

ABSTRACT

Psychoanalysis and Modernity: A Failure to Find Relief from Existential Terror

by

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This project considers the ways in which culture—the symbols and institutions that guide behavior and provide meaning to the individuals living within a community—serves a defensive function against conscious awareness of existential terror. The term existential terror refers to the cognitive and emotional experience of recognizing the inevitability of death, which is often accompanied by feelings of angst, isolation from others, and awareness of meaninglessness. In this dissertation, I will argue that the broad shift from traditional culture based on Judeo-Christian religious beliefs and communal forms of social life to modernity represents a slow but destabilizing deterioration of the defensive function of culture vis-à-vis existential terror. The reflexivity inherent in modern stores of knowledge (i.e., the chronic revision of information in light of new data) makes certitude impossible, which destabilizes all forms of knowledge and the legitimacy of social institutions that provide an anchor for meaning in a society. The focus of this project is to analyze the effects on individuals and society living at a time in which the efficacy of the cultural defense has been weakened. I will argue that psychoanalysis arose at a time of tremendous cultural flux and represents the de facto model of psychological defense in modernity, replacing religion as the primary cultural mode of meaning-making. I will argue that as system, psychoanalysis is doomed to fail in its mission, and will outline the reasons for this line of thought. *Keywords:* psychoanalysis, culture, existential terror, modernity