

## **“Love thy Neighbor,” Is it too much to ask? Freud’s Super Ego and the Golden Rule**

By  
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Mark Twain once wrote, “We all do no end of feeling, and we mistake it for thinking.” These words are reminiscent of Socrates who said, “Know yourself,” and, “to your own self be true.” Our feelings often blind us to our true motives, and the way we rationalize our motives blinds us to our feelings. Just yesterday we saw a historic example of this process during a televised meeting of the Democratic National Committee as it debated over how best to settle the disputed primary elections that happened in Florida and Michigan earlier this year. As you know, Hillary Clinton ostensibly won both States, but under what many consider incomplete and unfair circumstances. The committee debated between three choices, to continue discounting the two primaries altogether, to fully count them according to their questionable results, or to strike some sort of compromise, which, in the end, is the choice they made.

Even though I did manage to get the yard cut and the car washed yesterday, I found the entire ten-hour meeting absolutely riveting! Not only was it, for a guy who doesn’t like sports, about the most thrilling live television event I’ve ever seen, it also showed human beings at some of their worst and best behaviors—attempting, despite the extreme emotions on both sides, to come up with a reasonable solution. The committee’s greatest challenge was precisely the problem Mark Twain and Socrates understood; that all of us too often rationalize our emotions to such a degree that it’s impossible to distinguish our purely selfish motives from sound logic. For me the greatest example of this came toward the end of the meeting while the committee deliberated a motion to divide Michigan’s votes between the two nominees. One of the committee members, Harold Ickes, passionately chastised those who would vote for it by arguing, “This motion will hijack, hijack, remove four delegates won by Hillary Clinton and most importantly reflect the preferences of 600,000 Michigan voters. This body of 30 individuals has decided that they are going to substitute their judgment for 600,000 voters.” As much as I found myself disagreeing with him, I also found his argument very sound and persuasive, and began, as Twain and Socrates advise, to question myself, to wonder why the facts don’t add up the same for me as they do for Ickes, and if I’m getting my political math wrong because of my own bias. But then a graphic appeared on the screen reminding me that Harold Ickes isn’t only a member of the DNC, but he is also a Clinton campaign strategist. After this I could no longer trust his line of reasoning, and asked myself what the other members of the DNC, in the spirit of collegiality and unity, were too polite to ask, What if things were reversed? What if the other candidate, Barack Obama, had won in the two disputed states? Would Ickes, and the other outraged Clinton supporters who continually disrupted the meeting, have been so passionate to let the elections stand even though their candidate did not campaign in one state, and did not appear on the ballot in another?

Although this is a timely example, it may seem a long and convoluted way to get at my subject regarding whether or not it is reasonable to expect us to love others in the same way we love ourselves. It may also seem a bit too political for a Sunday sermon, and if so, to assure that I’m not taking sides, let me also say that I have great doubts that the Obama side of the argument would have been so magnanimous about agreeing to give Clinton a majority of the disputed delegates if it truly threatened his lead over her. The point here, however, with this fresh and irresistible example, is to show how difficult it is for any of us, even with the probing eyes of the world on us, to see through our rationalized biases into the motivating feelings behind them. Psychologist, Erich Fromm, who wrote, “The understanding of the operation of unconscious elements has taught us to be skeptical towards words and not take them at face value,”<sup>1</sup> distinguished rational activity from irrational, or neurotic, activity, by suggesting genuine reason always accomplishes something by making us aware of something new, that is, by bringing us closer to a true understanding of reality. Irrationality, on the other hand, helps us escape painful reality by rationalizing it away to satisfy our emotions, the part of us that is afraid to let go of our false sense of security reinforced by our false certainties. Reason brings us to new insights. Rationalization only secures what we already believe.

So the wisest among us choose the difficult path of forever questioning everything we know and hold dear. Someone once suggested that this approach is itself pathological, in that it goes into every situation and faces every idea with the question, “What’s wrong with this?” I think this is an accurate summation, but I also believe, as Socrates put it, “The unexamined life is not worth living.” The price of freedom is always uncertainty. Freedom is chaos. Freedom breaks our chains, exposes our false paradigms, and sets our feelings free, but it only walks beside us, as our companion on the long journey of life, but never as our guide. For freedom, unlike certainty, never knows what’s ahead.

Yet, as one who struggles to stay on this most rewarding and most difficult of all paths, I find myself ready now to ask what I never before thought to ask, to question my most sacred beliefs, my highest values, the foundation of my efforts. I’m speaking here of love. Today I want to question whether or not “love” as the song goes, is truly “the answer.” Or am I doing a disservice to my fellows by preaching the merits of love, of universal love, loving one’s enemies, practicing nonviolence when facing aggressors, caring for the weakest among us rather than letting nature cull our population, as Nietzsche suggested, so that we evolve into a super species? Is it reasonable to ask that we follow the Golden Rule, doing for others what we would do for ourselves? Or to love our neighbor as we love our self? Or are these expectations merely the emotional rationalizations of someone who doesn’t want to face the harsh realities of life? Is such grandiose love reflective of our highest principles and aspirations, or the psychological inflation of an ego that can’t cope with its own selfish feelings of hostility toward others?

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<sup>1</sup> Fromm, Erich, *Escape from Freedom*, An Avon Library Book, Heart Corporation, New York, NY, 1941, 1965, p. 85.

I owe the opportunity to ask this question to the psychologist most of us love to hate, Sigmund Freud, who raises it in his work, *Civilization and its Discontents*. Certainly there is a great deal about the human psyche Freud did not understand, and much he speculated about that has proven to be inaccurate. But such should be expected from a pioneer and trailblazer in any field. I think the real reason we dislike Freud, is, again, emotional rationalization. For, like Twain and Socrates, Freud, at the very least, has shown us that there is something beneath the surface of our thoughts, words, and actions. He has shown us that not only can we not trust others, or the world around us, but that we can't even wholly trust ourselves, that we must question our underlying and unconscious motivations. Freud, a devout atheist, even dared to question the most revered exhortation of Jesus himself, “Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.”

Adopting what he called “a naïve attitude towards it,” as if he'd never heard it before, he said, “Thereupon, we find ourselves unable to suppress a feeling of astonishment, as at something unnatural. Why should we do this? What good is it to us? Above all, how can we do such a thing? How could it possibly be done? My love seems to me a valuable thing that I have no right to throw away without reflection. It imposes obligations on me which I must be prepared to make sacrifices to fulfill. If I love someone, he must be worthy of it in some way or other.”<sup>2</sup> Freud saw this expectation as an unreasonable demand upon us, and, therefore, concluded it must be a rationalization of some sort motivated by unconscious factors. He did not consider it too much to love a friend, “But if he is a stranger to me,” he said, “and cannot attract me by any value he has in himself or any significance he may have already acquired in my emotional life, it will be hard for me to love him.”<sup>3</sup> Then he suggests, “I shall even be doing wrong if I do, for my love is valued as a privilege by all those belonging to me; it is an injustice to them if I put a stranger on a level with them.” But his real argument against this sacred mandate is not that it is unjust, but that it is unreasonable. “But if I am to love him (with that kind of universal love) simply because he, too, is a denizen of the earth, like an insect or an earthworm or a grass-snake, then I fear that but a small modicum of love will fall to his lot and it would be impossible for me to give him as much as by all the laws of reason I am entitled to retain for myself. What is the point of an injunction promulgated with such solemnity, if reason does not recommend it?”<sup>4</sup> For Freud the question of loving others, especially strangers, as we love ourselves is simply asking too much. “If the high sounding ordinance had run: ‘Love thy neighbor as thy neighbor loves thee,’” he goes on to argue, “I should not take objection to it. And there is a second commandment that seems to me even more incomprehensible, and arouses even stronger opposition in me. It is: ‘Love thine enemies.’”<sup>5</sup>

So where does this rationalization of emotion, if that's what it is, come from? If universal unconditional love is really so unnatural, unjust, and unreasonable, why do we

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<sup>2</sup> Freud, Sigmund, *Civilization and its Discontents*, Dover Publications, Inc., New York, NY, 1930, 1994, p. 38.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. p. 39.

need it? Why is the notion so sacred to us even though, historically, it has proven impossible to keep? Freud, although an atheist, held a similar view as Christianity when it comes to guilt. Whereas Christians believe this guilt arises from an original act of disobedience to God the Father, Freud believed it stems from an original act of patricide during which a primal band of brothers murdered their overbearing father, then felt guilt for doing so, which, for him, incidentally, was the beginning of religion. Crucified Christ then, according to Freud, becomes a symbol of atonement for our guilt, in his words, “the sacrificial death of one who therewith takes the whole of the common guilt of all upon himself.”<sup>6</sup>

Perhaps more importantly, this sense of guilt, according to Freud, is the origin of what he called the *super-ego*. In other words, the super-ego is inflated guilt, and acts upon us as a voice of conscience requiring us to obey the authorities (i.e., our father projections). Freud, thus, saw these impossible mandates, loving strangers as our equals, doing good for our enemies, and doing for others what we would have done for ourselves, as exaggerated compensations for our unconscious guilt over feeling hostile toward those authorities we’re supposed to love. As he put it, “The sense of guilt, we said at one point, was the consequence of uncommitted aggressions; but another time and, in particular, in the case of its historical beginning, the murder of the father, it was the consequence of an aggression that was carried out.”<sup>7</sup> The way out of this difficulty, he explained, was “The development of the inner authority, the super-ego, was precisely what radically altered the whole situation.”<sup>8</sup> And so, he concludes, “The command to love our neighbor as ourselves is the strongest defense there is against human aggressiveness and it is a superlative example of the unpsychological attitude of the cultural super-ego. The command is impossible to fulfill; such an enormous inflation of love can only lower its value and not remedy the evil.”<sup>9</sup>

Freud, in fact, saw this not only as a pointless expectation, but as harmful inasmuch as it degrades human nature. He opted for a less inflated, or severe, “*Natural ethic*” that would enable people to get along in a more realistic fashion. For now, however, it is enough to point out that Freud has made a pretty good case, or, at least, a reasonable case, against the moral expectation that human beings should strive to go against their own nature by loving people who want to harm them, and loving strangers whose motives and intentions we do not yet know.

Yet even after so faithfully attempting to fairly present his argument, I find myself disagreeing with Freud. Fortunately I have my favorite psychologist, Erich Fromm to lean upon for support, who said, “Love for one person, implies love for [all persons] as such.”<sup>10</sup> This kind of love, which he called *brotherly love*, is, in his words, “the kind of love the Bible speaks of when it says: love thy neighbor as thyself. Brotherly love is

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid. p. 62.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. p. 63.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. p. 68f.

<sup>10</sup> Fromm, *ibid.*, p. 134.

love for all human beings; it is characterized by its lack of exclusiveness. If I have developed the capacity for love, then I cannot help loving my brothers.”<sup>11</sup> So, for Fromm, Freud’s understanding of love is incomplete in that it restricts love to positive emotions towards those we are in immediate relationship with. Certainly it is impossible to hold such emotions for people we don’t know, and, even more so, for people we dislike. But it is, nonetheless, still possible to love them by making certain everyone enjoys the same rights and privileges and resources as we do. That’s really what loving people is about, friend or foe, neighbor or stranger. It is a value and an action as much, if not more, as it is a feeling.

Freud, furthermore, seemed to think that self-centered behavior is symptomatic of self-love, that it is possible for a person to limit love to oneself, or a few of one’s friends and family. But, as Fromm argued, selfishness is self-hate, not self-love. “Greed is a bottomless pit,” he said, “which exhausts the person in an endless effort to satisfy the need without ever reaching satisfaction. Close observation shows that while the selfish person is always anxiously concerned with himself, he is never satisfied, is always restless, always driven by fear of not getting enough, of missing something, of being deprived of something. He is filled with burning envy of anyone who might have more. If we observe still closer, especially the unconscious dynamics, we find this type of person is basically not fond of himself, but deeply dislikes himself.”<sup>12</sup> So, for Fromm, in contrast to Freud, love must be universal or it isn’t love at all. We can’t love ourselves without loving everyone, and we can’t love everyone without loving ourselves. “Freud,” he wrote, “has pointed out that the narcissistic person has withdrawn love from others and turned it toward his own person. Although the first part of this statement is true, the second is a fallacy. He loves neither others nor himself.”<sup>13</sup>

I find myself in agreement with Fromm here, but, in truth, I don’t know if I base such agreement on Fromm’s better argument, combined with my own experience and understanding of psychology and the theory of love, or if, like Harold Ickes, I simply want it to be true because I don’t like the other option. Do I believe in universal love because it truly represents humanity’s highest possibility, or because I can’t imagine living in a world without such a possibility? Do I preach these difficult values because they are right, or merely because deep down I feel wrong and such posturing eases my sense of guilt for harboring my own aggressive feelings? Are the advocates of love our greatest sages, or the greatest of hypocrites in managing to overcompensate for their feelings of shame and anger with impossibly inflated notions of forgiveness and love? The truth is I don’t know the answer to these questions at this venture in my life. And even though I will continue to promote what I believe is true, I will not behave like some in the DNC committee behaved yesterday, by pretending to make rational arguments while not mentioning or owning my own biases. I do not know if love is the answer, but I believe it is, for the most part, I think, because I want it to be, because I need it to be—a

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<sup>11</sup> Fromm, Erich, *The Art of Loving*, Bantam Books, Harper & Row, New York, NY, 1956, 1963, p. 39.

<sup>12</sup> Fromm, *Escape from Freedom*, *ibid.*, p. 136.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* p. 137.

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sentiment I shall share henceforth with all due respect and the greatest humility. But that’s what having freedom as my companion in life means. It means knowing myself, being true to myself, and realizing that I too am in the habit of confusing feeling for thinking. I think love is the answer, but, mostly, that’s how I feel.