Is peace and freedom possible?

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The failed intervention in Afghanistan, along with the wars in Iraq, Libya, and Syria, has once again revealed the truth: military power leads to destruction; it neither brings peace and freedom nor democracy. On December 8, 2024, the 61-year-old Ba'ath regime in Syria collapsed, and Bashar al-Assad's rule ended. However, problems regarding fundamental rights, freedoms, and humanitarian conditions have continued to grow.

It is truly strange how people can be convinced to engage in war, despite the fact that war leads to the loss of lives and other cherished values. Although it is hard to accept, it seems that without some kind of intrinsic willingness, the apparatus of the state could not compel people into such compliance, even with all its coercive power (1). This indicates that most of us have a strong and easily triggered inclination toward destruction, particularly self-destruction.

According to Freud, civilization cannot sustain itself without restraining drives (2). Without some form of liberation from these drives, sons would kill their fathers; polymorphous perversion and incest would ruin every family; mothers and daughters would be in constant conflict; jealousy, envy, and greed would be omnipresent; minorities would be scapegoated; economic classes would remain in perpetual conflict; and nations would be locked in endless war. Like many other 19th-century intellectuals, Freud was not overly optimistic that education and scientific progress alone would quickly build a new, free, and civilized world. Nevertheless, the massive catastrophe caused by the Great War deeply affected him. He had hoped that science, art, culture, and even studies of the mind to some extent would contribute to a brighter future, but when the wave of destruction that engulfed the world subsided four years later, no trace of his optimism remained.

Seven years before the Second World War, a correspondence titled "Why War?" ("Warum Krieg?") took place between Freud and Einstein (3). This exchange began with a letter from Albert Einstein in which he sought Freud's views on the origins of war and ways to prevent it. In his response, Freud referred to the two fundamental drives he identified in his work Beyond the Pleasure Principle (4): Eros (the life drive) and Thanatos (the death drive). Eros represents tendencies toward love, unity, and the preservation of life, while Thanatos embodies tendencies toward destruction, death, and aggression. Freud argued that war is an expression of the death drive on a societal level, making its complete elimination difficult, if not impossible. However, factors like the progress of civilization and the strengthening of legal systems could reduce the likelihood of war. He viewed the life drive as a unifying force among people and argued that supporting this tendency could mitigate the impact of war. Processes that foster education, intercultural engagement, and the cultivation of mutual understanding among individuals present a viable foun-

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dation for envisioning a more peaceful global order. Nonetheless, Freud remained skeptical about the possibility of completely suppressing humanity's destructive tendencies. While individuals can restrain their aggression on a personal level, this aggression often erupts in societal contexts through war. In the Why War? correspondence, Freud posited that war is not solely driven by political and economic causes but also closely tied to the impulsive essence of human nature.

Indeed, although the majority of individuals regard war as a disgraceful act unworthy of humanity, characterized by its senseless destruction of lives and human creations, the undeniable reality remains that humanity has yet to succeed in eradicating the phenomenon of war (1). In the absence of a significant qualitative transformation in psychic apparatus, cultural progression, and a more expansive and profound recognition of this reality, the prospect of reducing the likelihood of war appears to be an almost utopian aspiration. In a passage which portrays mind as little more than a mechanistic pleasure-seeker, Freud argues that (5):

all thinking is no more than a circuitous path from the memory of a satisfaction (a memory which has been adopted as a purposive idea) to an identical cathexis of the same memory which it is hoped to obtain once more through an intermediate stage of motor experiences.

Here, there is little room for an autonomous consciousness, for the most that consciousness would seem capable of is mediating between drives and their objects.

In line with this conceptualization, there is his famous horse and rider analogy. This metaphorical allusion to the roles played by various parts of the psychic apparatus appears more than once in Freud's writings, and each time the ego is equated with the rider, who, "if he is not to be parted from his horse, is obliged to guide it where it wants to go; so in the same way the ego is in the habit of transforming the id's will into action as if it were its own" (6). The judgment is damning and the implication clear: the ego is held hostage by powers originating elsewhere. Moreover, the ego is "not only a helper to the Id; it is also a submissive slave who courts his master's love" (6). In sum, Freud's position is that "the ego is not master in its own house" (7).

In the New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis, it reads as follows (8):

Thus the ego, driven by the id, confined by the super-ego, repulsed by reality, struggles to master its economic task of bringing about harmony among the forces and influences working in and upon it; and we can understand how it is that so often we cannot suppress a cry; "Life is not easy!" If the ego is obliged to admit its weakness, it breaks out in anxiety – realistic anxiety regarding the external world, moral anxiety regarding the super-ego, and neurotic anxiety regarding the strength of the passions in the id.

If we reduce Freudian psychology to only his words quoted previously, it could be claimed that there is no way to see the ego as an autonomous mental construct with agency. Ego is neither able to control passion nor the external world in the name of reason or freedom. Spinoza, arguing along lines similar to Freud's, held that human beings believe themselves to be free only because they are unconscious of the causes whereby their actions are determined (9).

The German psychoanalyst Mitscherlich (10) highlights two factors that have historically impeded humanity's ability to develop more peaceful attitudes: the first is the easily inflamed hostile emotions, and the second is an inextinguishable form of stupidity. According to Mitscherlich, the stupidity he refers to is not innate but rather a meticulously cultivated one, taught and instilled through the reinforcement of prejudices. When an education system that encourages and legitimizes hostility proves effective, prejudices take the place of critical thinking and reasoning, thereby fueling this "man-made" stupidity. Such blindness feeds aggression, reviving the urge to find a scapegoat, and once individuals externalize all their aggression, perceiving it solely as emanating from others, no barriers remain to prevent them from acting on their hostility (11).

The archaic forms of personal conscience prohibit us from critically questioning certain religious taboos (1). Consequently, societies repeatedly establish systems comprised of collectively accepted commandments, thereby creating primitive “cultural superegos” that are exempt from critical evaluation. These moral principles and prohibitions, endowed with an unquestionable quality, continue to persist even today. Regardless of their short-term benefits, such archaic methods are ultimately doomed to failure, as they do not teach us how to regulate our drives through "recognition." On the contrary, they reinforce mechanisms of repression and displacement, leading to an accumulation of aggressive drive energies. As a result, individuals protected under the veil of such taboos become trapped in a lifelong state of childish dependency, rendering them easily deceived and misled. Being confined within such a framework makes both freedom and the possibility of living peacefully unattainable.

Enlightenment replaced the power of absolute monarchy and the arbitrary rule of kings with the self-sufficient reason of individuals. The Enlightenment is a project of questioning the traditionally and religiously imposed, aimed at freely establishing ways to define independent truths. Psychoanalysis emerged at this historical juncture, embodying the three foundational issues of its era (12): a focus on subjectivity as the legitimate source and essence of experience; the acknowledgment of the internalization and presence of social power within the subject; and, as a consequence, an engagement with the problem of freedom, addressing the potential and limits of reason as a contradiction of self-governance.

Hence, Rozmarin passionately asserts that psychoanalysis must not condemn individuals to an illusion of separateness and unquestionable social normativity where the only question that the individual in trouble can ask is “What’s wrong with me?” For there to be freedom we must also ask and allow the subject to ask “What’s wrong with the world?” (12).

According to psychoanalysis, human cruelty and subjugation can only be mitigated through the analysis and recognition of the underlying motivations. However, psychoanalysis is not confined to the effort of illuminating the conflicts experienced by the individual throughout their life and shaping their existence. It also contributes to understanding the processes of group unification and separation. The possibility of peace and freedom lies within this framework. Perhaps then, as expressed in Nâzım’s verses, it may be possible to live "like a tree alone and free, and like a forest in brotherhood."

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