

Catharsis. The Repression of Positive Feelings and their Sublimation

Abstract: One of the explanations of the “origin” of the work of art was framed by the psychoanalytic theory. According to it, certain instincts or inclinations punished by society as “bad”, or negative, find expression and artistic sublimation in a socially acceptable manner, in accord with the requirements and the norms of the super-ego. Their very symbolic, “re-presented” expression is accepted by society. Even though such explanation covers an important part of the aesthetic sentiments, a whole category of aesthetic feelings cannot be described as a result of the sublimation and psychical release of tension deriving from the socially acceptable release of originally “bad,” negative instincts and impulses. An example in this respect is the very catharsis effect – described by Aristotle as critical in understanding the work of art represented by the tragedy. However, by catharsis Aristotle understands the state of setting free and unshackle oneself from such “positive” feelings as the pity, the compassion – acknowledged as values by the very society in which the representation of the catharsis-generating work of art takes place. In following the psychoanalytical theory, this article tries to answer the following questions: “Why does Aristotle talk about setting free a psychical tension within the catharsis effect?” “How does one account for the existence of a tension when the positive feelings manifest in the catharsis effect – such as the pity – correspond to values that are acknowledged by society (compassion, caritas, etc.)?” The conclusion of the article is that there is a repression of positive sentiments of the human being and that their very “acknowledgment,” their axiological rendering, represents a repression mechanism that psychoanalysis calls “rationalization”.

Keywords: catharsis, sublimation, positive feelings, society, super-ego, intelligence, affectivity, morality

1. Bad Emotions and their Sublimation The Psychoanalytical Explanation of the Origin of the Work of Art

The psychoanalytical theory elaborated by Sigmund Freud assumes that the sublimation process is related to the tension between the self (id) and the super-ego. The basis of Freud’s reasoning is that the advent of civilization and culture comes with the repression of natural (first of all, sexual) instincts or inclinations due to social commandments and imperatives.

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“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, 11:135). Their free expression – considered harmful for the social *order* – is censored by society and religion. The interdictions enforced by them create a state of tension and thus “neurosis” as the degree of civilization and culture (so repression) rises. Even when positive rather than interdictory impulses are at stake, it is surmised that man is sooner inclined to do the opposite; thus even positive “commands” can be viewed as interdictions. The neurotic anxiety that characterizes a high level of civilization comes from the fear that, despite the discomfort experienced in front of interdiction in general, in its absence order would fade, and the mentality would disintegrate as (re)conquered by irrepressible animal forces. The old option of sacrificing one’s freedom for the sake of the general *good* is, here too, present. “Every person, as he comes into a community, has to take part in this process by which civilized life has been built and by which alone it is maintained. He must repeat the *sacrifice* of his instinctive pleasures for the common good” (Bartlett 1928, 17).

Nevertheless, beside *bad* instincts (more precisely, those whose free exercise is penalized by society), there is another “instinct” or a natural “tendency” of the human being – affirmatively valued by society – the *pity*, the compassion, the mercy. Aristotle thinks that the incitement of pity and philanthropy is the purpose of a tragic performance.

“A tragedy, then, is the imitation of an action that is serious and also, as having magnitude, complete in itself; in language with pleasurable accessories, each kind brought in separately in the parts of the work; in a dramatic, not in a narrative form; with incidents arousing pity and fear, wherewith to accomplish its catharsis of such emotions” (Imgram Bywater 1920, 35).

Also, Jean Jacques Rousseau thinks that pity (the repugnance against the sufferance of another) is one of the most essential human instincts – beside the self-love. “He has only two fundamental passions: the desire to preserve himself and a certain pity or sympathy for the sufferings of others of his kind.” (Bloom 1987, 564) Adam Smith refers to pity as the sentiment that comes from imagining that the pain suffered by another may also befall us.

“Sympathy is characterized as an act of the imagination because we do not have access to another person’s mind. What we have access to is the other person’s observable circumstances, including his or her behaviour. The act of sympathetic understanding is a creation of order in the observer’s perceptions by means of an imagined rationale for the observed behaviour. As agents or moral beings, other people are, therefore, the creation of our imagination. But the most remarkable feature of Smith’s theory of sympathy is that the same can be said

of ourselves; as moral agents we are acts of creative imagination” (Haakonssen 2002, 14).

What happens, however, when rather than such sentiments/impulses/instincts as are flagged negative and adverse by society, morally and socially valued instincts are at stake, such as pity, compassion, and philanthropy? Can we assert that there is pressure exercised by social commandments on this kind of “positive” sentiments/instincts and that the imagination may furnish a form of indirect and symbolical relief of the feeling of pity/charity/philanthropy?

2. Pity – a Primary-Positive Feeling of the Human Being

An entire tradition affirms the *fundamental kindness* of the human being. From Plato to Rousseau, man has been viewed as bad only *by accident*, by a fatal and unintentional error, by *mistake*. Thus, both in Plato and in the Genesis, the image associated with a “desynchronization”, a “failure”, a *rhythm* error – the “fall”. Man falls as a suckling that has not learned how to walk yet; the fall is related – both in Plato and in the Genesis – to the ignorance, the forgetfulness, and the witlessness. It is meaningful that the myth of the Fall, which charges man with the gravest disobedience, also excuses him in the highest degree, as he perpetrates the evil doing *before knowing good from evil*, in other words he does the evil without knowing what evil is. The nature of man is good, and he only does evil because he has forgotten (repressed) his primordial inclination due to various causes (the “sensible world”, the “property”, the temptations of the Devil). Thus to solve the evil – from Plato through the illuminists – is to take off the state of oblivion, ignorance, and witlessness by studying, developing the reason, and knowledge.

The paradox and the tension of this kind of view derive from the fact that, according to it, the only way to come back closer to the natural state of man is knowledge, i.e. the very thing that takes one off of it. As man – while accumulating knowledge – gets entangled in more and more data, knowledge, reasoning, and information. Thus one imagines a state of *Edenic* knowledge, innocent, naive, and pure, without information and inference, a state of *direct and intuitive knowledge*. Either it was called ecstasy or contemplation, this kind of knowledge is meant to solve the said paradox according to this view/kind of society. This also explains why Enlightenment – which leans towards culture, erudition, study, and emancipation – ends up also having recourse to its mysterious “common sense” – an irreducible atom, the ultimate foundation of any knowledge to which any knowledge, however advanced, must finally come back to check and to stay in touch

with the stable terrain. The “good-sense” or the “common-sense” are travesties of the image of the innocent-absolute-direct-contemplative and information-independent knowledge which, as we have seen, solves the paradox of the “knowledge-based society”, to use a fancy expression, and dissolves the anxiety related to it. Man in his natural state knows and is more than the civilized man. In Rousseau’s view, two basic sentiments – love and repulsion before the sufferance of the other – secures the stable terrain for any considerations about the human being.

3. Catharsis as an Artistically Controlled Release of “Positive” Feelings

It is true that the establishment of any human society is grounded on the *repression* of some of man’s natural tendencies. But not only of such tendencies as are considered negative (bad) by the same society, but also of some that are considered by it as positive, and good. Furthermore, the differences among the human societies regard rather the former, than the latter aspect. Some human societies are more permissive with the expression of human aggressiveness, others more prohibitive; some are more forgiving in case of homicide, others more coercive; some are more liberal in understanding the relations between children and parents, others more conservative/authoritarian. However, with respect to the repression of man’s *good instincts* (which are considered good, valuable); all civilized human societies are alike. They generally use the same subliminal and subversive strategies for the *practical* dismantling of the very good to which they theoretically and formally pretend to adhere. Is there anyone who has never been astonished, especially during childhood, by the *obvious* contradiction between the beautiful things (love, altruism, generosity, and fraternity) uttered from the church pulpit and the ragged beggars at its doors? And the church pulpit includes also the school, the parents’ preachy stories, and the edifying discourses of any kind – from the philosophical to the political. This very exposure has a force that is large enough to convey towards in time to the repression of the *good instincts*, and to what we have metaphorically called the excise of the pity organ. Two of the great religious reformers of humankind – Siddhartha Gautama Buddha and Jesus Christ – expressed in unforgettable terms and precepts this formidable amazement concerning the deep schism within the society, exposed the mechanism of repression of the good in man, and raised the barriers enforced by society over the moral and good impulses of man (*which itself, the society, was praising so that individuals dismissed them!*). The fundamental merit of Buddha and Christ is that both of them liberated or tried to liberate man from the fear to do the good! For, and this fact deserves attention, both the repression of

evil (such tendencies, impulses, instincts whose expression is considered negative by society), and the repression of good (such tendencies, impulses, instincts whose expression is theoretically considered positive by society) belong to the fundamental anxiety – the fear that their direct expression would lead to the dissolution of order, anarchy, and social entropy. Buddha and Jesus are the ones who refused the *piticision*¹, the ones who by no less than a miracle kept their pity organ whole, healthy, and functional, and have most spontaneously, naively, and innocently expressed such sentiments as love of the fellow human, sufferance in from of the other's sufferance (com-passion), forgiveness, self-sacrifice, and helping the other. They are the ones who dared to imagine a society in which the instinct of good does express itself directly, naturally, furthermore a society founded on the principle of the direct expression of the instinct(s) of good. After Jesus, man felt free from his fear of doing what is good, of feeling and manifesting the instinct of good. Furthermore, man dared to imagine that a society may work without *piticision*, and was convinced at least for a moment that the “piticision” is a superstition, and a useless and primitive mutilation of the human soul. What man felt during the psychoanalytical revolution, followed by the sexual revolution, namely the emancipation of the libido and the deliverance from complexes of guilt, must have been felt – *mutatis mutandis* – by the people in the temporal and spatial environment of Jesus or Buddha.

The “evil” and the “good” are of course cultural notions and they must be treated as such. Unfortunately, we are closed in our own sphere of reference and, no matter how much we wish it, we have no access to the good in itself, the objective good – without any form of subjectivism. This is why we cannot refer to pity as a good in itself, but as a natural characteristic of man, which is positively valued in almost all cultures and civilizations. When we say that pity is a *good repressed by society*, we say nothing other than that the human society acknowledges pity as a value, but by all its customs the society invalidates this value and only grants it formal, theoretical and finally exclusively hypocrite recognition.

“...besides the doctrine that one should not be selfish, the opposite is also propagandized in modern society: keep your own advantage in mind, act according to what is best for you; by so doing you will also be acting for the greatest advantage of all others. As a matter of fact, the idea that egotism is the basis of general welfare is the principle on which competitive society has been built. It is puzzling that two such seemingly contradictory principles could be taught side by side in one culture; of the fact, however, there is no doubt. One result of this contradiction is confusion in the individual. Torn between the two doctrines, he is seriously blocked in the process of integrating his personality. This confusion is one of the most significant sources of the bewilderment and helplessness of modern man” (Fromm 1990, 73).

4. Anxiety in front of the Good, the Intelligent Society and the Anxiety in front of Emotions

It is not just for the sake of symmetry that we must assert that there are also *complexes of innocence* fed and cultivated by human society. Let's just think about the pejorative sense of such words as "naive", "innocent", or "weak-hearted". Let's think about the permanent risk to which kindness is subjected – the risk of being mistaken for stupidity. Let's think about the negative effects that a good (generous) deed may have on the does as expressed in such sayings as: "The path to hell is paved with good intentions". Let's think about Dostoevsky's novel *The Idiot*, where prince Myshkin is a retarded angel. Faith (credence) and trust as values nowadays acknowledged by society are undermined by a word with the same root: "credulous", "credulity". It's ok to have faith, but be careful not to be credulous. In general, the greatest risk associated with kindness, the irresistible manifestation of the instinct of good, is *stupidity*. And intelligence, as we all know, has always been considered the basis of society, the fundamental trait of the human being. Man defines himself as *Homo sapiens*, and fears that the bases of his being seem to cave in because of the *manifestation of the instinct of good*.

So this instinct must be repressed or sublimated, expressed indirectly, artistically, or metaphorically. And if aggressiveness is sublimated in sport competitions and contests, if the sexual instinct is sublimated into dance and erotic literature, how does one sublimate the repressed instinct of good? From the ancient Greek tragedies to soap operas, from novels to sentimental and soupy television shows – we deal with the *catharsis* phenomenon, which is nothing less than the release, within a determined, controlled and limited-in-time framework, of the *energy of good*, which is usually repressed by the commandments of the social life – suspicion, precaution, uninvolved amiability. *Catharsis* releases the so-called *noble* sentiments (this phrase itself denotes that they are rare and cannot be commonly found) – of terrible pity in front of the sufferance of the *man as man* (not as close relative or as *alter-ego*). These are sentiments that we are educated to feel, in our daily lives, in a parsimonious manner towards third parties. After being relieved of this dangerous energy of the instincts of good by participating in an *imaginary* fact, man will be able to continue living his life in an *intelligent* manner, that is not overwhelmed by feelings of pity and generosity in front of the pain and need of the fellow man. He will be able to indifferently get by an old man, a sick man or a dead man... Buddha did not attend enough theater... (The very consumption of "noble sentiments" within a fictional framework, in front of a scene or a screen, induces the idea that their expression does not belong to the real, day-to-day world.)

To the strategies of disarming the impulses towards pity one must also include the strong ambivalence of this concept. While “mercy,” “graciousness,” and “alms” are positive religious values associated either with divine attributes or with behaviors desirable for a Christian, the “pity” inspired or called forth by a person is strictly depreciative. For becoming “pitiful” or an “almsman” denotes the ultimate phase of decay of the human dignity. Also, when the love for a person transforms into pity, we talk about the irremediable degradation of the affection towards that person.

“The conversion of love into pity urges the last stage of love, the agony of love. When we start to feel pity for a person we have loved, it means that our élan is no longer able to sustain our struggle against the obvious. Pity is love in fatigue, a love in which the object is exterior to us. This is why in pity we realize all too well the condition of the other; we have a clear vision of the other person’s place in the world. In pity, we anticipate nothing, we give nothing generously, we do not transfigure at all; conversely, the lucidity of pity carries away any brightness that anyone would be entitled to delude themselves of having. Following the flames and the glows of love, pity is like ash covering the last burning glimmers of Eros” (Cioran 2012, 219).

If we grant credit to Feuerbach, divine attributes are actually the projection at the super-human and perfect level of traits partially existent in the human character. Thus God is the absolute Man, at the height of his powers – all-knowing, creator, all-powerful, but also graceful, forgiving and loving. In other words, man transfers into God, superlatively, the faculties that he, for various reasons, can only activate in himself in a partial, imperfect or repressed manner. Pity is one of these attributes. Pity – this natural human faculty, positively valued in all cultures, but equally repressed in all cultures – is hypothesized as a fundamental trait of divinity. The divine pity, mercifulness, and charity are invoked in almost every prayer. (“God, the merciful and loving of people”, “God, have mercy” – this is a formula that, according to Orthodox canons, must be repeated tens of times at the end of most prayers) If the Christian God is indeed the perfect reflection of the most desirable human faculties, we will observe that the divine power or will are invoked incomparably much less than *his pity and love*, which means, according to the reasoning of Feuerbach, that man, or at least the Christian man, appreciates/values his affective powers much more than his intellectual or will powers. But even this transfer into the divine being of these human traits signifies, on the other hand, their “sublimation”, their de-legation to another, their “experience” through re-presentation. By letting God take over his “pity” task, the Christian man feels discharged from the impulse to act on it, to practice it, and to feel it.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, repression takes place in civilized societies not only with respect to the impulses and instincts considered by such societies as bad, pernicious, and destructive, but also with respect to such impulses as are considered by the same society as good, beneficial, and constructive. Pity is one of the primary sentiments repressed in civilized society. The repulsion at the sufferance of another, as Jean-Jacques Rousseau called it, is subjected to various mechanisms of repression and sublimation, as we have seen, similar to the repression and sublimation of instincts with potentially negative or destructive effects. One must also mention the “rationalization” as another defense mechanism. Human rights are the result of this rationalization process, in which the impulses and the *instincts of good* are shielded by their intellectual expression under the form of *duty* and obligations deriving from the imperative of a good cohabitation. As an inheritor of the Kantian ethics in which – and this is essential for this discussion – *the sentiment was banished from the citadel of duty* apparently exactly in order to protect the society from turbulences that a free manifestation of the instincts of good would have caused, human rights continue to work even today in the same sense of inhibiting the *force of good* in man, *moving* it to the theoretical and intellectual level, and thus repressing its specific energy. Positive thinking – its very name says it – is the result of the same rationalization process. Not positive feeling, but positive thinking. In addition, the philosophy of positive thinking proposes a partial view on the reality of human psyche, divided between negative and positive impulses (valued as such by society). Positive thinking is rather repressing of negative feelings (including the natural, and primary ones – as the sadness) than stimulating/releasing of positive sentiments.

Man ceases the direct confrontation with the “passionate”, volcanic, direct experience of the morally positive feelings (pity, compassion, care, sadness for the grief of the other person) – but “displaces” them into the region of the cold, detached, theoretical, and legal comprehension. The ethics of duty and human rights are obvious examples of the rationalization process. Conversely, the work of art makes one regain access to one’s “primary” supply of positive sentiments and give them free play during the participation in the artistic event. However, the very phrasing of the positive feelings in the face of fictions has the gift of “protecting” the society from expressing them in the real, concrete framework of the daily life. A direct, spontaneous expression of the positive feelings is – for the “rational”, civilized, intellectualized society – as pernicious as giving tongue to negative feelings. Firstly, because uncontrolled “emotions” – irrespective of their category – are “condemned” by the rational society. Second, because emotions – positive or negative – contradict the foundation of this society,

which is the intelligence (*Homo sapiens sapiens*). Goodness and morality – even though they are formally, theoretically, and hypocritically praised by the “intelligent” society – are actually “undermined” by its customs (if pity were really the supreme value, *felt as such* – there would be no beggars, homeless, desolate aged people, and atrocities), and then by a parallel, ancillary “theory” – the association of naivety, innocence, purity, and guiltlessness with stupidity. However, the deadly sin of the “intelligent” society is the stupidity, not the wickedness. Of this tension between the (natural) wish to be kind and the (cultural) fear of being fool or fooled, credulous, double-crossed, exploited, weak-hearted emerges the tension whose release we call catharsis. Catharsis is the release of the positive feelings of the human being.

Notes

¹ To be sanctified as a member of society, the child goes through all kinds of rituals, the most barbaric and primitive being the ones concerning the genital mutilation (the circumcision of boys and girls), while the more “subtle” and sublimed are the baptism and the perforation of little girls’ ears. But the “pity organ” is extirpated from all children, without exception, in every religion, culture, and society, by various means; in other words, the pitecision is applied to them. If a future society gives up this barbarism, this ritual of initiation/sanctioning as member of society, and leaves the organ of pity to develop naturally – a completely new world will be born.

This pitecision practice is the fundamental trait of human society – and it is by no means recent, but it’s been there forever, irrespective of the region in which it developed. The thing that brings together the European and the Arab, the Bushman and the Canadian, the Scandinavian and the Chinese is this very excision of pity from the human soul, as though man invented himself – in all places – with the price of sacrificing his empathy, his ability to feel compassion, and to suffer together with his fellow man. There is a sadistic-masochistic foundation of the human society.

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