

HUMANITAS

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Humanitatis studia, id est philosophia.

— Ludovicus Vives

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EROS
AND CIVILIZATION

A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud

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With a New Preface by the Author

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CHAPTER ELEVEN

Eros and Thanatos

Under non-repressive conditions, sexuality tends to "grow into" Eros — that is to say, toward self-sublimation in lasting and expanding relations (including work relations) which serve to intensify and enlarge instinctual gratification. Eros strives for "eternalizing" itself in a permanent *order*. This striving finds its first resistance in the realm of necessity. To be sure, the scarcity and poverty prevalent in the world could be sufficiently mastered to permit the ascendancy of universal freedom, but this mastery seems to be self-propelling — perpetual labor. All the technological progress, the conquest of nature, the rationalization of man and society have not eliminated and cannot eliminate the necessity of alienated labor, the necessity of working mechanically, unpleasurably, in a manner that does not represent individual self-realization.

However, progressive alienation itself increases the potential of freedom: the more external to the individual the necessary labor becomes, the less does it involve him in the realm of necessity. Relieved from the requirements of domination, the quantitative reduction in labor time and energy leads to a qualitative change in the human existence: the free rather than the labor time determines its content. The expanding realm of freedom becomes truly

a realm of play — of the free play of individual faculties. Thus liberated, they will generate new forms of realization and of discovering the world, which in turn will reshape the realm of necessity, the struggle for existence. The altered relation between the two realms of the human reality alters the relation between what is desirable and what is reasonable, between instinct and reason. With the transformation from sexuality into Eros, the life instincts evolve their sensuous order, while reason becomes sensuous to the degree to which it comprehends and organizes necessity in terms of protecting and enriching the life instincts. The roots of the aesthetic experience re-emerge — not merely in an artistic culture but in the struggle for existence itself. It assumes a new rationality. The repressiveness of reason that characterizes the rule of the performance principle does not belong to the realm of necessity *per se*. Under the performance principle, the gratification of the sex instinct depends largely on the "suspension" of reason and even of consciousness: on the brief (legitimate or fictive) oblivion of the private and the universal unhappiness, on the interruption of the reasonable routine of life, of the duty and dignity of status and office. Happiness is almost by definition unreasonable if it is unrepressed and uncontrolled. In contrast, beyond the performance principle, the gratification of the instinct requires the more conscious effort of free rationality, the less it is the by-product of the superimposed rationality of oppression. The more freely the instinct develops, the more freely will its "conservative nature" assert itself. The striving for *lasting* gratification makes not only for an enlarged order of libidinal relations

("community") but also for the perpetuation of this order on a higher scale. The pleasure principle extends to consciousness. Eros redefines reason in his own terms. Reasonable is what sustains the order of gratification.

To the degree to which the struggle for existence becomes co-operation for the free development and fulfillment of individual needs, repressive reason gives way to a new *rationality of gratification* in which reason and happiness converge. It creates its own division of labor, its own priorities, its own hierarchy. The historical heritage of the performance principle is administration, not of men, but of things: mature civilization depends for its functioning on a multitude of co-ordinated arrangements. These arrangements in turn must carry recognized and recognizable authority. Hierarchical relationships are not un-free *per se*; civilization relies to a great extent on rational authority, based on knowledge and necessity, and aiming at the protection and preservation of life. Such is the authority of the engineer, of the traffic policeman, of the airplane pilot in flight. Once again, the distinction between repression and surplus-repression must be recalled. If a child feels the "need" to cross the street any time at its will, repression of this "need" is not repressive of human potentialities. It may be the opposite. The need to "relax" in the entertainments furnished by the culture industry is itself repressive, and its repression is a step toward freedom. Where repression has become so effective that, for the repressed, it assumes the (illusory) form of freedom, the abolition of such freedom readily appears as a totalitarian act. Here, the old conflict arises again: human freedom is

not only a private affair — but it is nothing at all unless it is *also* a private affair. Once privacy must no longer be maintained apart from and against the public existence, the liberty of the individual and that of the whole may perhaps be reconciled by a "general will" taking shape in institutions which are directed toward the individual needs. The renunciations and delays demanded by the general will must not be opaque and inhuman; nor must their reason be authoritarian. However, the question remains: how can civilization freely generate freedom, when unfreedom has become part and parcel of the mental apparatus? And if not, who is entitled to establish and enforce the objective standards?

From Plato to Rousseau, the only honest answer is the idea of an educational dictatorship, exercised by those who are supposed to have acquired knowledge of the real Good. The answer has since become obsolete: knowledge of the available means for creating a humane existence for all is no longer confined to a privileged elite. The facts are all too open, and the individual consciousness would safely arrive at them if it were not methodically arrested and diverted. The distinction between rational and irrational authority, between repression and surplus-repression, can be made and verified by the individuals themselves. That they cannot make this distinction now does not mean that they cannot learn to make it once they are given the opportunity to do so. Then the course of trial and error becomes a rational course in freedom. Utopias are susceptible to unrealistic blueprints; the conditions for a free society are not. They are a matter of reason.

It is not the conflict between instinct and reason that provides the strongest argument against the idea of a free civilization, but rather the conflict which instinct creates in itself. Even if the destructive forms of its polymorphous perversity and license are due to surplus-repression and become susceptible to libidinal order once surplus-repression is removed, instinct itself is beyond good and evil, and no free civilization can dispense with this distinction. The mere fact that, in the choice of its objects, the sex instinct is not guided by reciprocity constitutes a source of unavoidable conflict among individuals — and a strong argument against the possibility of its self-sublimation. But is there perhaps in the instinct itself an inner barrier which “contains” its driving power? Is there perhaps a “natural” self-restraint in Eros so that its genuine gratification would call for delay, detour, and arrest? Then there would be obstructions and limitations imposed not from outside, by a repressive reality principle, but set and accepted by the instinct itself because they have inherent libidinal value. Freud indeed suggested this notion. He thought that “unrestrained sexual liberty from the beginning” results in lack of full satisfaction:

It is easy to show that the value the mind sets on erotic needs instantly sinks as soon as satisfaction becomes readily obtainable. Some obstacle is necessary to swell the tide of the libido to its height.¹

Moreover, he considered the “strange” possibility that “something in the nature of the sexual instinct is unfavorable to the achievement of absolute gratification.”² The

¹ “The Most Prevalent Form of Degradation in Erotic Life,” in *Collected Papers* (London: Hogarth Press, 1950), IV, 213.

² *Ibid.*, p. 214.

idea is ambiguous and lends itself easily to ideological justifications: the unfavorable consequences of readily available satisfaction have probably been one of the strongest props for repressive morality. Still, in the context of Freud's theory, it would follow that the “natural obstacles” in the instinct, far from denying pleasure, may function as a premium on pleasure if they are divorced from archaic taboos and exogenous constraints. Pleasure contains an element of self-determination which is the token of human triumph over blind necessity:

Nature does not know real pleasure but only satisfaction of want. All pleasure is societal — in the unsublimated no less than in the sublimated impulses. Pleasure originates in alienation.³

What distinguishes pleasure from the blind satisfaction of want is the instinct's refusal to exhaust itself in immediate satisfaction, its ability to build up and use barriers for intensifying fulfillment. Though this instinctual refusal has done the work of domination, it can also serve the opposite function: eroticize non-libidinal relations, transform biological tension and relief into free happiness. No longer employed as instruments for retaining men in alienated performances, the barriers against absolute gratification would become elements of human freedom; they would protect that other alienation in which pleasure originates — man's alienation not from himself but from mere nature: his free self-realization. Men would really exist as individuals, each shaping his own life; they would face each other with truly

³ “Natur kennt nicht eigentlich Genuss: sie bringt es nicht weiter als zur Stillung des Bedürfnisses. Alle Lust ist gesellschaftlich in den unsublimierten Affekten nicht weniger als in den sublimierten.” Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialektik der Aufklärung* (Amsterdam: Querido Verlag, 1947), p. 127.

different needs and truly different modes of satisfaction — with their own refusals and their own selections. The ascendancy of the pleasure principle would thus engender antagonisms, pains, and frustrations — individual conflicts in the striving for gratification. But these conflicts would themselves have libidinal value: they would be permeated with the rationality of gratification. This *sensuous* rationality contains its own moral laws.

The idea of a libidinal morality is suggested not only by Freud's notion of instinctual barriers to absolute gratification, but also by psychoanalytic interpretations of the super-ego. It has been pointed out that the superego, as the mental representative of morality, is not unambiguously the representative of the reality principle, especially of the forbidding and punishing father. In many cases, the superego seems to be in secret alliance with the id, defending the claims of the id against the ego and the external world. Charles Odier therefore proposed that a part of the super-ego is "in the last analysis the representative of a primitive phase, during which morality had not yet freed itself from the pleasure principle."⁴ He speaks of a pregenital, pre-historic, pre-oedipal "pseudo-morality" prior to the acceptance of the reality principle, and calls the mental representative of this "pseudo-morality" the *superid*. The psychical phenomenon which, in the individual, suggests such a pregenital morality is an identification with the mother, expressing itself in a castration-wish rather than castration-threat. It might be the survival of a regressive

⁴ "Vom Ueber-Ich," in *Internationale Zeitschrift für Psychoanalyse*, XII (1926), 280-281.

tendency: remembrance of the primal Mother-Right, and at the same time a "symbolic means against losing the then prevailing privileges of the woman." According to Odier, the pregenital and prehistorical morality of the superid is incompatible with the reality principle and therefore a neurotic factor.

One more step in the interpretation, and the strange traces of the "superid" appear as traces of a different, lost reality, or lost relation between ego and reality. The notion of reality which is predominant in Freud and which is condensed in the reality principle is "bound up with the father." It confronts the id and the ego as a hostile, external force, and, accordingly, the father is chiefly a hostile figure, whose power is symbolized in the castration-threat, "directed against the gratification of libidinal urges toward the mother." The growing ego attains maturity by complying with this hostile force: "submission to the castration threat" is the "decisive step in the establishment of the ego as based on the reality principle."⁵ However, this reality which the ego faces as an outside antagonistic power is neither the only nor the primary reality. The development of the ego is development "away from primary narcissism"; at this early stage, reality "is not outside, but is contained in the pre-ego of primary narcissism." It is not hostile and alien to the ego, but "intimately connected with, originally not even distinguished from it."⁶ This reality is first (and last?) experienced in the child's libidinal relation to the mother — a relation which is at the beginning within

⁵ Hans W. Loewald, "Ego and Reality," in *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, Vol. XXXII (1951), Part I, p. 12.

⁶ *Ibid.*

the "pre-ego" and only subsequently divorced from it. And with this division of the original unity, an "urge towards re-establishing the original unity" develops: a "libidinal flow between infant and mother."⁷ At this primary stage of the relation between "pre-ego" and reality, the Narcissistic and the maternal Eros seem to be one, and the primary experience of reality is that of a libidinous union. The Narcissistic phase of individual pre-genitality "recalls" the maternal phase of the history of the human race. Both constitute a reality to which the ego responds with an attitude, not of defense and submission, but of integral identification with the "environment." But in the light of the paternal reality principle, the "maternal concept" of reality here emerging is immediately turned into something negative, dreadful. The impulse to re-establish the lost Narcissistic-maternal unity is interpreted as a "threat," namely, the threat of "maternal engulfment" by the overpowering womb.⁸ The hostile father is exonerated and reappears as savior who, in punishing the incest wish, protects the ego from its annihilation in the mother. The question does not arise whether the Narcissistic-maternal attitude toward reality cannot "return" in less primordial, less devouring forms under the power of the mature ego and in a mature civilization. Instead, the necessity of suppressing this attitude once and for all is taken for granted. The patriarchal reality principle holds sway over the psychoanalytic interpretation. It is only beyond this reality principle that the "maternal" images of the super ego convey promises rather

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

than memory traces — images of a free future rather than of a dark past.

However, even if a maternal libidinal morality is traceable in the instinctual structure, and even if a sensuous rationality could make the Eros freely susceptible to order, one innermost obstacle seems to defy all project of a non-repressive development — namely, the bond that binds Eros to the death instinct. The brute fact of death denies once and for all the reality of a non-repressive existence. For death is the final negativity of time, but "joy wants eternity." Timelessness is the ideal of pleasure. Time has no power over the id, the original domain of the pleasure principle. But the ego, through which alone pleasure becomes real, is in its entirety subject to time. The mere anticipation of the inevitable end, present in every instant, introduces a repressive element into all libidinal relations and renders pleasure itself painful. This primary frustration in the instinctual structure of man becomes the inexhaustible source of all other frustrations — and of their social effectiveness. Man learns that "it cannot last anyway," that every pleasure is short, that for all finite things the hour of their birth is the hour of their death — that it couldn't be otherwise. He is resigned before society forces him to practice resignation methodically. The flux of time is society's most natural ally in maintaining law and order, conformity, and the institutions that relegate freedom to a perpetual utopia; the flux of time helps men to forget what was and what can be: it makes them oblivious to the better past and the better future.

This ability to forget — itself the result of a long and terrible education by experience — is an indispensable requirement of mental and physical hygiene without which civilized life would be unbearable; but it is also the mental faculty which sustains submissiveness and renunciation. To forget is also to forgive what should not be forgiven if justice and freedom are to prevail. Such forgiveness reproduces the conditions which reproduce injustice and enslavement: to forget past suffering is to forgive the forces that caused it — without defeating these forces. The wounds that heal in time are also the wounds that contain the poison. Against this surrender to time, the restoration of remembrance to its rights, as a vehicle of liberation, is one of the noblest tasks of thought. In this function, remembrance (*Erinnerung*) appears at the conclusion of Hegel's *Phenomenology of the Spirit*; in this function, it appears in Freud's theory.⁹ Like the ability to forget, the ability to remember is a product of civilization — perhaps its oldest and most fundamental psychological achievement. Nietzsche saw in the training of memory the beginning of civilized morality — especially the memory of obligations, contracts, dues.¹⁰ This context reveals the one-sidedness of memory-training in civilization: the faculty was chiefly directed toward remembering duties rather than pleasures; memory was linked with bad conscience, guilt, and sin. Unhappiness and the threat of punishment, not happiness and the promise of freedom, linger in memory.

Without release of the repressed content of memory, without release of its liberating power, non-repressive sublimation is unimaginable. From the myth of Orpheus to

⁹ See Chapter 1 above.

¹⁰ *Genealogy of Morals*, Part II, 1-3.

the novel of Proust, happiness and freedom have been linked with the idea of the recapture of time: the *temps retrouvé*. Remembrance retrieves the *temps perdu*, which was the time of gratification and fulfillment. Eros, penetrating into consciousness, is moved by remembrance; with it he protests against the order of renunciation; he uses memory in his effort to defeat time in a world dominated by time. But in so far as time retains its power over Eros, happiness is essentially a thing of the *past*. The terrible sentence which states that only the lost paradises are the true ones judges and at the same time rescues the *temps perdu*. The lost paradises are the only true ones not because, in retrospect, the past joy seems more beautiful than it really was, but because remembrance alone provides the joy without the anxiety over its passing and thus gives it an otherwise impossible duration. Time loses its power when remembrance redeems the past.

Still, this defeat of time is artistic and spurious; remembrance is no real weapon unless it is translated into historical action. Then, the struggle against time becomes a decisive moment in the struggle against domination:

The conscious wish to break the continuum of history belongs to the revolutionary classes in the moment of action. This consciousness asserted itself during the July Revolution. In the evening of the first day of the struggle, simultaneously but independently at several places, shots were fired at the time pieces on the towers of Paris.¹¹

It is the alliance between time and the order of repression that motivates the efforts to halt the flux of time, and it is this alliance that makes time the deadly enemy of Eros.

¹¹ Walter Benjamin, "Ueber den Begriff der Geschichte," in *Die Neue Rundschau* (1950), p. 568.

To be sure, the threat of time, the passing of the moment of fullness, the anxiety over the end, may themselves become erotogenic — obstacles that “swell the tide of the libido.” However, the wish of Faust which conjures the pleasure principle demands, not the beautiful moment, but eternity. With its striving for eternity, Eros offends against the decisive taboo that sanctions libidinal pleasure only as a temporal and controlled condition, not as a permanent fountainhead of the human existence. Indeed, if the alliance between time and the established order dissolved, “natural” private unhappiness would no longer support organized societal unhappiness. The relegation of human fulfillment to utopia would no longer find adequate response in the instincts of man, and the drive for liberation would assume that terrifying force which actually it never had. Every sound reason is on the side of law and order in their insistence that the eternity of joy be reserved for the hereafter, and in their endeavor to subordinate the struggle against death and disease to the never-ceasing requirements of national and international security.

The striving for the preservation of time in time, for the arrest of time, for conquest of death, seems unreasonable by any standard, and outright impossible under the hypothesis of the death instinct that we have accepted. Or does this very hypothesis make it more reasonable? The death instinct operates under the Nirvana principle: it tends toward that state of “constant gratification” where no tension is felt — a state without want. This trend of the instinct implies that its *destructive* manifestations would be minimized as it approached such a state. If the instinct’s

basic objective is not the termination of life but of pain — the absence of tension — then paradoxically, in terms of the instinct, the conflict between life and death is the more reduced, the closer life approximates the state of gratification. Pleasure principle and Nirvana principle then converge. At the same time, Eros, freed from surplus-repression, would be strengthened, and the strengthened Eros would, as it were, absorb the objective of the death instinct. The instinctual value of death would have changed: if the instincts pursued and attained their fulfillment in a non-repressive order, the regressive compulsion would lose much of its biological rationale. As suffering and want recede, the Nirvana principle may become reconciled with the reality principle. The unconscious attraction that draws the instincts back to an “earlier state” would be effectively counteracted by the desirability of the attained state of life. The “conservative nature” of the instincts would come to rest in a fulfilled present. Death would cease to be an instinctual goal. It remains a fact, perhaps even an ultimate necessity — but a necessity against which the unrepressed energy of mankind will protest, against which it will wage its greatest struggle.

In this struggle, reason and instinct could unite. Under conditions of a truly human existence, the difference between succumbing to disease at the age of ten, thirty, fifty, or seventy, and dying a “natural” death after a fulfilled life, may well be a difference worth fighting for with all instinctual energy. Not those who die, but those who die before they must and want to die, those who die in agony and pain, are the great indictment against civilization.

They also testify to the unredeemable guilt of mankind. Their death arouses the painful awareness that it was unnecessary, that it could be otherwise. It takes all the institutions and values of a repressive order to pacify the bad conscience of this guilt. Once again, the deep connection between the death instinct and the sense of guilt becomes apparent. The silent "professional agreement" with the fact of death and disease is perhaps one of the most widespread expressions of the death instinct — or, rather, of its social usefulness. In a repressive civilization, death itself becomes an instrument of repression. Whether death is feared as constant threat, or glorified as supreme sacrifice, or accepted as fate, the education for consent to death introduces an element of surrender into life from the beginning — surrender and submission. It stifles "utopian" efforts. The powers that be have a deep affinity to death; death is a token of unfreedom, of defeat. Theology and philosophy today compete with each other in celebrating death as an existential category: perverting a biological fact into an ontological essence, they bestow transcendental blessing on the guilt of mankind which they help to perpetuate — they betray the promise of utopia. In contrast, a philosophy that does not work as the handmaiden of repression responds to the fact of death with the Great Refusal — the refusal of Orpheus the liberator. Death can become a token of freedom. The necessity of death does not refute the possibility of final liberation. Like the other necessities, it can be made rational — painless. Men can die without anxiety if they know that what they love is protected from misery and oblivion. After a fulfilled life, they may take

it upon themselves to die — at a moment of their own choosing. But even the ultimate advent of freedom cannot redeem those who died in pain. It is the remembrance of them, and the accumulated guilt of mankind against its victims, that darken the prospect of a civilization without repression.