



## The Art of Living

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**Abstract:** This paper compares Freudian and Lacanian comments on the issue of happiness. Freud claims that happiness does not exist - or, if it does, it is brief contentment. In contrast, Lacan declares that happiness is everywhere and that the subject is happy. The author tries to situate the difference between Freud's stance - which highlights the constant force of unhappiness in culture - and Lacan's view, which situates the subject's opportunity to find happiness everywhere.

**Key words:** Symptom; discontents; happiness.

**Sumilla:** Este texto compara los comentarios freudianos y lacanianos en materia de felicidad. Freud dice que la felicidad no existe - o, si existe, es breve. En contraste, Lacan declara que la felicidad está en todas partes y que el sujeto es feliz. El autor intenta situar la diferencia entre la posición de Freud - que destaca la constante fuerza de la infelicidad en la cultura - y el punto de vista de Lacan, que sitúa la oportunidad del sujeto de encontrar la felicidad en todas partes.

**Palabras clave:** Síntoma; malestar; felicidad.

Concerning happiness, Freud and Lacan contradict each other. In the essay *Civilization and its Discontents*<sup>2</sup>, which Freud initially intended to name "Unhappiness in Culture" (*Das Unglück in der Kultur*), he claims that happiness does not exist - or, if it does, it is brief contentment. In contrast, Lacan declares, in "Television"<sup>3</sup>, that happiness is everywhere and that the subject is happy.

This is not the only time we find Lacan make an affirmation that opposes Freud's statement on the same topic. Another well-known example is the declaration that anxiety is not objectless. Nonetheless, we know that such differences deal less with contradicting Freud than developing his theory.

What then is the advance that Lacan suggests concerning Freud's conjectures in relation to happiness?

I believe we can situate it within the notion of the symptom in its relation to what is real. Both consider the symptom as an escape valve for the discontentment produced by the object. However, they diverge as to the manner in which this device is structured.

To Freud, the symptom as a device leaves room for considering that the discontentment precedes the subject. He emphasizes the precariousness of the pleasure-principle system and the sovereignty of the impulses of aggressiveness and death. He goes as far as commenting that the intention that man be happy is not included in the plan of Creation. Consequently, it is impossible for happiness to last. It is limited to fleeting moments in which a contrast is established, producing intense pleasure.

Discontentment can be attributed to various causes. He lists three: the body that ages and decays; the world's misfortunes that afflict us; and relationships with others. He even remarks that suffering originating from relationships with others is the worst - curiously, the cause that most involves the subject. It thus seems more difficult to react to everyday unhappiness than to the unhappiness that *tsunamis* bring us. He adds that, although this type of suffering seems gratuitous, it is inevitable.

Thus, it should not surprise us, Freud adds, that people would rather dedicate to avoiding suffering than to

anticipating good times. That is, in relation to suffering, we are specialists; as to happiness, we are always amateurs.

Three ways in which we 'specialize ourselves' to avoid discontentment are pointed out: powerful derivatives, substitute satisfactions, and toxic substances. In the first, the symptom stands out, illustrated by Voltaire's suggestion that one should care for one's own garden; in the second, the sublimation is the substitution that the satisfaction of art can provide.<sup>4</sup>

According to Freudian notions, both repression and sublimation can be understood as substitutive of or derived from something previous. This partially results from the way Freud treats language, mainly emphasizing its impotence when naming the first encounter with *das Ding*. This treatment leaves room for considering that the trauma kernel is extra-linguistic. Hence, the Freudian subject<sup>5</sup> can do nothing but be unhappy. To that subject, real predominates over what is symbolic.

The Lacanian perspective differs because it considers language itself the cause of the repression, defining any information presumed at the start as mythical. There is no pre-linguistic subject, just as there is no extra-linguistic trauma. Lacan focuses on the significant cut that establishes a symbolic and imaginary boundary to real - which does not mean that the trauma does not proceed precisely from the point at which language fails.

In Lacan, we can thus interpret the origins of unhappiness that Freud listed as results of this failure: a real border traced by a significant founder in the first sexual encounter which is the symptom; a new real border traced in unexpected circumstances making the symptom necessary conditions change. Although sanctified by

routine, a symptom cannot always handle the discontentment. In the latter, a new occurrence forces a change in the tradition of the symptom and its respective discomfort.

Thus, the symptom, whether as shared meaning in the social bond or as a means of jouissance, does not derive from anything previous. As a structure, it is defined as the derivation itself that constitutes the boundary of real - which, strictly speaking, from a Lacanian standpoint, implies that the symptom is unhappiness in culture and not a device to handle it, as Freud saw it.

Of course, the symptom can change; and with it, the way malaise and well-being are distributed. It is worth emphasizing that we are dealing with well-being and malaise. One does not exist without the other, and both indicate the point to which the subject's jouissance is concerned or not with culture. Furthermore, in the real sense of the term, neither of them has precursors. They are logical derivatives:  $S_1$  and object  $a$ .

Accordingly, how can we situate the difference between Freud's stance - which highlights the constant force of unhappiness in culture, leaving happiness with scarce, contingent chances of an encounter - and Lacan's view, which situates the subject's opportunity to find happiness everywhere?

If we believe, as Lacan, that every encounter is handled according to the logic defined by the primordial encounter with *lalangue*, then finding happiness will depend on the subject's position confronted to failure. This can provide us with a key for contemplating what a subject can or cannot do with repetition and the return of real: Will he find the same thing in order to be equal or different? Will he experience the same thing again or experience

something new one more time? Will he subject the unforeseen to the same laws or invent new variations of them?

Thus, at the moment of the encounter, the subject is always happy theoretically. This is a starting point that leads to alternatives. It is a promising moment. In the time it takes to understand, which attenuates the vibration of happiness, the subject reveals his symptomatic response to this encounter by way of the restless work of the unconscious. As Freud put it, the symptom is treated as a social bond and, after all, that is what garden care is all about.

However, as to the moment of conclusion, the subject is not always happy. This will depend on the lessons he learns from encountering the lack of sexual relation and how he deals with a promise that is not kept.

I suggest considering the answers one could give to the lovers' question "Was it good for you?" in a parody that intends to illustrate Lacan's comments in *Television*.

- 1) "It was no good! Damn you!"
- 2) "It was supposed to be sublime, but they want me to damn myself!"
- 3) "It was damn good!"

We notice that the subject can respond in three different ways depending on how one interprets the word *damn*. These three ways would be subjective versions of the alternatives that Lacan distinguishes in the repetition of the original good fortune (*bon heur*) of *lalangue*<sup>6</sup>.

The first one would entail the cowardly sadness that allows itself to be overcome by the failure of the encounter; in the second, maniacal excitation, with its melancholic opposite face, when this experience occurs in the precariousness of the countenance in psychosis; and in

the third, the happy person, faced with the encounter, knows that nothing can be expected for a decisive meaning of life - but life can be lived, if possible, with the joyfulness of the unexpected.

As far as that goes, Lacan and Freud are in agreement: it is the art of living.

That must have been why J.-A. Miller<sup>7</sup> suggested to Lacan that he switch the name of his essay from *Television* to *The Art of Living*. Lacan didn't accept the advice. Nevertheless, it would have been a happy title.

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<sup>2</sup> Freud, S. "Civilization and its Discontents" (1930). London: Hogarth Press and Institute of Psycho-Analysis.

<sup>3</sup> Lacan, J. "Télévision" (1974). In: *Autres écrits*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2001, p. 526.

<sup>4</sup> Freud, S. *Op. Cit.*

<sup>4</sup> Freud, S. *Op. Cit.*

<sup>5</sup> Strictly speaking, one cannot speak of subjects under Freud's theory. However, although Freud did not have a theory of the subject, specifically, in his relationship with the Other, we discovered that the advent of the subject is considered in his long discussion of the Self, its unity highlighted from the exterior, its frontiers exchangeable in relation to the object in love, in hostility, etc.

<sup>6</sup> Lacan, J. *Op. Cit.* p. 545.

<sup>7</sup> Miller, J.-A. Lacanian Orientation Course, class on Nov. 21, 2007.