The interpretation of the will to truth as “a concealed will to death” indicates the general direction of Nietzsche’s thought, particularly his ethical thought. He introduces an alternative to the ethics of truth, which puts at its center the actual life of the individual human being as an unavoidable conclusion from “the death of God.”

Nietzsche’s declaration on “the death of God” was first a sociological observation rather than a philosophical conclusion. It represented the historical fact that in the western culture of his time a growing number of people no longer believed in the existence of God. This crisis or “event”, in his terms, sent him on a philosophical journey of examining the idea of truth and especially the human need for metaphysical truths. He concludes that the origin of our truths, especially metaphysical ones such as “the good in itself” or God, lies in our existential fears and weaknesses. These truths, he argues, are nothing more than existential supports that help us stabilize our fragile existence. He formulates this psychological idea in section 347 of *The Gay Science*, titled “Believers and Their Need to Believe”:

How much one needs a faith (*Glaube*) in order to flourish, how much that is “firm” and that one does not wish to be shaken because one clings to it, that is a measure of degree of one strength (or, to put the point more clearly, of one’s weakness).

(*ibid.*, p. 287)

Nietzsche sees a direct connection between existential weakness and faith. This thought is not foreign to the monotheistic religions, which underscore the weakness of man to praise the power of God. However, Nietzsche’s emphasis intends to undermine religion as such; religious truths that are rooted in human weakness are necessarily very doubtful. Furthermore, if they originate in our existential fears rather than in true understanding of the world, their acceptance involves self-deception, namely, a kind of wishful thinking. “The death of God”, Nietzsche argues, can release us from this deceptive existence:

Once a human being reaches the fundamental conviction that he must be commanded, he becomes “a believer”. Conversely, one could conceive of such a pleasure and power of self-determination, such a freedom of the will that the spirit would take leave of all faith and every wish for certainty, being practiced in maintaining himself on insubstantial ropes and possibilities and dancing even near abysses. Such a spirit would be the free spirit par excellence.

(*ibid.*, pp. 289–290)

To Nietzsche, a non-religious existence is similar to dancing on a tightrope. In such an existence, he says, the individual overcomes the need for absolute certainty, which only metaphysical guarantees can satisfy, and is free from the chains of faith. The existence of that individual is less stable but more vital, as it is not curbed by eternal commandments. By rejecting the idea of eternal good and evil Nietzsche does not reject ethics itself, as the title of the book *Beyond Good and Evil* might imply. He clarifies this point in his next book *On the Genealogy of Morals: Beyond Good and Evil*. At least this does not mean “Beyond Good and Bad” (Nietzsche, 1989a, p. 55).

Nietzsche’s ideas of “Slave morality” and “Master morality” may help clarify his new concept of ethics. “Slave morality” stands for ethics that originates in human fears and weaknesses, which is why Nietzsche’s philosophy identifies it with the ethics of religion. Since this ethics is the product of a frightened consciousness, its concept of evil precedes the concept of good. Whatever threatens one’s existence is defined as evil, and accordingly, whatever is able to rescue one from this threat is defined as good. The concept of evil is foreign to “Master morality” and

is therefore useful in explaining the meaning of ethics that stands beyond good and evil. This ethics sees life as a broad expanse of opportunity and not as a threat, and its followers feel free to formulate their own ideals and define them as good. Accordingly, failing to realize these ideals stands for the bad in this ethics. Similar to Spinoza's ethics, and in contrast to "slave morality", the concept of good comes first in this ethics, and is defined by human power rather than by human fears. However, Spinoza sees our power in our common intellect and therefore argues for universal ethics, while Nietzsche sees it in the individuality of each human being, and therefore argues for individualistic ethics.

Ethical development, according to Nietzsche, can only occur if people succeed in overcoming the need for a common truth and live up to their individuality. The main ethical lesson Nietzsche derives from "the death of God" is that the claim for a cosmological moral order is nothing but an illusion. Enslaving our life to an illusion instead of living it as best we can is an ethical failure. This recognition increases the value of each individual's actual life. Life is no longer a pale or distorted mode of a pure or utopian idea but a unique mode of being. Nietzsche takes Spinoza's immanent ethics a step further. While Spinoza's ethics adopts the metaphysical idea of a common human essence, Nietzsche rejects this metaphysical remnant to underscore the individuality of each human being. However, it is possible to interpret Nietzsche's rejection of the metaphysical aspect of human's existence as an unavoidable outcome of Spinoza's ethics, where he discards God's heaven in favor of human earth. The epigraph Freud chose for his first book on psychoanalysis, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, implies that he followed this line of thought: "If I cannot bend the heavens above, I will move Hell" (*Flectere si nequeo superos, Acheronta movebo*; Freud, 1900). It symbolizes Freud's rejection of transcendent approaches to human life in favor of immanent ones. In his later essays dealing with culture, he explicitly continues Spinoza's and Nietzsche's line of thought by rejecting religious faith as an illusion and by seeing ethics as a human invention. His unique contribution to this modern approach to ethics is his original psychological theory, offering a systematic explanation for the origins of religious illusion and human values. At the core of this theory lies the claim that our civilized existence stems from repressed complexes and necessarily involves discontent. That is the reason for my referring to the ethics of psychoanalysis as the "ethics of discontent", a name that obviously echoes Freud's most important ethical essay, "Civilization and Its Discontents".

Freud: Ethics of Discontent

In his "Introduction Lectures on Psycho-Analysis", Freud links psychoanalysis with the process of scientific secularization of Man's self-perception:

In the course of centuries, the naïve self-love of men has had to submit to two major blows at the hands of science. The first was when they learnt that our earth was not the center of the universe but only a tiny fragment of a cosmic system of scarcely imaginable vastness. This is associated in our minds with the name of Copernicus. [. . .] The second blow fell when biological research destroyed man's supposedly privileged place in creation and proved his descent from the animal kingdom and his ineradicable animal nature. This revaluation has been accomplished in our own days by Darwin, Wallace and their predecessors. [. . .] But human megalomania will have suffered its third and most wounding blow from the psychological research of the present time which seeks to prove to the ego that it is not even master in its own house, but must content itself with scanty information of what is going on unconsciously in its mind. We psychoanalysts were not the first and not the only ones to utter this call to introspection;

but it seems to be our fate to give it its most forcible expression and to support it with empirical material which affects every individual.

(Freud, 1917, p. 285)

To Freud, modern empirical science represents the reality principle: it takes humans away from their state of infantile phantasies and illusions and brings them down to the ground of reality by strictly adhering to knowledge based on empirical evidence.⁶ This knowledge reveals that the world was not created for Man as the scriptures preach, but it is a boundless universe of which we are but “a tiny fragment” (ibid.). Our earth is not the center of the universe and we are not semi-divine creators but “descend from the animal kingdom” (ibid.). Psychoanalysis, Freud argues, follows this line of thought, substituting religious convictions with empirical recognitions. Furthermore, psychoanalysis’ recognition is the most paralyzing, he claims, since it reveals that Man is “not even master in its own house” (ibid.). This is Freud’s version of Nietzsche’s declaration of “the death of God” that follows Spinoza’s science-oriented spirit. Modern science, according to Freud, obliges human beings to cope with the shocking recognition that the universe has no father, a recognition which Nietzsche symbolically names “the death of God”. Freud’s psychological theory is rooted in this new recognition; as Lacan puts it: “The myth of the murder of the father is the myth of a time for which God is dead” (Lacan, 1992, p. 177). Freud, while fervently attempting to convince others that psychoanalysis is an empirical science and not an ethical stance, presents it explicitly as an ethical stance in his essays on culture. Psychoanalysis is a secular ethics that sees religious faith as an illusion that humans must overcome if they wish to have a better life. Unlike the metaphysical and religious ethics, this ethics does not revolve around salvation but around authenticity.⁷ Ethics of this kind (e.g., Nietzsche’s ethics) is not an ethics of harmony but of discontent.

The essay “Totem and Taboo” illustrates Freud’s increasing attention to the cultural aspect of human psychology.⁸ The essay is an attempt to bridge the gap between the end of the biological explanation of human evolution and the beginning of the anthropological one. Freud suggests that the psychoanalytical idea of the Oedipus complex can explain the birth of human civilization from human biology. We should assume, he claims, that human civilization began with the murder of a father that affected deeply the murderers, his sons. They consequently decided to bridle their biological drives by adopting the ideas of Totem (religion) and Taboo (morality). However, already in this essay he argues that the function of religion is merely emotional, whereas morality also has a practical facet (Freud, 1923, p. 15). In the essay “The Future of Illusion”, Freud takes this argument a step further, claiming that religious faith is nothing but an illusion of a helpless mind. He concludes that the time has come in human history to replace the religious conception of life by a scientific one. The latter, he argues, does not promise salvation but is more realistic and thus enhances human existence. He elaborates on this ethical view in “Civilization and Its Discontents,” which begins by dismissing religious or “oceanic” feeling as a mode of infantile regression. He argues that human existence would improve once the conflictual nature of the civilized psyche is acknowledged. Indeed, this conflictual psyche is the origin of psychological distress, but it is also the source of human achievements. Before delving deeper into “Civilization and Its Discontents”, which stands at the focus of my discussion, let me clarify briefly Freud’s rejection of religious faith in the essay “The Future of Illusion”. This is a crucial step towards validating my argument that psychoanalysis is rooted in secular ethics.

“The Future of Illusion” ends with a very clear conclusion:

Religion would thus be the universal obsessional neurosis of humanity; like the obsessional neurosis of children, it arose out of the Oedipus complex, out of the relation to

the father. If this view is right, it is to be supposed that a turning-away from religion is bound to occur with the fatal inevitability of a process of growth, and that we find ourselves at this very juncture in the middle of that phase of development. Our behavior should therefore be modelled on that of a sensible teacher who does not oppose an impending new development but seeks to ease its path and mitigate the violence of its irruption.

(Freud, 1927, p. 42)

The conclusion that “a turning away from religion is bound to occur” arises from Freud’s psychological analysis of religious ideas. According to this analysis, they are illusions that have a very strong psychological effect. Their illusory nature and their psychological power are both explained by their origin in the most primitive fears of humanity, or, as Freud put it, “born from man’s need to make his helplessness tolerable and built up from the material of memories of the helplessness of his own childhood and the childhood of the human race” (*ibid.*, 17). The parallelism he established in “Totem and Taboo” between the development of a child and the development of civilization is used here to explain the extent to which we are trapped in religious ideas. Nietzsche names our difficulty to release ourselves from religious ideas “the shadows of God”. He explains it in the fact that the idea of God has dominated western culture for centuries.⁹ Freud’s explanation is more systematic, going back to the beginnings of the civilized life of both infants and humanity. He bases his explanation on the capability of our psyche to turn anxiety into a defense mechanism by illusion. The fundamental expression of this capability is that the threatening father turns into an omnipotent protector by a process of idealization. Similarly, Freud argues, the adult human anthropomorphizes nature, turning it from an indifferent cruel entity into a protector. Illusions, Freud points out, are not necessarily false, but are always the result of our wishes and not of our understanding. That is why they teach us more about our subjective fears than about objective reality. According to Freud, the fact that religious ideas are illusions rooted in our basic existential fears explains their strong effect. He thinks, therefore, that a “sensible teacher” is required to release humans from this illusory shield that protects them from their most primeval fears: “the time has probably come, as it does in an analytic treatment, for replacing the effects of repression by the results of the rational operation of the intellect” (*ibid.*, p. 43).

Freud, much like Spinoza and Nietzsche, acknowledges the important psychological function of religious ideas, and like them thinks that the time has come to discard them. He is closer in spirit to the scientific stance of Spinoza’s thought, but his conception of the human psyche is closer to Nietzsche’s anti-metaphysical view. While urging to replace the religious view with a scientific one, he does not think in terms of metaphysical theory as Spinoza does, but in terms of biology and culture, like Nietzsche. He believes this change can help improve human life by making humans concentrate on their real life rather than enslave it to a protective illusion:

By withdrawing their expectations from the other world and concentrating all their liberated energies into their life on earth, they will probably succeed in achieving a state of things in which life will become tolerable for everyone and civilization no longer oppressive to anyone.

(ibid., p. 49)

In “Civilization and Its Discontents”, Freud formulates the ethics of the new Man, who is no longer influenced by religious ideas. He argues that the life of such a person, although necessarily characterized by discontent, is more authentic and valuable, being guided by the reality

principle. As he did in “The Future of Illusion”, he presents it as a better alternative to religious existence, which he now rejects as a kind of psychosis. He criticizes religion ironically for pretending to explain the purpose of human life and suggests a less assuming point of departure for human ethics, one that is very similar to Aristotle’s in his *Ethics*:

We will therefore turn to the less ambitious question of what men themselves show by their behavior to be the purpose and intention of their lives. What do they demand of life and wish to achieve in it? The answer to this can hardly be in doubt. They strive after happiness; they want to become happy and to remain so.

(Freud, 1930, p. 75)

Once free of a religious goal, the purpose of human ethics is human happiness. However, whereas a metaphysical view of human existence, such as that of Aristotle and Spinoza, interprets happiness as harmony, the anti-metaphysical view, such as that of Nietzsche and Freud, understands it as authenticity. Yet, Nietzsche, like other philosophers before him, thinks in ideal terms that lead him to formulate the new ethical ideal of the overman (*Übermensch*). Freud rejects this line of thought and criticizes Nietzsche’s new ideal of being in his essay “Beyond the Pleasure Principle” directly:

It may be difficult, too, for many of us, to abandon the belief that there is an instinct towards perfection at work in human beings, which has brought them to their present high level of intellectual achievement and ethical sublimation and which may be expected to watch over their development into supermen [*Übermensch* S.F]. I have no faith, however, in the existence of any such internal instinct and I cannot see how this benevolent illusion is to be preserved. The present development of human beings requires, as it seems to me, no different explanation from that of animals. What appears in a minority of human individuals as an untiring impulsion towards further perfection can easily be understood as a result of the instinctual repression upon which is based all that is most precious in human civilization.

(Freud, 1920, p. 42)

Unlike the philosophers, Freud, as a scientist and therapist, thinks in terms of normal life and not an ideal one. Moreover, he interprets the ideal thinking and language of the philosophers as a defense mechanism, much like religious ideals. Although Freud is a great explorer of the productive function of phantasies and sublimations, he established his approach to human life on the reality principle. This is his point of departure as a physician and a positivist scientist, the *raison d’être* of his therapeutic method and the foundation of his ethical view. To Freud, the reality is that which positivist science considers as reality, namely, empirical facts.¹⁰ Therefore, as the above quote indicates, he insists that any explanation of human life, its ethical goal, and its intellectual achievements should be restricted to biological instincts and their repression. This leads him to the theoretical idea of sublimation, which is a “certain kind of modification of the aim and change of the object, in which our social valuation is taken into account” (Freud 1933, p. 97). This psychological capability makes civilization possible and explains its achievements but bring discontent into the life of the civilized human being, since it requires struggling against the original biological instincts. In his essay “Civilization and Its Discontents”, Freud explains the basic discontents that underlie the foundation of civilized life:

- 1 The pleasure principle determines the purpose of human life, although it can never be fully satisfied.

- 2 Sexual love works against the interests of civilization, and civilization devises restrictions to manage this love.
- 3 Civilization restricts the natural aggression of human beings.
- 4 Civilization is the source of the human sense of guilt.

According to Freud's biological approach, biology, rather than any metaphysical goal, determines the purpose of human life. The pleasure principle with which humans are born determines the life of each individual. It explains the direction life takes as earlier experiences of satisfactions and dissatisfactions shape mature choices. The most crucial point of this argument, however, is that while determining the purpose of human life, the pleasure principle can never be fully satisfied because the world around us acts against it. Humans are doomed to struggle to achieve an unattainable goal:

We are threatened with suffering from three directions: from our own body, which is doomed to decay and dissolution and which cannot even do without pain and anxiety as warning signals; from the external world, which may rage against us with overwhelming and merciless forces of destruction; and finally from our relations to other men.

(Freud, 1930, p. 77)

Our capability to satisfy the pleasure principle is very limited and more than anything else depends on good luck. For this reason, most human beings prefer, from the very early stages of their development, to avoid suffering than strive for ultimate pleasure. In psychoanalytical terms, this means transforming the pleasure principle into the reality principle, a transformation that produces discontent since it involves suspending and rejecting satisfactions. Yet it is crucial, according to Freud, for the development of each individual and the whole of civilization. This is the primary reason why Freud's ethical stance rejects ideas of eternal harmony as illusive and regressive.

We cannot completely avoid physical pain or pain caused by the external world, which is beyond our control. The question is why civilization, a human creation, brings discontent into our existence. Freud thinks that the primary cause for that is the cultivation of the original biological love. Our biology determines our first objects of love through the pleasure we derive from them regardless of the restrictions or taboos of civilization, which are foreign to biology. This explains why the Oedipus complex is so central to our psychological development, marking the transformation from sexual love to non-sexual or civilized love. In the civilization process, the sexual desire for the mother turns into love for the mother, and consequently into an ambivalent relation with the father. This primary sublimation, which bends biological desire to the laws of civilization, underlies the psychological development of every civilized human being. However, since the origin of every love is biological, it keeps undermining the civilized order and bringing discontent into the life of the civilized human being. Love, while being the source of the highest human satisfaction, is therefore also the source of discontent in human civilized life. This is the first answer to the question why civilization, which was created by humans for their own benefit, is also a source of psychological discontent. However, Freud does not use this insight to speak against civilization but against an ethical view based on love:

According to one ethical view, whose deeper motivation will become clear to us presently, this readiness for a universal love of mankind and the world represents the highest standpoint which man can reach. Even at this early stage of the discussion, I

should like to bring forward my two main objections to this view. A love that does not discriminate seems to me to forfeit a part of its own value, by doing an injustice to its object; and secondly, not all men are worthy of love.

(*ibid.*, p. 102)

Freud, a modern explorer of Eros, argues that ethics cannot and should not be based on the idea of universal love because the biological origin of love discriminates between objects, and therefore can never be authentically transformed into universal love. Ethics should not be based on universal love because its goal is achieving a better human life, which sometimes means hating those who deserve it. An ethical approach that castrates the highest human pleasure, which, according to Freud's theory, is also the criterion for our happiness, is wrong. True ethics should recognize that love discriminates between its objects and its formulation must take this into account. This is another example of Freud's rejection of ethics of harmony in favor of realistic ethics that is based on recognition of the conflictual nature of civilization and of each civilized human being. Freud admits that civilized life requires sublimating biological instincts but thinks it cannot and should not alienate them altogether. Therefore, discontent is a necessary part of ethical development, and any ethical approach that aims to annihilate discontent is, according to Freud, wrong and misleading.

While biology grants us love, it also breeds aggression, which means that the process of civilization requires the sublimation of aggression as well. This is another source of discontent for the civilized human: "If civilization imposes such great sacrifices not only on man's sexuality but on his aggressivity, we can understand better why it is hard for him to be happy in that civilization" (*ibid.*, p. 115).

However, unlike love, which turns into a constitutive element of civilization by a process of sublimation, aggression is thoroughly destructive to civilization. Civilization, as the myth of "Totem and Taboo" tells, begins with an act of aggression against aggression and by giving up aggression. An aggressive father was murdered by the brothers who agreed after the murder to sacrifice aggression for a common social life. However, aggression is an expression of a primary drive, and eliminating it is impossible without eliminating life itself. It can only be civilized by sublimation, and like every sublimation, it is necessarily an insufficient substitute that generates discontent. The need to sublimate aggression is therefore another source of discontent for civilized Man. Moreover, the most effective way for civilization to cope with aggression, Freud argues, is by making us turn our aggression against ourselves. This gives rise to a sense of guilt, which Freud considers the most important issue in the evolution of civilization and the central origin of discontent in the life of civilized Man:

In the first place, I suspect that the reader has the impression that our discussions on the sense of guilt disrupt the framework of this essay: that they take up too much space, so that the rest of its subject-matter, with which they are not always closely connected, is pushed to one side. This may have spoiled the structure of my paper; but it corresponds faithfully to my intention to represent the sense of guilt as the most important problem in the development of civilization and to show that the price we pay for our advance in civilization is a loss of happiness through the heightening of the sense of guilt.

(*Freud, 1930, p. 134*)

Civilization was born, as explained in "Totem and Taboo", from the sense of guilt, the outcome of turning aggression from external objects to internal ones. However, the sense of guilt is also the source of morality, which Freud explain in his theory by the idea of the super-ego. This

new psychological master, comprising internalized values, is a by-product of turning aggression inwards. One may regard it as an outcome of the primary trauma, where the fear of castration is so acute that it leads to self-castration. Once this happens, the inner world becomes as threatening as the external world, often even more so.¹¹

Civilized life comes at the cost of discontent. The ethics of civilized human beings should therefore be grounded in this recognition. This ethics stands in contrast to metaphysical ethics, which promises salvation in the name of eternal truth. Freud rejects the idea of salvation by explaining it psychologically as an infantile phantasy or illusion. He formulates ethics derived from his psychological theory, calling upon humans to follow the reality principle and cope sincerely and pragmatically with their existence. It assumes that each human being is an individual with a different history, which makes it impossible and wrong to suggest a common prescription for a proper human existence. In Freud's view, human life is conflictual because the development of each individual and of humanity as a whole results from a sublimation of biological instincts, which necessarily produces discontent. The capability to cope well with this conflictual life without denying its conflictual nature or being defeated by it paves the way to morality and to the great achievements of human civilization. Freud therefore sees psychoanalysis as "inducing the patient to give up the repressions (using the word in the widest sense) belonging to his early development and to replace them by reactions of a sort that would correspond to a psychically mature condition" (Freud, 1937, p. 257). Freud, much like the thinkers of the enlightenment, understands human development in terms of maturation, represented in his theory by the reality principle. However, whereas the enlightenment scholars assume that man is a rational being, Freud assumes that the origin of psychological life is biological, and therefore irrational. In his view, maturity is not the end of conflictual life but its sublimation. Like Nietzsche's ethics, Freud's ethics is individualistic, but unlike Nietzsche's ethics, it is not reserved for outstanding people.

Conclusion

Psychoanalysis regards our psyche as a historical phenomenon originating in biology and shaped by culture. Accordingly, it interprets human existence in biological and cultural terms rather than religious ones. This makes it a secular ethical view, which has at its core the conflicts between the biological and cultural aspects of human existence. Its practice aims to enable living better with these conflicts rather than annihilating them, as the latter means annihilating psychological life.

Because it recognizes the historicity and individuality of human existence, psychoanalysis is not a moral doctrine that proposes definitive moral values. Paul Ricoeur rightly claims that it is unable to provide us with normative answers since it asks primary questions concerning the desires with which we approach concrete moral problems.¹² The priority that psychoanalysis gives to the concrete over the abstract brings it very close to Nietzsche's reevaluation of values, giving priority to the concrete life of each individual over general and abstract truths. According to this psychological approach to morality, moral values are human inventions that should be constantly reexamined to prevent them from turning into psychological fixations.

Discontent, according to this view, is neither an ethical problem nor an indication of a moral sin. Discontent is a characteristic of a vital psychological life that might yield psychological distresses but is also the source of human achievements. According to this ethics, the purpose of human life and of psychotherapy is not reaching complete harmony. This is an illusionary goal that can only breed further frustration or psychological death. Like Nietzsche's ethics, it is an ethics of life, where moral values are tested in terms of life and death rather than of truth

and falseness; whatever promotes life is good while whatever degenerates it is bad. Complete elimination of discontent, if at all possible, is a sign of death and not of a good life.

Regarded from this perspective, psychoanalysis is a major milestone in the development of secular ethics in western culture. The legacy of secular ethics, which originates in Greek philosophy and reemerges in the modern period in Spinoza's ethics, presents itself as an alternative to the mythical or religious type of ethics. Greek philosophy calls to replace the *mythos* by *logos*, and Spinoza revives this idea in modernity. Both, however, formulate their purpose, similar to the religious one, in terms of harmonic existence. Nietzsche and Freud reject the metaphysical idea of the psyche along with the prospect of harmonic existence.¹³ In contrast to the metaphysical approaches, be they philosophical or religious, they explain psychological development as sublimation rather than purification. Accordingly, they offer an original view of ethics, which does not aim to eliminate existential discontent but reshape it into new forms of life.

Notes

- 1 In some cases, he argues that he practices it for the wellbeing of others, for example in "The Apology" (Plato, 2001); in other cases for his own wellbeing, for example in "Phaedo" (Plato, 2001a).
- 2 The paper refers to Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*.
- 3 Freud begins his investigation in "Civilization and Its Discontents" with the same assumption, namely, that happiness is the purpose of human life (Freud, 1930, p. 76).
- 4 Nietzsche, in a postcard to Franz Overbeck, Sils-Maria, July 30, 1881:

I am utterly amazed, utterly enchanted! I have a *precursor*, and what a precursor! I hardly knew Spinoza: that I should have turned to him just *now*, was inspired by "instinct." Not only is his over tendency like mine – namely to make all knowledge the *most powerful affect* – but in five main points of his doctrine I recognize myself; this most unusual and loneliest thinker is closest to me precisely in these matters: he denies the freedom of the will, teleology, the moral world-order, the unegoistic, and evil. Even though the divergencies are admittedly tremendous, they are due more to the difference in time, culture, and science. *In summa*: my lonesomeness, which, as on very high mountains, often made it hard for me to breathe and make my blood rush out, is now at least a twosomeness.

(Nietzsche 1969, p. 177)

Freud on Nietzsche in "On the History of the Psycho-Analytic Movement":

In later years, I have denied myself the very great pleasure of reading the works of Nietzsche, with the deliberate object of not being hampered in working out the impressions received in psycho-analysis by any sort of anticipatory ideas. I had therefore to be prepared – and I am so, gladly – to forgo all claims to priority in the many instances in which laborious psycho-analytic investigation can merely confirm the truths which the philosopher recognized by intuition.

(Freud, 1914, pp. 15–16)

- 5 Accordingly, Paul Ricoeur compares psychoanalysis and Spinoza's *Ethics*:

Thus, psychoanalysis would like to be, like Spinoza's *Ethics*, a reeducation of desire. It is this reeducation which it posits as the prior condition for all human reform, whether intellectual, political, or social.

(Ricoeur, 1974, p. 194)

- 6 In light of this, it is ironic that the empirical sciences often dismiss psychoanalysis (see Popper, 1963).
- 7 Lacan claims that authenticity is one of the three basic ideals of psychoanalysis, the other two being human love and independence (1992, p. 9).
- 8 James Strachey emphasizes this fact in his editor's note to the standard edition of the essay "The Future of Illusion":

In the "Postscript" which Freud added in 1935 to his *Autobiographical Study* he remarked on "a significant change" that had come about in his writings during the previous decade. "My

interest”, he explained, “after making a long *détour* through the natural sciences, medicine and psychotherapy, returned to the cultural problems which had fascinated me long before, when I was a youth scarcely old enough for thinking” (*Standard Ed.*, 20, 72).

(Freud, 1927, p. 3)

9 Nietzsche (1974, p. 167).

10 Ludwig Wittgenstein expresses this idea explicitly in his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*: “The world is a totality of facts, not of things” (Wittgenstein, 1971, p. 7).

11 Nietzsche also thinks that the major source of discontent in human life is a sense of guilt, but unlike Freud he claims that one should overcome it for a better life (Nietzsche, 1997, p. 36).

12 Ricoeur (1974, p. 194).

13 Nietzsche equates with irony Plato’s ethics and Christianity: “Christianity is Platonism for ‘the people”” (Nietzsche, 1989, p. 2).

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