



Sources and Genesis of the Need to Believe

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Perspective

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Abstract

It is the affect and not the representation of God that constitutes the impact point of psychoanalytic approach to religion. Therefore, psychoanalysis does not enter directly in dialogue with philosophy or with theology. But, far from disregarding the presence and power of the religious dimension in the human mind and in societies, Freud proposed a specific approach based on two main elements: oceanic feeling and nostalgia.

Keywords: Religion; Need to Believe; Archaic Thinking; Oceanic Feeling; Autism; Nostalgia; Mysticism

Oceanic Feeling and Its Relationship to Belief

By confronting what some former autistic persons can describe about their past apprehension of the world, we will try to prolong what Freud notes briefly when he declares:

«Pathology teaches us about a large number of states in which the delimitation of a boundary between the self and the outside world becomes uncertain.»

I will propose the analysis of these two notions by successively envisaging their components:

- In terms of temporality,
- Space,
- Relational link
- The type of knowledge process that characterizes them both from the point of view of representation and of affect.

Archaic Thought and Oceanic Feeling

Freud argues with the French writer Romain Rolland in 1923 about oceanic feeling. He recognizes that some people

have an «oceanic feeling», a subjective experience he does not share, but has no reason to question like a delusional perception which, although not responding to a perceptible external reality, nevertheless exists for the patient. But he does not consider the oceanic feeling as a primary data giving the proof of the presence of the idea of God and analyzes the process into its elements. It is an emotion namely a modification of the somatic state of the subject caused by an experience perceptible to others and possibly inducing a similar response [1-3].

Freud decide to analyze it in terms of a drive namely to decompose it into representation and affect. Therefore, the oceanic sentiment appears as the qualitative expression of drive energy-to be defined - and, a representation attached to the notion of «Ocean» but carrying unnominated mnesic traces of objects of the past. It means that oceanic feeling must be explained itself and is no longer proper to explain anything and especially not the religious need. But, proposing to submit to a critical examination the fact that oceanic feeling could be «*Fons and Origo*» of any religious need, Freud, as he says, is facing the task, to try to dry out the Zuydersee! [4-7].

Temporality in the Oceanic Feeling

If it exists something proper to evoke the temporal rhythm, it is the movement of the waves or the one, insensitive, of the tides. Movement that does not lead anywhere in alternation of flux and reflux, rhythmized back-and-forth. When Romain Rolland evokes it to Freud, it is to describe a sensation of eternity, but it can also be imagined from the infinity of the sea itself [8]. Or even, when sub diving, as the underwater vision of a primitive universe. The choice of the aquatic reference, where other images such as the silence of the desert, or the mountain peaks, could also have come to connote the image of an infinite beyond the limits of the human [9].

Unlimited Ocean Space

The sensation of immensity in the oceanic experience is characterized by an horizon line perceived not as a limit but as a vanishing point that would open on the same infinite. Some agoraphobic anxieties are similar, for instance when one must borrow a bridge straight ascending-descending and cannot see beyond the ridge line [10-17]. Unable to anticipate what follows he may fear in a vertigo an infinite fall beyond the visible limit. The romantic poet, H.-D.-C. Grabbe quoted by Freud writes a consolation sentence:

«Yes, we'll never fall out of the world. We're in it once and for all.»

This can be interpreted as an assertion of immortality for the part of matter that one occupies, and which could at most undergo a process of transformation. I will bring it closer to the Winnicottian approach to the notion of collapse, a very peculiar anguish of an unlimited fall [18,19]. When analyzing it, Winnicott makes no reference to Freud but he evokes in very Freudian terms the following: *«it is certain that if there is real in what I will say, the poets of the world will have already seized, but the flashes of intuition that pass through poetry will not prevent it to be painfully and step by step that we should move away from ignorance, towards our goal.»* [20-25].

Winnicott identifies its origin from a defect in the primary holding of the infant and calls it an «agony», namely the absence of struggle at the moment of death, the final inability to maintain the integration process. Integration is progressively established in the first year of life, the baby bringing together the myriad of discontinuous sensations he experiences. On the contrary, «disintegration» is a distressing experience and even a panic [26].

Vertigo has some connection with the oceanic feeling as the banal experience of the sensations experienced by boat when the regressive well-being engendered by the rocking

is transformed into a primitive angst and somatically into seasickness.

The experience of vertigo is a loss of limits, a fall that one can no longer stop. I will bring this closer to what described about autistic children who have not been able to find a stable surface stopping the drive movement [27]. The child's gesture or his cry is then lost in the void, in a sort of infinite echo or fading. Conversely, when the support can be found a very gentle movement emerges folding in a loop on itself. What was lacking is precisely the back and forth, which the child reconstitutes in the Fort-da game when he alternatively throws away and takes back a toy.

This reminder allows a more precise reading of the notion of «oceanic feeling» which could be reconciled with this archaic experience, which is below the words, that which Winnicott designates as «non-integration» [28]. Therefore, it cannot be confused with *Hilflosigkeit*, which would rather be like «disintegration» calling for help!

Mystic, the Obscure Self-Perception of the Realm Outside of Me, of That

This fragment, the last of Freud's hand, in 1938 (Freud, 1938), marks his interest in the religious question, probably revived by the imminence of death. One could summarize it in these terms: the oceanic infinity is inside us and we perceive it obscurely only by projecting it out of us. Pathology offers many examples of the uncertainty between the self and the outside world, whether it is to live one's own psychic productions as foreign (the uncanny) or to project them outside and to no longer recognize them for one's own (hallucinations, etc.). The infant is not yet sharing between his self and the outside world. One might think that Freud has, with the latter, identified the maternal nature of the Oceanic and that he might stick to the idea of a nostalgia for the separation from it [29-31].

Otto Rank will emphasize the lack and the disarray following the loss of the amniotic liquid universe. It is to avoid this displeasure that the infant's self tries to remain a «pure me-pleasure» against a stranger and threatening outside. The loop is closed, and the ocean is swallowed: at the outset, the Ego contains everything or at least everything that has any libidinal interest:

« Our present feeling of the self is therefore only a shriveled remnant of a more broadly extended feeling, extended even to everything, which would correspond to a more intimate union of the self with the surrounding world», (ibid.)

A comparison between oceanic and autistic experiences can help to understand how what is designated here is a

common archaic experience [32-34]. I will only take the term «autistic» in the sense, very general of a withdrawal whereas at the same time one promotes his own perceiving function to the dimension of an universe, because nothing else exists then for it. The confusion between the perceiving and the perceived is not as an introjection, but as an inclusion in the object [35,36].

I specify that my intention is not to consider the autistic or psychotic experience as a resurgence of the native state of the psyche [37]. This would indeed omit what characterizes the pathologies in question, namely a *destructivity* which has a function in the history of the person, thus post-native. On the other hand, regression, which is one of the modalities of defense, opens up to operations which are peculiar to anyone, however, except in these pathologies, there is seldom access and always limited. Donna Williams, ex-autistic, evokes in her autobiography, "If I am touched, I no longer exist," how she was fascinated, as a child, by the particles of dust suspended in a ray of light.

«The filaments were almost transparent, but it was enough not to look directly and to look beyond them to become very present... (...) Only my vision was so hypersensitive that the particles I perceived erected a hypnotic foreground that would lose all its brilliance and reality in front of the rest of the «world».

Donna Williams will soon find a name for this activity consisting in losing herself in perceptions where she flies mentally, she said, and in which she was past master: the art of "Evanescence" which refers to the capacity of disappearing [38]. Whether the sensation is acquired with typical techniques, such as a blink of the eyes which gives a stroboscopic vision or by another way, the goal is the same: to become the world of oneself alone. But as Donna Williams notes:

«The child as a world is no longer a person.»

The oceanic experience by abolishing the difference between the outside and inside also allows to annihilate any kind of doubt. Total belief, incommunicable and solitary...

Freud therefore gives much reason to the authenticity of the oceanic feeling, but as a survival of the original feeling of the primary self that can survive in some pathologies. But with this position, Freud eliminates the affective evidence of the existence of God this feeling was supposed to bring. He could have held it there and felt that he had solved both the oceanic enigma and the source of religious sentiment with the narcissistic omnipotence. But returning to religion, he will oppose the distress of the little child and his need to be protected... by the father.

One could think that the mother/baby cell forming the narcissistic self of the beginning was enough to explain the above but, for Freud, everything happens as if the necessity to bring back the father prevented him from drawing the conclusions of his own demonstration.

Nostalgia, the Neurotic Experience of the Archaic

We have seen the links between the loss of the illusion of omnipotence from the moment the process of individuation and thus separation is settled. There comes the second explanation of the need to believe proposed by Freud. What has been lost in terms of omnipotence will be transferred and hopefully recovered after the projection of such an omnipotence on the «father-mother» to which the child can then identify. This will not insure him a recovery *ad integrum* of the original experience which has irreparably disappeared, hence nostalgia accompanies paradoxically his return.

For nostalgia is not absence but on the contrary the presence of the object so desired, this *Sehnsucht*, pathological anguish, sensation of desire-anguish, which can no longer be suppressed by the contribution of the desired object. To this anguish before the too beautiful Freud will oppose the religious consolation as it to the father:

"The terrifying impression of the child distress had awakened the need to be protected – protected by being loved – the need that the father had satisfied. The recognition that this distress lasts all of life has made man cling to a father, to a father this time more powerful."

Human anguish in the face of the dangers of life is soothed by the thought of the benevolent reign of Divine Providence, the institution of a moral order of the universe assures the fulfilment of the demands of Justice, so often unfulfilled in the human civilizations, and the extension of earthly existence through a future life provides the frameworks of time and place where these desires will be realized. Answers to questions posed by human curiosity about these puzzles: the genesis of the universe, the relationship between the body and the spiritual, are developed according to the premises of the religious system. And it is a tremendous relief for the individual soul to see the conflicts of childhood emanating from the paternal complex-conflicts never fully resolved –, to be so said removed and receive an accepted solution of all. ».

We have seen the oceanic feeling as a trace and a regret of an archaic perception of the world and of oneself based on the narcissistic omnipotence of the first times of life. Let us envisage it through the notions of *Sehnsucht* and *Heimweh*.

Sehnsucht

It appears when the angst caused by the disappearance of the desired object can no longer stop even when the object is back. The despair seems to have been too strong because of the absence. When Freud refers to *Sehnsucht* as the origin of the religious need he means not the mother but the father. «In the situation created by the elimination of the father there was a factor which in the course of time would create an extraordinary increase in the desire for the father.» Because of the murder, the father afterwards becomes an ideal for the brothers, something they aspire to but without reach, since they have collectively renounced the vow of becoming like the father and replace him.

Freud concedes the possibility of a place for maternal deities in the interlude between the murder and the return of patriarchy based on the guilt and nostalgia of the father, we are therefore facing a peculiar nostalgia that targets the father, a father who could reassure the child, protect him and love him. This ideal father, who has little to do with the «*Urvater*» happily murdered, is the one that draws the religious need.

But is it true that he has no connection with this terrifying figure?. On the contrary, it seems that it is also because the father was a cruel and narcissistic being that he will be implored by the sons. In August 2003, the Pope and the Rector of the Paris Mosque have both called to pray that the rain falls that would end an exceptional heat wave that has already made a significant number of deaths in France. Archaism? Certainly, but that translates well the idea of an intercession against evil, which here has nothing to do with a bad human will. Praying together for rain is a way, beyond religious differences, to restore a Union of men of goodwill, solidarity against misfortune, or even against evil.

In the Catholic religion, the prayer addressed to the Saints or to the Virgin has the function of «intercession», namely a request for assistance of an accused addressed to a lawyer. It is not a question of ignoring guilt and therefore the probable punishment, but of marking repentance and obtaining a defense, a forgiveness. In «The future of an illusion», Freud will evoke the image of the «clinging to the father» (as is translated *festhalten* which means «hooking», «attachment» anticipating the later theories of Imre Hermann and Esther Bick: Catholic religion is the one that serves as a referent to Freud when he speaks of the need to be protected and loved by the father, for the God of the Jewish religion is described as a bearer of sufferings much more than loving and protecting.

It is also the Catholic Church that it takes as an example of the collective organization around the love in *Masses psychology* «Every Christian loves Christ as his ideal and feels

connected to other Christians by identification. But the Church demands more of him. He must also identify with Christ and love other Christians as Christ has loved them. The Church therefore requires that the libidinal position given by the mass formation be supplemented on these two points. The identification must come in addition to where the object choice took place, and the object love where the identification exists.

*This further development of the distribution of libido in the mass is probably the factor on which Christianity bases its claim to have acquired a higher morality.» Before concluding this evocation of the *Sehnsucht* and its link to the need to believe, we will recall, in order to emphasize that it is indeed a «need» in the vital sense of this term, the clinical forms of *nostalgia*, in German *Heimweh*.*

Heimweh

The Freudian formula according to which “to find the object is to rediscover it” is of nostalgic essence, except that it emphasizes the moment of the reunion and not the suffering that precedes it. The “pain of return” that expresses itself in nostalgia would precede the return itself as a painful feeling of the distance between the object. The voyage of Ulysses and his infinite wanderings imposed by the vengeful wrath of Poseidon is the model of nostalgia. For the lack of nostalgia does not concern the absence of the object of love, but an absence to oneself, a loss of identity. The painful wish for the lost country (*Heimweh*) described for the first time in 1688 by Hoferus is the pain of adolescents obliged to leave the family I to find themselves projected into an adult life, as soldier or servant.

The prodrome consists in an aversion to foreign habits, a tendency to isolation, susceptibility, even intolerance to jokes even innocuous and a constant tendency to praise his homeland. The outcome is a melancholic state leading to death. The various authors who have been interested over time in this pathology have all emphasized that the young people so afflicted were from endogamic families as found in the Swiss mountains. Pathology which, like the war neuroses, had an obvious social significance insofar as it decimated the armies and especially the Swiss mercenary platoons. A military doctor from the Napoleon period gave as a preventive remedy against nostalgia to ensure that the Platoon had a family atmosphere and that the surgeon-General occupied the place of a comforter and a father, What will continue with the function of the “father of the regiment” attributed to the Colonel, this one before, for example, giving his consent to the marriage of an officer under his command.

It is true that the message of religion is quite different since it is, in the Christian religion in all cases, peace,

sharing and joy, opposed to frustration and inaccessibility of the object. However, one wonders whether the nostalgic experience, with what it assures of a persistence of desire for an inaccessible object, is not necessary for the initiation of the belief process, whatever the content.

Conclusion

To this perspective that has put infinity outside, I will oppose to conclude the concept of «substance» as the philosopher Spinoza defines it at the beginning of book I of «Ethics». It is a being conceived by oneself, which exists in itself and who needs no other being. The Substance is the very name of infinity in the infinity of its attributes. But for us infinity is indeterminate in the sense that nothing can be said of precise and Spinoza, unlike to the antique philosopher Plotin, is not going to reach it by an oceanic feeling or anything analogous. It is therefore necessary to access the infinite through the attributes of the Substance, but one loses nothing because the attribute and the finite modes that corresponds to it are logical means to express the Substance. The Substance is not separable from the attributes and infinity can exist otherwise only by the finite.

The third kind of knowledge is the moment when a man, instead of seeking the explanation of things in the relationships of modes between them, goes back through intelligence up to the infinite attribute which is the unity and reason of all these singular modes. He thus reaches God whose attribute is an immediate expression, a course that is only possible when man has disposed of the prejudices which the religious authority claims to impose. Here are the positive and the negative replaced by the recognition of the partial as an expression of infinity, thanks to a process of individuation based on an understanding that does not imply abandonment of oneself or nostalgic resignation.

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