

LIBERATION AND ITS LIMITS

The Moral and Political Thought of Freud

Jeffrey B. Abramson

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Introduction: Two Notions of Freedom

The ideal of the liberated self has become central to the moral vision of our age. “Find yourself”; “be yourself”; “be natural”; “get in touch with your feelings”—these are but some of the phrases testifying to the widespread contemporary equation of freedom with the value of self-expression. As against an older, republican tradition which identified freedom with public space, communal solidarity, and the activity of citizenship, freedom in modern society is most often envisioned as the personal achievement of individuals in private space—a matter of abolishing external constraints on the expression of one’s inner or authentic self.

The relevance of other persons, or of politics in general, to freedom so conceived is not readily apparent. In the older, republican vision of freedom, political liberation was basic to personal liberation, because it was the community itself—and the public loyalties and virtues it spawned—that gave the self its character as well as its aims and purposes in life. By contrast, among ourselves it is the act of dispossessing the self of community, of tradition and religion and family, that is commonly seen as therapeutic and liberating.

Freud’s influence on contemporary aspirations for liberation is broad and secure. And yet his moral vision of the free self has not, I think, been adequately understood or pursued. According to the prevailing interpretation of psychoanalysis, Freud’s teachings are profoundly anticomunity and radically individualist. Freud

stands against community, in this view, because he dismissed almost all forms of group allegiance as curious, sometimes dangerous, attempts to console man the infant for the harshness of reality. According to this reading, furthermore, Freud preferred the psychology of alienation over the loyalties bred by either religion or politics. And for modern alienated men and women, Freud is preeminently known for devising a new therapy—an intense, private, and indwelling form of liberation in which one finds freedom and well-being only by becoming, in Philip Rieff's term, a "virtuoso of the self." Such a virtuoso is at once radically knowledgeable about the origin of his or her own desires, unburdened of moral constraints that cannot survive negotiation with reason, and situated in the world no longer by reference to gods or traditions, but solely in terms of what science can reveal about who one is.

If this dominant reading of Freud were correct, then psychoanalysis would provide considerable support for our reigning notions about freedom and privacy. But while there is obviously much in Freud's writings that resonates with those quests for liberation that focus on the isolated self, I will argue in this book for a second, more adequate reading through which Freud can be seen as contributing to a more communitarian vision of liberation and well-being. He does this by setting out in unsurpassed manner the limits to the competing, atomized understanding of liberation. Freud foresaw and criticized the modern appeal of an ethic of self-assertion and spontaneity, an ethic that has roots in Nietzsche but parades today under the banners of the permissive society and sexual liberation. Against any such easy understanding of liberty as license for naturalness and self-expression, Freud explored the internal contradictions of erotic life and repeatedly and bleakly emphasized the incompleteness of the kind of liberation we can achieve merely by "living out" desire. To take Freud and psychoanalysis seriously, therefore, is to conclude that much of what passes for liberation in contemporary society is empty—individualism run riot, as it were. Psychoanalysis is in fact one of the gravest moral indictments our culture has known. This was true of the judgment Freud levied against his own supposedly repressive culture. But it is true also about the judgment psychoanalysis demands of our own sexual "liberation."

Nor is Freud's critical distance from the radically individualist and self-expressive therapy underlying the platform of the per-

missive society limited to sexual matters. The prevailing reading of Freud tends to obscure the extent to which psychoanalysis is an “intersubjective” science of the mind—a distinctive study of how the child’s ego is constituted and enriched by attachments to others, attachments deep enough to enter into who the child is becoming. In the key psychoanalytic theory of identification, Freud explores just how precarious personal identity is, how unstable the boundaries between distant selves. This vulnerability of personality can be for better or worse. Freud himself characteristically worried about the sinister forms politics and religion take when the sense of distance between persons collapses. But Freud’s account of moral development in children also shows that, apart from deep attachments to others, the self is left impoverished, unable to experience the friendships and loyalties that enrich personal character.

Of course, Freud did not often talk directly about politics and freedom. His immediate concern, both as clinician and theorist, was with the tension between repression and expression of human instinctuality, and it is here that we must expect to find clues to his moral vision. Fortunately, the pioneering work of Marcuse and Rieff, among others,¹ has long since made clear just how politically important Freud’s exploration of human instinctuality is, and I propose to follow their work in arguing in particular about Eros, politics, and freedom, as follows.

Freud conceived of Eros as basic to the human condition and sexuality as basic to Eros. But from infancy onward, Eros becomes fused with and compromised by the equally strong human instinct for destruction. So alloyed with aggression, Freudian Eros becomes as much a process of self-estrangement as self-fulfillment. Self and other in love are for Freud also self and other involved in a contest for power and mastery. Indeed, whatever love one has to give to the other (Freud’s category of “object-love”) is apparently at the expense of what remains for self-love. These antagonisms within affection are present even or perhaps especially in the family, and a central theme of psychoanalysis is the drama whereby children come to repress their own erotic strivings and aggressive hostilities in favor of a fearful submission to the parent. Indeed, instead of being a vehicle for liberation, Eros becomes the source of a moral conscience whose commandments are strangely self-violent and repressive, as if the child had deflected his hostile urges away from the beloved parent and onto his unworthy self.

Freud's account of the dilemma of human nature caught between erotic and cruel inclinations is powerful and has showered illumination on aspects of childhood that, while dimly perceived prior to psychoanalysis, never seemed so terribly formative, so fraught with destiny. It is also that part of the psychoanalytic canon which is responsible for the widely held view that Freud followed Hobbes in portraying all human relations as, at base, forms of antagonism. Such a reading of Freud must be given its due; Freud's dominant account of Eros is indeed gloomy, and the Oedipus complex gives symbolic summary to the aggressive underbelly of even our closest relationships.

But Freud is not just a latter-day Hobbes, and I will argue that, at least at times, he speaks of Eros and human attachment with a more affirmative, less dire voice. It is in this voice that Freud speaks of the "highest erotic bliss of childhood"; and when Freud concretely describes the relation between infant and mother, he describes, against his own theoretical animus, a moment of union, or being at one with the other, that enriches the identity of both without impoverishing either. In the act of nursing, for instance, the mother gives of herself for the pleasure of her child. But it is only by so giving to the pleasure of another that the mother experiences her own pleasure *as* a mother, her own enrichment and enlargement of character. In other words, her self-fulfillment is hardly in tension with, but is in fact dependent on, fulfilling the other as well.

On a more theoretical level, when Freud reformulated his theory of instincts late in his career, he specifically jettisoned an earlier, more solipsistic description of the aims of the sexual instinct in favor of a direct definition of Eros as the drive for union with the other. This theoretical elevation of the human desire for union was prepared for by a lifetime's clinical study of the frequency with which human dreams and fantasies turn on images of incorporating or being incorporated into another human being (usually the mother). Alongside his Hobbesian pessimism about the integrity of human attachments, therefore, Freud also affirmed in part the career of Eros beyond antagonism, thereby keeping alive within psychoanalysis mankind's most utopian aspirations.

Still, as opposed to the tradition of moral and political philosophy which linked rather than opposed community and freedom, Freud never went on to give any sustained attention to the public forms erotic attachments might assume outside the

family—in friendship centrally and citizenship occasionally. But to see that such allegiances at least sometimes wear an erotic face is to see, in accord with the older tradition of liberation, that Eros potentially sponsors political attachments between persons who see themselves as sharing in a common identity as citizens. The aspiration to a public life answering to, rather than repressive of, Eros is therefore a worthy moral and political ideal, but it can be gestured toward only by allowing, perhaps more than Freud himself did, for the fundamental difference between the reciprocity of erotic relations and the dominations of power.

After offering an overview of the problem of Eros and politics in Chapter One, I will set forth Freud's explicit psychology of love, attempting to cull from it an affirmative teaching regarding the "happy love" achieved by children through the extremity of their dependence on the parents. The basis for this reading is provided by the concept of identification and the intersubjective process whereby the child comes to have a first and "oceanic" sense of self by reference to the image or model of the parents. Such a notion of how an ego is constituted so as to "be like" the beloved parents is suggestive of attachments beyond the rooted antagonisms of which Freud characteristically speaks.

But an ambivalence of love and hate is the rule even in early infancy, and hence the "efflorescence" of infantile Eros is "doomed to extinction." Freud proceeds to document the sinister and self-repressive uses to which identification with the other is put in order to control human aggression. The tracing of Freud's pessimism in this regard will take us through Chapter Five.

On the level of therapy, Freud's affirmative voice is heard more often. Starting with the ethic of sublimation, Freud offers a partial "way out of" the predominance of self-repressive psychology. Eros, according to Freud, can be "desexualized" and rechanneled into public and civil affections that are nonetheless compensatory forms of individual gratification. But this process of sublimation remains shadowy in psychoanalysis, not the least because desexualization threatens to atrophy the force of Eros and tilt the always precarious instinctual balance in favor of destruction. Moreover, Freud's commitment to sublimation is qualified by his refusal to follow the Platonic account of sublimation and allow desire to take on the qualities and virtues of the object it loves. Instead, Freud rejects Plato's familiar distinction between "higher and lower" pleasures in favor of the persistence of the infantile essence of

desire throughout a life history. These criticisms of sublimation will form the substance of Chapter Six.

Nonetheless, the concept of sublimation does point toward the limited personal liberation Freud thought he could deliver to his patients in therapy. If the survival of infantile desire over time gives to every life history a regressive potential, it also makes that life history tell an intelligible story, at least in retrospect. Through the recollection of origins, we come to comprehend the destiny of character as it has been fixed so far by the circumstances of childhood. But such an act of self-apprehension is itself a further moment in the unfolding of the life history being understood, a new piece of the character that constitutes our fate. Indeed, as I will argue in Chapter Seven, psychoanalysis as therapy stands or falls with the claim that human beings, unlike other natural objects, can understand themselves in ways that henceforth change what there was to be understood.

Psychoanalytic freedom lies, then, not in some desublimating ethic of immediate "self-expression" or sexual liberation or Reichian living out of repressed desire. It lies in the slow and gradual process of self-understanding which alone gives access to and mastery over primitive experience. "Where id was, ego shall be." And Freud conceived of this act of mastery primarily as a process of distancing oneself from the hold of the past, an undoing of the fate one has been living and of the arrests in development that come from keeping mind ignorant of its own origins.

But once the past is dispossessed of its power over mental life, the psychoanalytic project of liberation has evidently reached its limits. Psychoanalysis is not, Freud remarked, psychosynthesis. It has no *Weltanschauung*, or world view, and suggests no new meaning for a life suddenly disenchanted of its former sense of purpose and meaning. Freud rightly sensed that through psychoanalysis science had won a decisive victory over religion, thereby rendering unstable the most widely held answers to the meaning of life. What did science have to offer in place? What new set of moral beliefs could the analyzed self affirm in the absence of God? What new erotic attachments could be formed by one who comprehended the longing for the parent which had hitherto dictated all choices in love? To what form of political life or community could one pledge rational allegiance once the need of the infant within the citizen for consolation and proxy father figures had

been exposed? These are some of the questions of psychosynthesis which Freud refused to answer but which must guide the attempt to reunderstand morality and politics in the light of perhaps the most important commentary penned on the human condition in this century.

Eros and Politics

Psychoanalysis precariously holds together two rival teachings about human nature and culture. The first, more accessible teaching declares the tragic opposition between instinct and culture, and culminates in *Civilization and Its Discontents*' well-known argument that culture tames nature only through a painful, often ruthless process of external frustration and suppression. The second, more hidden and central testament of psychoanalysis is to the essential sociability of human nature—the primal need, present already in infants, for the love, affection, and company of others. This account of civility before culture culminates in the notion of an Oedipus complex and a saga of the *self*-repressions upon which all later authority is based.

I

Freud develops his account of nature *against* culture by locating the human animal in a natural history of desire, with origins in bodily urges of a most unruly and anarchic sort. To lift the veil on

self-reflection imposed by infantile amnesia is to learn dark secrets about the animal core of desire and its uneasy humanization. In Freud's final view, human nature is torn between two opposing forces: an instinct for life, called Eros, which aims at uniting life forms together and preserving their existence; and an instinct for death and destruction, which aims at dissolving life back into the primeval inertness of inorganic matter.¹ Culture's pacification of the destructive urge is at the center of Freud's tragic vision, because the gloomy choice is between destruction expended against self *or* other. The "cultural" solution is to internalize aggression as self-destruction, and this accounts at base for the "tormenting uneasiness" of civilized life.²

Culture's confrontation with Eros, while not equally doomed for Freud, is nonetheless rife with tensions between private and public pleasures, individual gratification and "aim-inhibited" social relationships. Sexuality in particular is an unruly, asocial passion, by nature a rebellion against the conventions of normality, and capable of every sort of sadism and violence, perversion and transgression against order. Freud's account of infantile sexuality in particular drives home one point repeatedly—naturally Eros knows no principle of organization; it is a pure anarchy of bodily pleasures, or, as Freud puts it, "polymorphous perversity."³

Just *how* disorderly sexuality is as a passion we commonly miss due to the absurdly narrow custom of restricting the label of sexuality to the already organized, contained, and functional sensations of the "sexual" (i.e., genital) organs.⁴ But even the popular view of sexuality cannot abide by its own conventions. It must acknowledge that some persons experience undeniably sexual excitement in so-called perverse, or nongenital, ways. And it must further allow that such perverse eroticism plays a role (albeit a subsidiary one) in even normal sexual stimulation.

When the psychoanalysis of neurosis shows that perversions are not just "rarities" or "oddities" but deviate from conventional behavior only in the sense of returning to infantile bodily gratifications we all once experienced, then the discomfort of the popular view is complete.⁵ The use of the conventions of normality to mask the animal truth is exposed and nature reveals itself in all its radical asociability. In Freud's terms, we then discover infantile sexuality to be a loosely connected set of "component" instincts, with no image of the body as a whole, no stable aim or object, finding

“organ pleasure” in every corner and crevice of the body.⁶ Such an Eros, it would seem, has no internal limits or sociability; it must be perpetually narrowed, organized, and restrained by outside sources. Eros may be a Roman cupid, a playful child, but the child plays with arrows.

But the above sketch of nature versus culture does not exhaust Freud's vision. In fact, as both Rieff and Marcuse suggest, psychoanalysis is a powerful retort to the natural man/social man tension that has dominated political philosophy from and after Hobbes. For what Freud characteristically insists upon is that, already within the state of nature and the unrepressed desires of childhood, Eros takes the form not only of anarchic pleasure striving but also of a deep emotional need for the company of others, for the love and protection of the parents. The dilemma of childhood, put simply, is that this need to be loved stands threatened by the contrary aggressive impulses the child also entertains toward the loved parents, a dilemma which eventually coheres into the Oedipal fantasies of sexual rebellion against the loved and hated parental rival. But what Freud defines as the passing or dissolution of the Oedipal complex is the triumph of love over hate, the submission to and internalization of parental authority as the child's own conscience, or superego. This loving identification with the parent henceforth mutes the outer expressions of rebellion and harnesses aggression to the self.

Freud was pursued throughout his career by the Rousseauist criticism that he conflated the social with the natural by reading back the work of family association into the structure of instinct. Freud made his defense by referring to the evolutionary history Eros has even on the level of instinct. To imagine, with Rousseau, a prehistory of Eros prior to all stable human attachments is to imagine away the organic and biological changes that have accompanied and accomplished the speciation of humans.⁷ For ever since the human animal stood upright and revealed its genitals, sexuality has been a permanent rather than a periodic urge, and man has been a “horde” animal.⁸ The Eros we can know as humans therefore is a passion that is structured from the beginning by the family as a society. And every family, over and above cultural differences, will enact the core of the Oedipal dilemma: a rebellious appropriation of parents as sex objects; a deferential surrender of that rebellion, out of fear and need of the parents.

II

Politics for Freud continues the Oedipal longing for love and authority and the consoling search for dependence on new father figures. In the state-of-nature theory popularized by Hobbes and Locke, the self is seen as fully formed outside of society, persuaded into political community only as the better device for protecting private space from the anticipated but unwanted encroachments of others. Freud's understanding of the ambition of politics is fundamentally different, here more like Rousseau in seeing in politics a vast remolding of an unstable self seeking the company of others to complete itself, possessed by a need to diminish distance between self and other. At bottom, therefore, politics counts on an attraction and obedience that is erotic and nonrational in nature, a redirection of emotions previously reserved for the family toward the state. Freud thus refers to the "libidinal constitution" of groups and notes that if

an individual gives up his distinctiveness in a group . . . , it gives one the impression that he does it because he feels the need of being in harmony with them rather than in opposition to them—so that perhaps after all he does it "*ihnen zu Liebe*" [for love of them].⁹

This vision of politics as a sphere of love has a long and ambiguous history in Western political thought. A chasm separates those who have seen in eroticized politics the most alluring of utopias and those who have regarded it as the most totalitarian of possibilities. Plato's *Republic* remains a sounding board against which to state one's position. In the *Republic* Plato proposes to extend the ties of kinship love into the public sphere by raising a class of future rulers in ignorance of blood parentage, each member calling all contemporaries by the name of brother and sister and all elders by the name of mother or father. For such persons, the difference between family feeling and public loyalty will have collapsed. The life they hold in common will be the only "private" life they know, and hence "each shares in a common interest which each will call his own."¹⁰ Outside of the construction of such a common life, Plato conceived of Eros as a grave danger to political order, a "great winged drone" stinging the soul into the tyrannical assertion of its own insatiable appetites. It takes, therefore, the establishment of a certain sort of community, where public