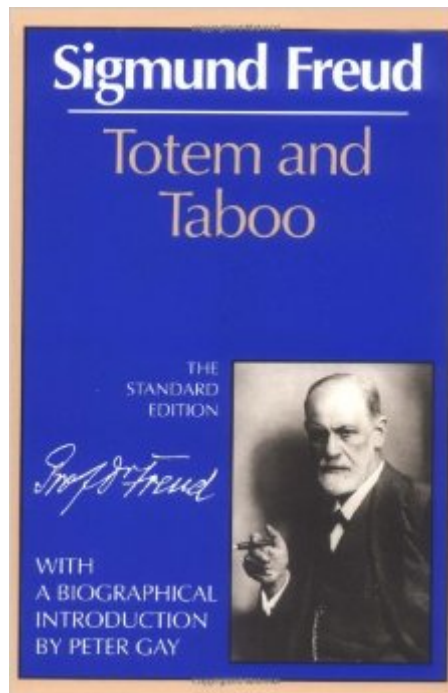


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Totem And Taboo (The Standard Edition) (Complete Psychological Works Of Sigmund Freud)



Synopsis

Totem and Taboo (1913), first published as a series of four articles between 1912 and 1913, is among Freud's most dazzling speculative texts. Adducing evidence from "primitive" tribes, neurotic women, child patients traversing the oedipal phase, and speculations by Charles Darwin, James G. Frazer, and other modern scholars, Freud attempts to trap the moment that civilized life began. It stands as his most imaginative venture into the psychoanalysis of culture.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

This is the first Freud book I have ever read. I am not a trained psychiatrist, or sociologist, or ethnologist, so I am going to review the book from a layman's standpoint. In this work, Freud draws heavily on observations and theories of ethnology, emphasizing on studies of Australian aborigines and Frazer's work. He draws a parallel with his personal observations from treatment of "neurotic" patients and claims to have found common patterns in these two classes of subjects, which tend to explain certain social and psychological phenomena, as well as the "birth" of religion. He focuses on the concepts of "Totem" and "Taboo". While familiar with taboo (although our understanding of the term is narrower than Freud's), totem is remote to us. Certain aboriginal peoples were grouped in social groupings, centered on the cult of and belief of descent from a certain animal. So, you are the "Kangaroo tribe", we are the "Ostrich tribe" etc. The topic most interesting Freud, to which he devotes the first essay in the book, is "exogamy", i.e. marriage outside one's group. This practice of exogamy seems to be in contradiction to what is pursued by some ethnic groups in America (Jews

and Greeks come to mind) i.e. "endogamy" - a push to have children marry within their parents' ethnic group. This practice of exogamy in Australian aborigines is attributed by Freud to fear of incest, with quite convincing arguments. What is challenging is to concoct a theory that suggests totemism and exogamy are not orthogonal social institutions that just happened to coexist, but intricately bound together. Freud accomplishes that through intricate reasoning that draws heavily on religion (in his 4th essay).

Freud published these four essays in 1912 and 1913. He states in the Preface, "It will be found that the two principal themes from which the title of this little book is derived---totems and taboos---have not received the same treatment. The analysis of taboos is put forward as an assured and exhaustive attempt at the solution of the problem. The investigation of totemism does no more than declare that 'here is what psycho-analysis can at the moment contribute towards elucidating the problem of the totem.'" Here are some representative quotations from the book: "We have arrived at the point of regarding a child's relation to his parents, dominated as it is by incestuous longings, as the nuclear complex of neuroses." "Taboo is a primeval prohibition forcibly imposed (by some authority) from outside, and directed against the most powerful longings to which human beings are subject. The desire to violate it persists in their unconscious ... the fact that the violation of a taboo can be atoned for by a renunciation shows that renunciation lies at the basis of obedience to taboo." "The original animal sacrifice was already a substitute for a human sacrifice---for the ceremonial killing of the father; so that, when the father-surrogate once more resumed its human shape, the animal sacrifice too could be changed back into a human sacrifice. The memory of the first great act of sacrifice thus proved indestructible." "There was an alternative method of allaying their guilt and this was first adopted by Christ. He sacrificed his own life and so redeemed the company of brothers from original sin." "There can be no doubt that in the Christian myth the original sin was one against God the father.

And this time through those primitive manifestations performed by that very primitive peoples like aborigines from Australia, North and South America Indians and many others discovered by European colonization, manifestation that we are used to call by Totem and Taboo. This is the standard Freud's view on the subject and to understand this book is a necessary step to proceed to other important Freud's work like *Moses and Monotheism*, *The Future of an Illusion* and many others, where he approaches with reluctance the idea of religion as an offspring of early animism. The prior standard way of seeing these types of primitive manifestation was to see them through the

amount of dread the primitive men have against the manifestation of some praeternatural agency, to use a term used by Mr. Thorstein Veblen, a contemporary of Freud, in his magnificent book on the leisure class (The Theory of the Leisure Class). It is worthy to note that nobody can be sure on the origins of this type of tradition and that adds substance to Mr. Freud's arguments. Sigmund Freud goes a step further to the classical view and says that totemism and taboo as animism are the manifestation of something not outside ourselves but rather inside human minds of the primitive people, where the unconscious played a good part to the forming of this kind of culture manifestation and where there is an intricate and unconscious and almost mathematical calculation in order to attribute to the priest-king, who typifies the carrier of this tradition, both the pleasures and the burden of the function.

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