

## SUMMARY OF NORMAN O. BROWN, LIFE AGAINST DEATH

INTRODUCTION: The book was written at the height of the cold war, in the 1950s, during the first great nuclear buildup. The author believes that we must find new ways of thinking about politics and society, or else the human race will destroy itself. He turns to Freud as the most radical philosopher of civilization. Freud's thought is not empirically verifiable. It violates our common sense in many ways. But it opens up new "mad" possibilities for a radical reorientation of society.

CHAPTER I: Freud tells us that neurotic symptoms, dreams, and "Freudian slips" all have a hidden meaning. They are symptoms of the individual's desires. The psychoanalytic patient denies this meaning and resists the therapist's interpretations because the patient is repressing the desire and its meaning. All of us dream and make "Freudian slips," so all of us have symptoms. Most of us are considered "healthy" because our symptoms are socially acceptable. But for all of us, the essence of human life is desire --not pure rational thought, as the classical philosophers taught. Unconsciously, we all want all of our wishes fulfilled. Of course civilization makes this impossible, so we compromise. But every neurotic symptom is similarly a compromise between the pleasure principle (unconscious desire) and the reality principle (what the world allows). Therefore civilization itself is a system of compromises, and all of us living in civilization are neurotic.

CHAPTER II: History is the story of how our collective symptoms have developed. All our lives are shaped by the collective symptoms of civilization's history. Freud tells us that repressed desires always return in some disguised form; i.e., in a compromise that is the essence of the symptom. So, for example, religion is a way of acting out our collective desires in a disguised form. It is a way of gratifying our desires while still repressing them. For Freud the origin of religion is also the origin of society and politics: the "primal crime" when the sons banded together to murder the father and then, out of guilt, turned his memory into the ultimate authority--God the father. The sons, under this sacred authority figure, could not fulfill their true desires. They had to go on repressing and compromising; i.e., developing civilization. The desires keep on returning in disguised ways because we keep on wanting to fulfill them. This is the motive force of all change in history.

CHAPTER III: The most basic desires are childhood sexual desires. There is a profound duality in this. On the one hand, the human child is cared for by parents or surrogate parents for several years. Since it gets most everything it needs without working for it, the child feels all-powerful, as if its wishes were commands. But the child knows that it is really totally dependent, and therefore impotent on its own. The conflict between the fantasy of omnipotence and the reality of impotence makes us eternally dissatisfied and yearning for more. This "restless heart" keeps us making constant changes. This is the way that desire moves history.

The child's desire has a peculiar quality. It is "polymorphously perverse," which means that the child can get erotic pleasure for every part of its body. Adult pleasure is more specifically sexual. Growing up means repressing our original polymorphous perversity. Yet we never really abandon that original form of desire. Genital sexuality is therefore never fully satisfying. We want a full erotic life of touching, seeing, smelling, tasting, and moving. We want to play with our full bodies, and with the world, as we did in infancy. We want to get pure delight out of this play, not thinking about any purpose beyond the play itself. The 17th century theologian Jakob Boehme said that God plays in this way. He has desire but it is impersonal (like the id); it has no aim beyond itself. Boehme said that Adam in paradise played with such God-like desire. Technology now makes it possible for us to reduce work to an absolute minimum, so that all of us could play as much as we want. Ultimately even our work is a form of play. But the play element is repressed. So our work, and all our economic life, is also composed of neurotic

symptoms--compromises between desire and necessity, substitute gratifications for (and repressions of) the pure playful erotic pleasure we all really desire.

CHAPTER IV: If the infant is satisfied with its self-engrossed play, why does it learn to relate to external reality at all? Freud says that this arises from the desire to relate to the parent figure in two distinct ways: identification (the desire to be like the parent) and object-choice (the desire to possess the parent). But Freud also says that these two sources, although distinct in his theory, are experienced by the infant simultaneously and without any distinction. Identification means that the child installs an image of the parent in its own ego, so that it can unite with the parent. Object-choice means that the child wants to take in the parent in order to unite with the parent. Every child also experiences narcissism, which means self-love. Narcissism leads to, or reinforces, identification: if I take the parent into myself, I can love myself even more by adding the energy of my love for my parent to my self-love. All of these sources of relationship with the parent (i.e., the outside world) reflect a desire to unite erotically with the world.

As a result of relating to external reality we accept the reality principle, learn the difference between "me" and "not-me," and thereby develop an ego. But originally the ego develops as a pure pleasure ego. The self is identified with the whole world of erotic pleasure. All erotic desire later on is a desire to regain that sense of erotic union. So the ego needs an external world to fulfill its narcissistic desire. Yet this desire is not really a selfish form of love, nor is it the selfless love that Christianity advises. It wants to unite with its object, rather than possess it or surrender to it. But this impersonal love is also a desire to overflow creatively into the world--to make more world, one might say, out of oneself. The source of the pure pleasure ego, the model for all later love, is the experience of suckling at the breast--uniting with the mother and feeling oneself beyond all dualities. This is also the source of mystical experience (Freud's "oceanic feeling"). As soon as duality enters into our experience, our true desire is repressed. All duality is essentially the duality of the repressing and the repressed. It is the source of all our symptoms, which means civilization and its history. Freud was always committed to some irreconcilable dualism (eventually the dualism of life against death drives). He did not see that his own theory depended on a primal experience in infancy that transcends all dualisms.

CHAPTER V: Freud had many interesting things to say about art, but he never resolved one question: Is art an expression of the pleasure principle, or is it a substitute gratification of our desires that bows to the reality principle? Ultimately this points to a religious question: What is the ultimate aim and meaning of our life? Shall we be saved by following pleasure or reality? The reality principle always requires repression, compromise, and therefore neurotic symptoms. So only the pleasure principle can save us; i.e., give us ultimate fulfillment. The true psychoanalytic meaning of art appears, surprisingly enough, in a book Freud wrote called Wit and Its Relation to the Unconscious. Jokes, he says, are basically plays on words. They invoke the id's primary process thinking. They depend on metaphor; i.e., one thing stands for another. But this is the basis of all art, as well as the basis of dreams. Art and jokes are both forms of dreaming while we are awake.

Art allows a consciously controlled release of repressed desires, which means a return to early childhood, when the primary process dominated our minds. But it is also a form of sublimation. It must follow socially acceptable rules. So it must say one thing while appearing to say another; it must be a system of metaphors. Therefore art, like all the images of the unconscious, is polyvalent (it means many things at once). Art is also a form of play. It seduces us into experiencing the release of repressions--just like the foreplay that opens us up for sexual intercourse. Art, then, is consciously controlled play, a way of returning to

childhood while still being an adult. Therefore art merges past and present, taking us beyond time. It is the expression of all the artist's unenacted desire. It acts out the ultimate goal of life, which is the pure fulfillment of our earliest childhood desires in a timeless realm.

CHAPTER VI: Language is another area that Freud explored. It began as a form of play--an end in itself--that fulfilled erotic desire by making sounds with the mouth. This play came to center on puns and metaphors--playing with words. But then the reality principle took over. Desire was sublimated, and words were used to achieve goals and get work done. So language, too, is a compromise symptom. The true meaning of every word has to do with the fulfillment of childhood desire, but it is disguised beneath an apparent meaning. When language was pure play, it was part of the pure pleasure ego. So it was part of the childhood fantasy of omnipotence. For the child the word is the reality; thinking and saying something, which means expressing one's wish for it, makes it so. Language therefore begins as playful magic. The id knows no difference between sensual desire, emotion, imagination, and thought. Every desire is a metaphorical symbol, and vice versa. (This theme is developed much more fully in Norman O. Brown's later book, *Love's Body*.) So every metaphor in language and art is also the fulfillment of a sensual desire. The true goal of all language is to overcome the difference between speech and bodily desire--to speak with the body and to have the body become speech. (This was also a theme developed by the theologian Boehme long ago.) This purely sensual speech would be the most perfect form of beauty. Language, the basis of all culture, is a disguised attempt to recapture this erotic sensuality that we experienced as infants.

CHAPTER VII: Since repression is Freud's central concept and the central force driving history, Freud believed that there must be an internal conflict in the psyche, which means another force opposing eros. This other force had to be rooted in our biology, or our animal nature. It could not be the desire for self-preservation, since both eros and self-preservation are manifestations of the original narcissism of the pure pleasure ego as it loves itself. Since narcissistic eros is the desire to preserve and extend life by unifying with the world, its opposite must be the desire to stop and end life by separating from the world. The opposite of eros is the death drive. In order to preserve life, eros turns the death drive outward, making its aggression against the world. Freud says that the conflict of life against death is irreconcilable and thus permanent. It is the most basic source of every neurotic symptom. But only humans are neurotic. Although all life may be based on these two drives, they only conflict in humans. The drives are harmonized in other animals--and in the earliest months of human infancy. Freud failed to see that his own theory pointed to this conclusion about infancy (as noted in Chapter IV). If the drives conflict, they also press toward reunification. Freud assigns the task of reconciling conflict to the ego. But it is also the ultimate goal of the id, which wants to refind its primal pleasure by overcoming all dualities. This desire for unity, which means an end to change and time, is a religious, eschatological goal. This means that it is the goal of all history, leading to an end of all history.

CHAPTER VIII: Freud presents three kinds of evidence to support his idea of a death drive. 1. The first is what he calls the "nirvana principle." All organisms seek to get rid of tensions, to return to a state of homeostatic balance. Other animals species have an ongoing cycle of tension and relief. But humans repress the desires that keep this cycle going, so we are always off balance and desiring to regain our balance. In some of Freud's formulations this desire to be in a natural cycle of tension and relief is the essence of the pleasure principle. So we always want to return eros to the tensionless state of "nirvana," which means death, since only inorganic objects are in a tensionless state. We want to put an end to all movement, change, and history.

2. It would seem, on the contrary, that we always want to be making progress. But for Freud this is a compromise symptom—a substitute way of gratifying our true desire, which is always to return to an earlier state of pleasure. This creates what he calls the repetition compulsion: doing the same thing over and over to try to regain past pleasures. Other animals repeat their past pleasures effortlessly. If humans did not repress their true desires, we too would repeat effortlessly. We would return to the primary process of the id, in which there is no progress because there is no history or time, no change or movement. But Freud is wrong to equate this with death. There are kinds of activity that do not produce change because they do not involve movement from one place to another; think of an overflowing fountain, a juggler, or a spinning dancer.

3. Freud found in some of his patients a masochistic desire to harm themselves. He saw this as evidence of a basic desire of every organism to return to the inorganic state: the goal of all life, in this sense, is death. Other animals accept this as natural. But humans repress their own death just as they repress their eros. So we turn death outward into aggression and a drive to master the world. From this drive we create culture. All the things that we create in the world are expressions of our refusal to accept death; they are monuments to our fantasied immortality. We deny death by negating nature and other people through our work. We seek to gain power over the world to deny death. In all these ways, our refusal to accept death creates civilization.

All three evidences of the death drive reflect ways in which we repress not only death, but also the natural aging process that leads to death. In other words, they are ways we repress the natural flow of life, or eros. All our repressions turn out to be parts of a single process. Yet we use the life force as the agent to repress both death and life; so we set life against death. Repression and its consequent conflicts are the source of time and civilization, which together make up history. But Freud's evidences of the death drive also point to our desire to reunite life and death and thereby reunite all other dualities. We each want to live out our unique lives and reach death by our individually destined routes. We want to live our own particular lives, which means accepting our distinctiveness and separateness from all other lives. Repression prevents us from accepting our unique destiny. It sends us into society and civilization, which creates fantasies of group immortality ("I may die, but the nation or the church or the working class or whatever lives on").

What we really want is to experience both life and death unrepressed—to live fully gratified lives and to die our own deaths. As the philosopher Nietzsche said: "What has become perfect, all that is ripe—wants to die." But to become perfect we must accept both drives, abandon our fantasies of immortality, and therefore stop making change and history. We must live wholly in a timeless present. The best we can hope for now, under conditions of general repression, is to envisage such perfection as a possibility for the future, when life will be reconciled with death.

CHAPTER IX: Why do human beings repress their own death? We are born too early, without enough time to develop fully in the womb. Therefore we are dependent on our parents for a long time, which conflicts with our fantasies of omnipotence. We want to be fully self-sufficient and gratify our desires for erotic pleasure on our own. But we are beset from the beginning by anxiety; we fear separation from the parent (usually the mother) as a threat of extinction. The solution is to fantasize escaping death by returning to the womb, where we can be permanently united with the mother and have all our desires instantly gratified. Return to the womb is a way of manifesting the death drive. But the fantasy is the way that eros uses the death drive to try to fend off the reality of death. Eros does this in stages, corresponding to the sexual development of the child. At each stage the erotic

desire is concentrated in one part of the body. The price of trying to repress death is repressing the polymorphous perversity that is our true desire.

1. The first stage is the oral phase. When the infant first wants the breast but finds it missing, it creates the pure pleasure ego—the fantasy that everything pleasurable is inside and everything painful is outside. So it puts all sources of anxiety—the threat of death—outside itself. It then denies the real existence of that external reality, which represents its own death. It creates a subject/object dualism in order to deny the reality of death. 2. In the anal phase, the child experiences itself as a passive object manipulated by its parents, who are imposing toilet training. So the child rebels and learns to be an active subject by becoming aggressive against its parents; it turns the death drive outward.

3. The ultimate aggressive act is to deny its dependence on the mother by ~~taking the~~ going back into the womb, impregnating the mother, and thereby becoming its own father. The child wants to be both male and female; it wants to be self-created; it wants to be god. In order to imagine itself as an active creator, a little boy concentrates all his erotic desire in his penis. Yet girls and boys both, according to Freud, reject the other because she has no penis and therefore can't become her own father. Both sexes fear castration as a punishment for carrying out their desire to impregnate the mother, which means becoming like her. Since the mother is both the solution to the problem of death and a reminder of the threat of death, children are very ambivalent toward their mothers. (Brown's theory, like Freud's, is male-centered. For creative feminist extensions of Brown's line of thought see Dorothy Dinnerstein, The Mermaid and the Minotaur, and Nancy Chodorow, The Reproduction of Motherhood.)

As adults we act out this ambivalence in religion and culture. We serve the authority figures—the fathers—who promise us immortality that we now recognize can not be attained by returning to the mother. But what we are really doing is sublimating our repressed desire to return to the womb. All the creations of civilization represent symbolic wombs and symbolic penises. All of civilization is a repetition compulsion, trying to regain the original fantasy of pleasure and immortality by reuniting the two. The fantasied penis (for both men and women) is the mental image of the "true self"—the ego. It represents a fantasy of total independence from our parents; i.e., a fantasy of omnipotence. But we also have a superego, which is the internalized voice of our parents, which we learned to obey during our long period of total dependence. The superego requires us to repress our erotic desires. It also requires us to repress our desire to die our own natural death. The superego turns the death drive inward in the form of guilt, which is aggression against the self. The unconscious id rejects this whole development because it rejects the need to be either male or female. The id is always androgynous. But the ego, acknowledging physical reality, represses the qualities of the opposite sex that are manifest in the id. So the repressed id always seeks to return to androgyny, which means returning to a natural unity of life and death drives, both fully expressed, which would mean the end of history. The true goal of eros is an eschatological acceptance of, and fusion with, death.

CHAPTER X: For Freud, culture depended on sublimation, which means desexualized or aim-inhibited erotic desire. But Freud never explained sublimation satisfactorily. He did not show why we should distinguish between "higher" and "lower" kinds of gratification. Nor did he show why sublimation could cure neurosis. Perhaps a whole society built on sublimations is neurotic. This is what Freud himself said was going on in religion. But psychoanalysis, too, may only adjust the individual to a neurotic society.

CHAPTER XI: The aim of psychoanalysis is to make unconscious desires conscious. Freud contended that this was the key to improve culture. He said: "Where id was, there ego shall be. It is a work of culture." In therapy this is done through transference: the patient reenacts a past relationship, which caused the problem, in the present with the therapist. But the therapist makes the pattern conscious, so that the patient ends up remembering, rather than simply repeating, the past (if the therapy works). Talking it over is the source of the cure. However according to Freud's theory words are always themselves compromise symptoms--substitutes for the real desire (see Chapter VI). So a purely verbal therapy means repressing the bodily desire and holding the whole problem within the mind. Eros is therefore turned inward, as if only the self, but not the world, could be loved.

A real cure would require the past to be repeated bodily, so that unconscious desires could be seen in the present, not just remembered. This would mean bringing desire out into the world and attaching it to the objects of the world--as we did in childhood. It would mean making the world lovable. In other words, the real cure of neurosis depends on changing the world in ways that make it conform more to the id's desires. Culture is always the projection of our fantasied desires. To cure the neurosis of history we must make a culture that embodies our true desires. The ego and id would have to be allies in such a project. As a society, we could make the past--our earliest childhood desires--conscious, which would remove the repressions, and then repeat the fulfillment of those desires in the real present world. We could make a civilization that satisfies our true desires.

CHAPTER XII: In addition to therapy, Freud suggested sublimation as the solution to repressed desire. But sublimation also pits the body against the mental ego. The ego tries to negate death as well as eros. But Freud tells us that every negation is a hidden affirmation. What we seem to push away we actually let in, though in disguised, desexualized form. We take in the love objects that we have apparently negated, on condition that they are desexualized, and we identify with them. Then we try to find objects in the external world that match the inner images, so that we can unite with them. To do this, we try to alter reality to match the inner images; this is one of the main things we do in civilization. So we are always projecting fantasied memories of past gratifications onto the things we create in external reality. Those things are really shadows of our dream images, which we hope will protect us from the painful reality of having our true desires go unfulfilled in the present. So all our gratifications in the present are symbolic and partial.

Since our desires are concentrated in particular bodily parts--especially the genitals--the symbolic gratifications we seek in civilization reflect that genital organization. The pleasures of genital sex are actually substitutes for the polymorphously perverse pleasures of early infancy. The pleasures of culture are substitutes for those substitutes. Culture is based on the centrality of the ego and its ability to repress the id. But the ego itself is a projection of the unifying structure at the base of our psychosexual identity: the genital organ. So culture, as a projection of genital organization, reinforces that organization. But it also represses genital, as well as all other kinds, of sexuality. It persuades us that our "true" identity is a mental or spiritual phenomenon. In fact the idea of a mind or soul is a cultural representation of the ego, and therefore an extension of genital organization. But everything that is repressed must return in disguised form. So civilization itself is a return of all our bodily desires in non-bodily (mental or spiritual) form. Civilization therefore is an attempt to regain our true bodily life in ways that make it impossible for us to succeed.

This is the true meaning of sublimation. By desexualizing our libido we distance ourselves from life in order to avoid the pain it can bring. We see the world rather than directly experiencing, as if our life were a dream--as if we were asleep. So our lives become deadened. In this way the sublimating ego works against

the life drive and serves the death drive. The ideal of pure intellect and rational contemplation championed by classical philosophers is actually a manifestation of the death drive. As the death drive grows, the life drive protects itself by deflecting death outward into aggression. Naturally civilization is filled with aggression. But in order for civilization to survive the aggression must be turned back inward, in the form of guilt. (This, of course, is a key idea in Civilization and Its Discontents.) But we are not condemned to guilt, as Freud thought. We can replace his ideal of reason, moderation, and sublimation, symbolized by the Greek god Pallor, with a more life affirming ideal, symbolized by the god Dionysus. Dionysus is the god of excess, the material world, and bodily pleasure. Like the id, he affirms life and death simultaneously, without placing limits on either one. He dissolves the ego in a total release of every drive. The way to escape from civilization's collective death-in-life is to develop a "Dionysian ego," strong enough to live fully because it is strong enough to die its own unique death.

Chapter XIII: The most scandalous of Freud's ideas is "anality" and the anal stage of development. For Freud, excrement can represent property or money, the child's gift to the parents, a plaything, a symbolic penis, a symbolic child, a weapon used for aggression, or a means of mastering and controlling the world. These meanings converge in the idea of the anal character, marked by excessive orderliness, thrift, and stubbornness.

Chapter XIV: Martin Luther tells us that he discovered the central idea of his Protestant Reformation—we are justified before God only by faith, not by our works—while having a bowel movement. What is the connection between Protestantism, the religion that produced modern Western culture, and excrement? For Luther the whole world is a hell, ruled by the devil, who is directly related to excretion. All our efforts to save ourselves by our own works are works of the devil, as worthless as excrement. All our life in the body and the works of our body are ruled by the devil; i.e., by death. This world is a pure culture of the death drive. As the world sinks deeper into excrement and the death drive, though, it comes closer to the radical reversal that is the culmination of God's plan: the second coming of Christ. Luther also identifies the devil and excrement with capitalism (just as Freud identifies excrement with money). Money, the false god, is crucifying the world, he says. Yet we must accept our cross and wait for the second coming.

Today Protestant religion has largely dropped this eschatological element of Luther's teaching. We need a viable eschatology—a vision of the resolution of all the conflicts of history. Liberal Protestantism now also ignores the devil. It accepts the world, steeped in the death culture, as it is. But in psychoanalytic terms Luther is saying that the world is a projection of our anal fantasies, which are aggressive sadistic fantasies. His reformation was a return of those repressed fantasies, making them more visible and explicit. He claims that we can not be saved by our works—i.e., by our sublimations—because we are always bound to the body and its excrement. By making this conscious, he hoped to transcend that situation. In fact, though, Protestantism took Western culture deeper into the pure culture of the death drive. It increased the split between eros and the world. Psychoanalysis is the next, and perhaps last, stage in the return of the repressed. It demystifies the world, withdraws all the sublimated projections from culture, and traces them back to bodily desires. Psychoanalysis could become the basis for a new eschatology—a vision of life and culture based on genuine fulfillment of our polymorphously perverse erotic desires.

Chapter XV: (This chapter is especially long and complex, and the summary here is especially condensed.) Modern Western culture is dominated by capitalism and the desire to increase monetary wealth. Money is an intrinsically useless object that is given fantastic value; this is just what little children do with their excrement. Our compulsion to earn more money for the future is a way of repressing our desire to

enjoy life in the present. Building up an economic surplus, which is the essence of capitalism, is a way of sacrificing our true desires, which means our true selves. We do this in order to expiate our guilt feeling, which arose largely from the aggression we felt during our anal phase. So money, as excrement, is condensed guilt. But the more we repress our aggression the more we turn it inward; i.e., the more guilt we feel and the more we need to expiate it by self-sacrifice, which means making more money. Indeed we can never expiate all our guilt. So now our society hopes to escape this dilemma by being secular. We have forgotten about the problems of evil, the devil, eschatology, salvation, and the ultimate meaning of history. But the repressed death drive always returns. The guilt and aggression build, and we enter ever more deeply into the pure culture of the death drive, as witnessed by the massive destructiveness of our military arsenals. The only escape is to make the death drive conscious, to accept our own deaths, and thereby accept our own desires for life and bodily pleasure too.

Chapter XVI: "The Way Out" of civilization's dilemma was already foreseen by mystics like Jakob Boehme who saw the possibility of human perfection. Today the poets have taken over this role. They point to the body as the place of spiritual revelation. What we need is a culture based on total fulfillment of bodily desires. We need a science based on eros, not on an objectivity that detaches mind from body. This science would see the whole world animated by desire, with mind and body united. Like mysticism and poetry, the new science would treat all opposites as intertwined manifestations of a common source, striving to be reunified. Psychoanalytic theory at its best is a poetic science of this sort. It shows us how all opposites are unified in our minds, as is most evident in our dreams, "the royal road to the unconscious." In the unconscious everything is affirmed; everything stands for both itself and its opposite; everything is a metaphor for this ultimate union of opposites. Once repression is removed, we can experience this dream-like thinking consciously. This is a way of eroticizing the conscious ego, which allows the ego to become an agency of unification rather than separation. The union of eros and intellect is a way to move toward the Dionysian ego. In a civilization based on the Dionysian ego, politics would aim at true happiness and erotic enjoyment, rather than power and accumulation. Death would be accepted, so eros could make death its friend rather than its enemy. The two drives could affirm rather than repress each other. In this way, the power of the death drive would be limited, the pure culture of the death drive would turn into a culture of eros, and the power of eros could grow.