

Between Freud's Libidinal Instinct and the Christian Perspective of Love

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Abstract: Starting from Freud's theory of sublimation, I intend to point out, in this research, a better way out by experiencing a pure feeling of love, so well-known in the eastern spiritual tradition. Freud was convinced that the unacceptable sexual impulse could be deviated from its original purpose by the superego's restrictive laws and transformed into a superior state of tender love, morality, artistic abilities. Though it may appear as a natural process of acquiring an elevated spirit, what I cannot agree with is the outcome: love.

Therefore, in this study, I will bring together both Freud's view and the eastern Christian theologians' conclusions on this matter to argue that love cannot derive from the sexual drive, but rather the opposite is more logical.

Keywords: libidinal instinct, unconsciousness, consciousness, sublimation, love

Numerous studies on Freud's sublimation theory have concluded that sublimation is a key notion in psychoanalysis because from a therapeutic point of view, successful psychoanalytic treatment apparently aims at sublimation, seen as a necessary process for complete psychic health. It suggests that by bringing to conscious light repressed instinct, desires, and wishes, energy that has previously displayed itself in unpleasant symptoms, it may eventually be harnessed and directed to a more productive outcome. At first glance, sublimation may appear as a clear enough concept. It involves the redirecting of a repressed sexual instinct toward a nonsexual aim.

As Freud underlines in his essay “On Narcissism”(1914): “Sublimation is a process that concerns object-libido and consists in the instinct directing itself towards an aim other than, and remote from, that of sexual satisfaction; in this process the accent falls upon deflection from sexuality” (Freud, 1961:94). But is the deviation towards another external goal a complete reshape of the self? What Freud proposes is not a solution, but rather a temporary silence of the instincts.

Protopresbyter Alexander Schmemmann dares to go deeper into the human’s psyche and spirit and places man on a continuous track in his development integrating three antagonistic realities into a single one: created, fallen and redeemed world. In a highly provocative lecture on utopia and escape, perceived as two dimensions people have always faced, he clarifies why Freud’s pursuit of libido liberation is only a psychological utopia. “Very often today, Utopia speaks in terms of revolution. Have you ever heard of a single government in Africa for example that does not claim to be a revolutionary one? They are always a Front of the Revolution or Liberation of something. Revolution is a code word. Here, in the United States, it is liberation, or change, or quality of life.”(Schmemmann,1981:14) Schmemmann traces these two anomalies in the human psyche way back to the Judeo-Christian religious experience grasping the duality of Utopia and Escapism as extreme solutions, each bearing witness to a completely wrong idea of the Enlightenment that human reason would explain everything, even what Christ meant by the Kingdom of Heaven. In fact, the logical solution he proposes is an instant and permanent integration of the opposing dimensions within human’s mind, that is accepting the reality of an original good instinct or nature, though fallen during its existence at a certain moment and its redemption by the Creator. We can deduce now that the major distinction between Freud and the

Christian's view is an axiological one: while Freud seeks man's edification from the instinct trap outward, trusting his own ability to rise to a higher level, on a horizontal axis, the Christian experiences, in a practical manner, the perfect blending of the three realities without denying the existence of any of them, but unifying the opposing forces, good and evil nature by something that is inexplicable and beyond man's power to determine or change, placing man's endeavour vertically. Nowhere, in any culture or philosophy could we find a better outlook of the human inner world than in eastern Christian belief. The beauty of this perspective lies in the three fundamental truths: everything is good by creation, this world is fallen and yet, this world is redeemed.

For Freud's non-religious mind it was almost impossible to peek through the key-hole of any idea based on faith, so we partially understand the outcome of his psychoanalysis and appreciate some of his monumental work on human psyche, being well aware of the shortcomings, such as the sublimation issue. Many other psychoanalysts agreed that sublimation was not entirely clear. For instance, Laplanche and Pontalis's entry on sublimation ends with a significant negative assessment of attempts to explain the notion of sublimation: "The lack of a coherent theory of sublimation remains one of the lacunae in psychoanalytic thought" (Laplanche, Pontalis, 1973:433). The belief that sublimation is a vexed concept is continuously echoed in the secondary literature on the topic. Surely, this has been true from the early days of that literature, as found in Edward Glover's assertion in his 1931 article "Sublimation, Substitution, and Social Anxiety": "It is generally agreed that prior to 1923 a good deal of confusion existed regarding the exact nature of sublimation. Since then it has increased rather than diminished." (Glover, 1931: 263) Even more recently, Jacques Lacan observes "the virtually absurd

difficulties that authors have encountered every time they have tried to give a meaning to the term sublimation” (Lacan,1992: 142–43).

The substitution of nonsexual for sexual aims means that one cannot distinguish sublimations from symptom formation. In Freud’s basic interpretation various drives are repressed and later these may manifest themselves in different behaviours. These acts, often named by Freud substitute formations, are related in numerous ways to the original drive or instinct. They are what Freud calls the “return of the repressed” (“Repression,” in Freud, 1961:154). His burning issue is how to separate those substitute formations, those situations of the return of the repressed, which are barely symptoms, from those that are sublimations. A well-known case he analysed can be found in his 1910 essay “Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of His Childhood”(Freud,1961:57–137). There, Freud states that Leonardo is a model of that type of individual whose repressed sexual desires find sublimated expression by focusing his energy to a powerful drive for scientific and artistic research.

Concluding his research on the matter he recognizes the difficulties of separating symptoms from sublimations, and illness from health: “We must expressly insist that we have never reckoned Leonardo as a neurotic or a <nerve case>, as the awkward phrase goes. Anyone who protests at our so much as daring to examine him in the light of discoveries gained in the field of pathology is still clinging to prejudices which we have today rightly abandoned.” (Freud, 1961:131) The idea is that “neurotic symptoms are structures which are substitutes for certain achievements of repression that we have to carry out in the course of our development from a child to a civilized human being. We know too that we all produce such substitutive structures, and that it is only their number, intensity and

distribution which justify us in using the practical concept of illness and in inferring the presence of constitutional inferiority.”(Freud, 1961:131) Linking the above idea to Schmemmann’s theory on utopia and escape we can observe both extremities occurring in Leonardo’s case. Comparing and contrasting utopia and escape with symptoms and sublimation we can observe some terminology correspondence between the two pairs. Freud’s sublimation stands for Schmemmann’s utopia while the symptoms are the perfect match for escape. The distinction is that Freud’s concept of escaping from an instinctual obsession by means of sublimation is merely a way to cover it not to rise above it. As Schmemmann notices: “there is real evil, and there is real good. There is the world that is loveable, and there is the world that is hateful. There are vertical and horizontal dimensions of human life. Nothing is betrayed. Nothing is mutilated. When there is joy, that joy is full. When there is sadness, that sadness is full. Life cannot be reduced to those psychological gravities and all kinds of similar things.”(Schmemmann, 1981:12). He considers that the only true kind of religion is the integrative one, which bears witness to not only the belief in, but also the experience of the redemption which takes place here and now. What he points out so insightfully is that no sublimation is really effective or the cause of transforming a fallen instinct into an elevated spirit .And this belief and experience will classify both utopianism and escapism as inefficient methods. As for Freud, he prefers to move inside the same circle mixing two opposing states, repressed and expressed (sublimation) in the hope of reaching a moral standard.

The greatest mistake that Freud makes is that he equals sexual aim to the high feeling of love or cultural values. For him the latter derives from the first by means of sublimation. But how can an altered energy be the cause of a superior one? What has already been broken, remains so, unless another power or energy, superior

to the human nature and creator of it might intervene and strengthen man's weak nature. As Dumitru Staniloaie beautifully explains in *The Holy Trinity: In the beginning There Was Love*, "the supreme existence, being without origins, is forever happy through itself without any progress, while the created one, in order to be united with the eternal one needs the effort of the free will", translation mine. (Staniloaie, 2012:12) But, the reality of the free will through which man is supposed to progress by following some laws - seen as the expression of God's care for mankind or of the Supreme Mind - can use the ability of reasoning against the Supreme Reason of what is good. That explains both the Christian's notion of the fall and the vast space of the *id* presented in Freud's theory. In this state of ontological entropy all man's psychology changed; not only was he able to oscillate between good and evil but he experienced the fall in his entire being dividing his mind into Freud's *id*, *ego* and *superego*. The Christian's belief sees in Christ the Saviour as only He, man and God, was able to personally restore man's nature by incarnation. He made Himself accessible to man so that the human psyche can be restored from the abyss that Freud calls the unconscious or the instincts' zone. Schmemmann brilliantly gives this restoration a permanent state, not some heroic events forgotten long ago, but a continuous fortification and enlightenment of what is weakened, forgotten and unknown in human's mind. In fact, the Christian's view proposes an experiential and practical ascent towards a higher level of conscious by divine intervention, which is more than Freud's *superego*, as it exceeds morality. Freud must have created the concept of sublimation due to human's urge to reach inner freedom again. Except the fact that, for him, the liberation was wrongly visualized. If we take into consideration his analysis of the mind, with two of the extremes: the *id* and the *superego* and compare them to Schmemmann's good and fallen dimensions of the

mind we observe that the solutions are different. On the one hand, Freud believes that the sexual drive can be channeled towards a moral aim, process known as sublimation. In other words, Freud suggests that the perfection of the psyche contains those libidinal instincts as its primary energy. On the other hand, we notice that the Christian's perspective includes the divine energy or the fulfillment of love through which human's being is restored. Once man interacts with that love, there is no trace of the libidinal impulses in it, though it can express itself at the instinctual level too.

In Freud's account on sublimation there is an emphasis on the social value of the activity resulting from sublimation. Therefore, in his *New Introductory Lectures* he says, "A certain kind of modification of the aim and a change of object, in which our social valuation is taken into account, is described by us as sublimation" (Freud, 1961:97). In one of his earliest published studies on sublimation in the Dora case of 1905 he accounts "the undifferentiated sexual disposition of the child . . . being diverted to a higher sexual aim" and thereby providing "the energy for a greater number of our cultural achievements." (Freud, 1961:50) And in the *Three Essays* he states that sexual curiosity can be "diverted or sublimated in the direction of art" (Freud, 1961:156). If for Freud the sexual impulse was the main drive for further personal development for the Christians this could not be accepted. Dumitru Staniloaie speaks more convincingly in *The Holy Trinity: In the beginning There Was Love* about human's relation to God and His aim to become as good as God through His constant love. "God desires that the Life or the Good, which identifies with Him in an unlimited way to extend to a limited existence, of course with His help", translation mine. (Staniloaie, 2012:20). Embracing this thought it is impossible to logically accept man's preoccupation with art or scientific discoveries as a

consequence of deviated sexual aim. However, there should be somehow a connection between concepts such as love, beauty, justice and sexual drive. What Freud understands as a bottom to top effort, is in reality the opposite, namely it is love itself, a completely pure feeling which human being was well acquainted with at the very beginning of his existence, and from which complex life arouse, including the sexual impulse. The impression that man must turn this primary energy into a higher disposition underlines the fact that there has been a fall in human's life at a certain moment and if we want to include the word sublimation in this equation it should be the name of that mysterious force or the Holy Spirit in Christian's belief that does all the magic work. Freud's inaccuracy consists in the idea that sublimation is the deviation of sexual energy, or libido, into a physical act or a different emotion in order to avoid confrontation with the sexual urge, which is itself contrary to the individual's belief. It is based on the incorrect idea that sexual energy can be used to create a spiritual nature which in turn can create more sensual works.

To justify my point I will give more details about Schmemann's realistic and pertinent perspective on utopia and escape as they are both present in Freud's sublimation. Both attitudes coexist in a detrimental way and are present in any society and culture. History has recorded traces of the two visions. There are people who "being obsessed with one particular vision and being fanatically loyal to that vision, cut themselves off from the mainstream of culture. There are also, always, in every culture and every society, those who can be called the dropouts, those who for various reasons are trying to escape from the pressures of their society."(Schmemann,1981:1) Religion makes no exception for it has been invaded during the time by its own utopians and escapees. Broadly speaking, utopia is characterized by the promise that the personal destiny of the human existence moves

towards perfection and fulfillment. More acutely this "Marxist utopia"(Schmemmann 1981: 1) is reflected in Freud's work too as a reminiscence of the Age of Reason rather than an objective search of one's inner freedom. As C.G. Jung observes "Freud has appropriated this concept and usurped it for the sphere of the will and the bourgeois, rationalistic ethos... Sublimation is part of the royal art where the true gold is made. Of this Freud knows nothing; worse still, he barricades all the paths that could lead to true sublimation."(Jung, 1974:171) Jung was closer to the Christian's vision endowing sublimation a mystical nature. He regarded it as an alchemical blending in which fire and flesh are mixed or the particles and energetic components of human being gathered mysteriously under an unknown force to create something greater or more refined. Jung found it hard to accept Freud's plasticity of the sexual instincts and their convertibility to non-sexual ends to get rid of the burden of the unconscious depository. From the Christians' point of view the unconscious side of the human psyche is caused by the initial fall from a good state of mind and the whole process of regeneration or redemption is a collaborative work between God and man as a daily effort to experience the state of grace. Staniloaie shows that God or the Supreme Force is able to reshape man's damaged mind due to the eternal, perfect harmony and love of the Trinity which manifested personally in Jesus Christ. "Saint Maxim the Confessor sees in Jesus Christ before the incarnation the Reason or the Nous as the underpinning of all creation, and after incarnation as the One who restores the harmony of creation with God and among it."(Staniloaie, 2012:15). The possibility to transcend the well-known dimension and become perfect or the sons of God through His Holy Spirit is a gradual process that might uncover the hidden unconscious or the *id* because everything in the human's psyche would be revealed. But the discovery of one's self would not wipe

out or make disappear all the negativity as Freud suggests by his sublimation, but, paradoxically in spite of what is fallen and altered a new energy can grow stronger. So, the libidinal drive is not the cause of the super ego, but the first is an opposing force to the latter. The real super ego should spring from the Superior Conscious that created the human being. After all, the superior consciousness or the morality is the original state of mind and not something new, it is like returning home. That justifies why Schmemmann places the redemption in the here and now. In his vision redemption means exactly that of which St John writes in his epistle: “That which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life - the eternal life which has manifest to us. And this is the paradox, the antinomy...Redemption means that the Kingdom which is to come, it is in the midst of us” (Schmemmann, 1981:10) This belief is an extraordinary reminder of the fact that everything is inside us due to the fusion of the divine energy with human’s energy; a macrocosmic world crammed within a microcosmic dimension ready to expand and flourish when it is accessed willingly with the right thoughts or to tumble down when neglected. Contrasting what has been said above with Freud’s vision, we can infer that, for him, the two concepts: the *id* and the *superego* are one and the same notion, the first causing the latter. Although he insightfully divided the human psyche in its main operational systems, *id*, *ego* and *super ego*, we are witness to his incapacity to understand that those primary instincts were not primary at all, but love was the primary state or the good of the creation from which man fell into what we know now as libidinal or sexual impulses. Between these two, love and sexuality, one might not notice any difference, but they are totally contrary to each other as dignity is to vanity or light is to shadow.

In a child these two possibilities are so well observable: sometimes a child is adorable, without even being conscious of the divine sparkle latently dwelling within him, and at the same time, another destructive side can grow unless it is detected and replaced through education and positive environment by a healthy one. So, in every person there are two innate dispositions that evolve depending on internal and external factors. Each disposition corresponds to either the good or the weakened ability in the human nature. Indeed, Schmemmann captured correctly this trio circle of our reality: created good, fallen, redeemed. The right attitude is to integrate all three at once each moment of our lives otherwise we cannot avoid falling into either utopia, which stands for the bright side of things or sublimation or escape, which refers exclusively to the dark in the world or repressed impulses. It was said that one vision contains too much optimism while the other severe pessimism, but I see them both triggered by fear and negation of reality. Knowing all these, where should we position Freud's sublimation? Is it escapism or utopia? Logically judging, it is a mixture of them both. On the one hand, through it he seeks the transformation of sexual aim into non-sexual aims by means of art - that is utopia, and on the other hand, for Freud sublimation is also repression of the hostile desires – meaning escapism from those forces. In *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* he mentions: “the diversion of sexual forces from sexual aims and their direction to new ones—a process that deserves the name of ‘sublimation’” (Freud, 1961:178). In the same reference he writes “we would place its [sublimation's] beginning in the period of sexual latency of childhood.” We can assume that such redirection on the part of the child involves unconscious repression of those sexual drives, and such repression is exactly what Freud describes as the progenitor of the period of sexual latency. He implies that the child does not consciously face his or her erotic desires and

does not choose to act on them so he or she pursues some other activity as a substitute satisfaction. It is suggested that the sublimation of those desires first requires their repression. But in other texts when Freud explicitly considers repression and sublimation together, he claims that sublimation is an alternative to repression. To sustain the affirmation, he writes in a passage from *Five Lectures on Psycho-analysis* that “Premature repression makes the sublimation of the repressed instinct impossible; when the repression is lifted, the path to sublimation becomes free once more” (Freud, 1961:54). In a letter to Putnam, Freud even goes so far as to sustain the idea that the two are mutually exclusive: “It [psychoanalytic theory] teaches that a drive cannot be sublimated as long as it is repressed and that is true for every component of a drive” (Hale, 1971:121). We observe from these examples an apparent contradiction regarding two concepts, sublimation and repression. He is not suspected for an intentional misunderstanding of the concepts, but rather we perceive it as the consequence of not fully digesting the wonder of becoming a pure spirit. As I previously showed, within human mind, there are two opposing forces, which Freud mixes under the names of sublimation and repression, but, they are the disguised form of utopia and escapism. He endowed the drive with an “ideational component and an energetic component” (Freud, 1961:152) in order to explain why sublimation does and does not involve repression. In short, sublimation is the result of successful psychoanalytic intervention involving lifting of the unconscious repression of both the ideational and energetic components; but the sublimation involved in typical cases of scientific and artistic expression or that occurs in the latency period in childhood only involves lifting of the repression of the energetic component and continued repression of the ideational component. By ideational component Freud understands the content of the drive, including

its aim and the energetic component is the force associated with that aim, including the strength of the drive. Contrasting his view with Schmemmann's he does not succeed to rise above the curse of the fallen world as one component of the drive, the ideational one is still not expressed. The Christian perspective implies lightening up the whole psychic components, which equals with the process of redemption. This light in the darkness of the unconscious world is a permanent putting-up-to-date of humanity's real aim or purpose of its existence: becoming being of love and light as we original were. Irrespective of time and space, each individual has all the necessary tools to curve themselves, and their libidinal instincts, through God or Supreme Force's power or model into the wonder of love. This transformation does not deny or exclude anything that went wrong in the human's psyche; the fallen leaves its marks, and, yet, the miracle is the ability to feel, think and act differently despite all that.

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