

Love, Suffering and Conflict: Some Lessons from Freud's Civilization and Its Discontents

Brian R. Clack, University of San Diego, USA

The Asian Conference on Ethics, Religion and Philosophy 2014
Official Conference Proceedings 2014

0066

Freud's great book *Civilization and Its Discontents* is permeated by a profound pessimism and an attention to the extent and unavoidable presence of suffering and conflict in human life. According to Freud there are three principal sources of suffering. It results: (1) from our own body, doomed to decay and dissolution; (2) from the external world (Freud is here thinking of diseases and natural disasters); and (3) from our relations with other people (we are threatened by their cruelty, violence and faithlessness). (As we will see, our relations with others are actually of an ambivalent nature, since human beings have the capacity both to support us and to bring us low.) Reflection upon these multi-directional sources is enough to make us realize that it is impossible to avoid suffering, and this significantly undermines the very possibility of achieving a state of happiness: 'Life, as we find it,' he writes, 'is too hard for us; it brings us too many pains, disappointments and impossible tasks' (Freud, 1961, p. 23). What is it that human beings typically do in the face of this unavoidable existential pain? Freud's suggestion is that people adopt one or more of a number of possible strategies that serve to soften the worst blows of life. He refers to these as 'palliative measures', a term which highlights the essentially hopeless and incurable nature of the human condition: a palliative, after all, is something that *relieves without curing*, something that lessens the effects of far-advanced, severe and curative-unresponsive illnesses.

Freud mentions four palliative measures utilized in the total arena of human existence. Firstly, *intoxicants and drugs* (of one variety or another) are employed either to numb oneself to the troubles of existence (narcotics and alcohol can be seen to serve this function) or else to introduce a degree of stimulation into a life felt to be colourless and dull (hallucinogens and stimulants such as cocaine might in this capacity be used). The second strategy is the adoption of *religion*, which (at least on the Freudian interpretation) palliates the most painful aspects of life by, as it were, *re-creating* a picture of the world, so that its 'most unbearable features are eliminated and replaced by others that are in conformity with one's own wishes' (Freud, 1961, p. 31). The third palliative is the enjoyment of *art*, the pleasures of which can be felt to diminish the problems of life – or at least to add some kind of value to one's world – though Freud feels that the intensity of aesthetic pleasure is really too mild to make us forget our misery. It is the fourth palliative measure that is to be our principal focus here, and is the one that is, for many, the most treasured of all: *romantic love*. It is the nature, the potential success, and the problematic limitations of love's palliative function that this paper addresses.

I want to say at the outset that I will have nothing to say here about the famous (indeed, the notorious) speculations made by psychoanalysis about the determinants of love in infancy and childhood. I address these matters elsewhere (in my book *Love, Drugs, Art, Religion: The Pains and Consolations of Existence* (Clack, 2014)). My concern, rather, is with a very specific matter: if love has (among other things) the promise of a palliative quality, in what does that quality consist, and are there unpleasant reverberations of love (and of the quest for love) that counterbalance, undermine and even negate its palliating elements? A palliative measure, even in the medical field, need not be an unequivocally beneficent thing, since it is possible that hazardous side-effects flow from it (within palliative medicine one common concern regards the negative effects of the use of opioids). The strategies for coping outlined by Freud have their good points and their bad

ones too: the use of a drug may bring intense pleasure (there's no point denying *that*) and yet, as everyone knows, it can lead to physical debilitation and addiction; religion may bring a great sense of comfort, and yet if Freud (and others) are right, it does this at the expense of critical thought and the preservation of an accurate representation of reality. Where then does love stand with regard to its benefits and costs?

We can start with the benefits of love. Freud himself stresses how, in our search for pleasurable experiences, it is sexual love that 'has given us our most intense experience of an overwhelming sensation of pleasure' (Freud, 1961, p. 33), and that the attainment of this kind of love can therefore be seen to add considerably to the sum total of a person's enjoyable experiences, thereby counterbalancing the inevitable pains of life. One may find Freud's thinking here base and overly physical, but it is hard to deny that the experience of falling in love – and indeed of remaining in love, *standing* in love – is one of life's most ecstatic feelings, producing in the lover a sense of euphoria and perhaps even a reconciliation to the world as a whole. This point needs to be emphasized. When a person is in love (or has the comfort of a loving relationship) the world seems to them a better, friendlier place, a glow is cast over the world, and its difficulties and trials seem somehow now more manageable. Contrast that with the experience of one who has no love, or has lost love, in the throes of some dreadful break-up, say: for that person the world is painted in darker colours and obstacles may seem insurmountable. We may remind ourselves of Wittgenstein's famous observation in his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*: 'The world of the happy man is a different one from that of the unhappy man' (Wittgenstein, 1961, 6.43). It is one of love's most remarkable qualities that it has this capacity to transform our perception of the world, transforming it – even with all its faults – into something wonderful. Small wonder, then, that people should ardently seek that transformative power of love.

Love is held in such high esteem that philosophers and creative writers have articulated the most dramatic images to capture its beauty and intensity. The classic case is that found in Plato's *Symposium*, in the speech of Aristophanes, in which love is described as 'the desire and pursuit of the whole', two incomplete and broken individuals finding ecstatic wholeness in the experience of *merging* with each other. Aristophanes' account evidently has the character of a myth, original human beings being of an eight-limbed form, and when split in two by a troubled Zeus, each half searches for that part which will restore them to completeness. The view that love constitutes a kind of merging is not the preserve of poetry and myth alone, however. Some important contemporary philosophers (notably Robert Nozick (1995) and Robert Solomon (2006)) have also advanced the view that love is a form of *shared identity* in which two individuals merge together into one united being. (I suppose this has a Biblical warrant: *And they two shall be one flesh* (Mark 10:8).) For our purposes, the most relevant of the merging accounts is that provided by the psychoanalyst Erich Fromm in his book *The Art of Loving*. Fromm argues that love is best regarded as 'the answer to the problem of human existence' (Fromm, 2006, p. 7), the thing that uniquely overcomes the pain of our separateness from others, meeting the 'deepest need of man ... to leave the prison of his aloneness' (Fromm, 2006, p. 9). For Fromm, love *heals* us: the full answer to the unbearable

suffering of a separate, disunited existence lies in ‘the achievement of interpersonal union, of fusion with another person, in *love*’ (Fromm, 2006, p. 17).

Accounts of the role of love in the mitigation of suffering need not be so dramatic as to stress fusion, of course. One might choose to speak more prosaically of a *joining* of interests (see Singer, 1987, p. 370) and this, more than the ideal of merging, actually seems to present the truth of love as best experienced: two distinct persons, retaining their identities, and yet joining intimately together in a shared experience of life, each one supporting the other through struggles, false steps and illness, each one celebrating the other’s joys and triumphs, each taking pleasure in the other’s mental and physical being, and (as Irving Singer puts it) ‘in general attend[ing] to the being of a person reciprocally attending to one’s own’ (Singer, 1987, p. 390). It is clear to see how a loving relationship, modestly thus conceived, could function in an effective palliative function, softening some of life’s most keenly felt sufferings. As Nozick has written, ‘love places a floor under your well-being; it provides insurance in the face of fate’s blows’ (Nozick, 1995, p. 233). This ‘floor’ would seem to be achieved both by the presence of another who takes an active role in securing our comfort and by the creation of a secure little world – a home – functioning as a shield against life’s troubles, ‘an island of coupled safety in a lonely world’ (Appignanesi, 2011, p. 250). The at-homeness thus experienced contrasts markedly from the cold and sometimes dangerous nature of the world outside and serves as a refuge from it. Beyond that, it may just be – as attachment theorists such as John Bowlby (1971) say – that human beings in the main seek the closeness of another person, such closeness instilling both comfort and a greater happiness in pleasant experiences. Hume’s thoughts are here pertinent. Noting that the mind is insufficient for its own entertainment, and that the pleasure of the company of an intimate causes the heart to be elevated, he saw how vital the need for a companion is, in days both happy and sad: ‘Every pleasure languishes when enjoy’d a-part from company, and every pain becomes more cruel and intolerable’ (Hume, 1888, p. 363).

Before one gets too carried away, however, it needs to be noted that love is not an unequivocally joyful experience, nor is its relation to suffering unambiguously that of taking our pains away. No, the problem with love is that it not untypically *contributes* to suffering. Freud stresses this point when he tells us why it is that ‘wise men of every age’ have warned against the pursuit of love: ‘It is that we are never so defenceless against suffering as when we love, never so helplessly unhappy as when we have lost our loved object or its love’ (Freud, 1961, p. 33). The palliative promise of love is compromised, that is, by the vulnerable position we occupy once we have attached ourselves, and the fate of our happiness, to another person. This situation can produce the most profound suffering. The most extreme of the pains engendered by love would appear to be the conspicuous disturbance of one’s mental stability it brings, that feature that has led so many thinkers to describe love as a rather specific kind of madness (in Stendhal’s words, as a ‘disease of the soul’ (Stendhal, 2004, p. 26)). (One may also wish to add here Plato’s depiction as the lover as a person ‘who from the very nature of things is bound to be out of his mind’ (Plato, 1973, p. 41).) Beyond that general state, there are the many particular kinds of pain associated with love. Some of these – such as the specific vulnerability produced by opening ourselves up to another and placing our happiness at their mercy –

we have already noted, but more can be added. There is, for example, the experience of jealousy in which a disagreeable emotion such as panic ensues from the understanding or suspicion that one's love object has developed (or is in the process of developing) a romantic attachment to another. Then we have the whole range of small anxieties so brilliantly dissected by Roland Barthes in *A Lover's Discourse*: the rising sense of alarm caused by waiting longer than expected for a phone call or at a rendezvous, for example, or the obsessive attention to pauses and phrases in the object's speech, the lover trying to discern whether these indicate a diminution of interest. Other relationships – notably friendships – do not cause such alarm. On the other end of a scale having frenetic anxiety and dreariness as its polarities, one encounters the peculiar pains of domesticity, that setting in which the electrified interaction of two physical beings must, as Balzac noted, 'incessantly contend with a monster which devours everything, that is, familiarity' (Balzac, 2005, p. 42). Finally, hovering in the background of even the most successful of relationships, there is the grueling recognition that this love will one day come to an end, when death separates two people who longed so fervently never to part. 'Remember all along', Joseph Brodsky hauntingly tells us, 'that there is no embrace in this world that won't finally unclasp' (Brodsky, 1995, p. 111).

The problems of love ultimately come down to the ambivalent nature of our relations with other people, something touched upon at the very beginning of this paper. It was the great pessimistic philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer who best caught the character of this ambivalence in his parable of the porcupines:

'One winter's day, a number of porcupines huddled together quite closely in order through their mutual warmth to prevent themselves from being frozen. But they soon felt the effect of their quills on one another, which made them again move apart. Now when the need for warmth once more brought them together, the drawback of the quills was repeated so that they were tossed between two evils [i.e. the cold of loneliness and the pain of togetherness]' (Schopenhauer, 1974, volume 2, pp. 651-652).

This seems to me to sum up quite perfectly the problem of human relationships. We seek support from other people, and hope to receive from them comfort when we encounter pain in our lives. Very often we receive that support, that comfort, that love. And yet people – particularly those people in whom we have invested love – have within their power the most dreadful ability to hurt us. And they frequently do. How many people are broken up by love? How many novels, poems, and songs are dedicated to that theme? As Freud rightly points out, if our desire is to escape from pain, or at the very least to palliate it, then the pursuit of love may not be the right option: it is, after all, a high risk strategy. We might do better to immerse ourselves in the more reliable, less volatile, joys of friendship, or of art. As Napoleon memorably observed, 'In love, the only victory is *escape*'.

WORKS CITED

- Appignanesi, L. (2011). *All About Love*. London: Virago.
- Balzac, H. de (2005). *The Physiology of Marriage*. Cirencester: Echo Library.
- Barthes, R. (1978). *A Lover's Discourse*. New York, NY: Hill & Wang.
- Bowlby, J. (1971). *Attachment*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Brodsky, J. (1995). *On Grief and Reason*. New York: Farrar Strauss Giroux.
- Clack, B.R. (2014). *Love, Drugs, Art, Religion: The Pains and Consolations of Existence*. Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Freud, S. (1961). *Civilization and Its Discontents*. New York, NY: W.W.Norton.
- Fromm, E. (2006). *The Art of Loving*. New York, NY: HarperCollins.
- Hume, D. (1888). *A Treatise of Human Nature*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Nozick, R. (1995). Love's Bond. In R.M.Stewart (Ed.), *Philosophical Perspectives on Sex and Love* (pp. 231-240). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Plato (1951). *The Symposium*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Plato (1973). *Phaedrus*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Schopenhauer, A. (1974). *Parerga and Paralipomena* (two volumes). Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Singer, I. (1987). *The Nature of Love: The Modern World*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Solomon, R. (2006). *About Love*. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett.
- Stendhal (2004). *Love*. London: Penguin.
- Wittgenstein, L. (1961). *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.