

Terror, Transience and the Human Animal: A Revised Account of Religion

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It is not difficult to find examples of philosophers and writers who have given to this sense that our place in the world is precarious; that the world is, at best, disinterested in human life, and, at worst, hostile to it. Hume provides a fine example of this feeling in his attack on the design argument. Sure, the world provides us with examples of ‘prodigious variety and fecundity’, but these very existences, so admired by the supporters of the design argument, are ‘hostile and destructive to each other’. The uncaring, violent nature of the world’s processes leads him to this startling description of the world: ‘The whole presents nothing but the idea of a blind nature, impregnated by a great vivifying principle, and pouring forth from her lap, without discernment or parental care, her maimed and abortive children!’¹ And Hume is not alone in his description of the world as a terrifying place. For Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–80), death renders life and the human project absurd. Why? Because any sense that death brings life to completion, or that it is ‘the resolved chord [that] is the meaning of the melody’,² misses the fact that death is often unexpected, happening when human projects are incomplete, and things have been left unsaid. There is little indication in Sartre’s writings that concern for human life informs the structures of the world. Similarly, the sense that life is not only absurd but also takes place within a universe unmoved by human concerns is reflected in the philosophy that informs the writings of the Marquis de Sade (1740–1814). For Sade, Nature’s processes are to be replicated in the actions of his libertines, who

¹ David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, Indianapolis: Hackett, [1779] 1998, p. 74.

² Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, London: Methuen, [1943] 1985, p. 532.

show neither mercy nor concern for their victims. ‘In Nature,’ he notes, ‘...we detect [no] law other than self-interest, that is self-preservation.’³

Such comments convey something of the appeal of the supernatural. A commitment to a supernatural form of religion suggests that this world can be escaped, that there is another, better world. William James (1842–1910) notes that such religious beliefs are associated with what he calls ‘the sick soul’. By this phrase he designated the person who looks at the world, who perceives it as merely the abode of suffering and death, and who longs for a better world to take its place.⁴ We have suggested the problem of seeking to replace this messy world with adherence to another plane of existence: all too easily such ideas can be adapted to support inhuman and violent actions. Our goal, then, is to offer an alternative account of religion that locates the religious impulse within the same processes that define us as human. Our aim is to celebrate the mutability of things that we often find disturbing, rather than to attempt to find an answer that effectively distances us from these unpleasant and troubling experiences. In suggesting that such an approach might be possible, the final section of this book considers two rather unlikely sources for constructing a revised vision of the nature of religion.

Freud: Transience and the Religious Animal

Sigmund Freud (1856–1939), as we have seen in chapter three, argues that the psychological origin of religion is to be found in the infant’s engagement with a threatening universe. The child’s perception of the father’s power – both to save and to destroy – lends itself to the creation of God-the-Father. For our purposes, a significant part of Freud’s analysis lies in his claim that what

³ Donatien Alphonse François, Marquis de Sade, *Juliette*, New York: Grove Press, [1797] 1968, p. 888.

⁴ William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, [1902] 1982, pp. 127–65.

motivates the religious construction is the desire to make oneself feel safe in a threatening universe; as he puts it, to ‘feel at home in the uncanny’.⁵ Moreover, it is this desire that drives the development not just of religion, but that of civilization itself.

What does it mean to suggest that the human enterprise is to find out how one might feel ‘at home in the uncanny’? It is perhaps helpful to offer a transliteration of Freud’s German at this point, for the word translated into English as ‘uncanny’ is *unheimlich* (‘unhomely’). How is one to feel ‘at home in the unhomely’?⁶ The human animal is, after all, one that is *not* wholly at home in the natural world. This sense that the world is not altogether hospitable towards us seems to inform the supernatural concerns given expression in some religious beliefs: our real home apparently lies somewhere other than this planet. And indeed it is important to note that human life does seem to be by those things and activities that differentiate us from nature. There is a kind of artificiality about human behaviour that distances us from other animals and suggests that somehow we are able to transcend the physical world.⁷ This apparent ability to transcend the physical place in which we find ourselves (through, say, thought, reading, art) is common to many human activities, not just religious ones. Indeed, Freud explicitly connects the impulses that lead to the need for civilization (the desire to resist nature and fate) with the same impulses that give rise to the development of religion. As he puts it: ‘religious ideas have arisen from the same need as have all the other achievements of civilisation: from the necessity of defending oneself against the crushingly superior

⁵ Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion* (1927), in the *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (hereafter *Standard Edition*), vol. 21, London: Hogarth Press, 1964, p. 17.

⁶ This idea is more fully developed in Freud’s ‘The “Uncanny”’ (1919), *Standard Edition*, vol. 17, London: Hogarth Press, 1955, pp. 217–56.

⁷ See Beverley Clack, *Sex and Death: A Reappraisal of Human Mortality*, Cambridge: Polity, 2002, ch. 2.

force of nature'.⁸ Religion is thus grounded in the same impulses and concerns that have affected the development of human society and the construction of human being itself.

Now, this suggests a rather different view of the meaning of religion than has hitherto been considered when addressing Freud. In these comments, Freud apparently sees religion not so much as an illusory way of thinking about life that exists in isolation from other human ways of dealing with their environment. Rather, he suggests that religion is grounded within the general human experience of not feeling at home in this world, and it is this experience that motivates all kinds of human activities, not just religious ones.

At the same time, Freud suggests that religion is grounded in the peculiarities of human psychosexual development. As we have seen in chapter three, Freud describes religion as a form of obsessional neurosis. But, again, this claim should be placed in the context of his more general reflections on what it is to be human. Invariably, Freud seeks to disturb any straightforward distinction between 'normal' and 'abnormal' behaviour. As he puts it, 'every normal person, in fact, is only normal on the average. His ego approximates to that of the psychotic in some part or other and to a greater or lesser extent.'⁹

With this in mind, consider the similarities that Freud discerns between religious rituals and the obsessive actions through which the neurotic seeks to render safe their frightening world. Neurotic ceremonials 'consist in making small adjustments to particular everyday actions, small additions or restrictions or arrangements, which have always to be carried out in the same, or in a

⁸ Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*, p. 21.

⁹ Sigmund Freud, 'Analysis Terminable and Interminable' (1937), *Standard Edition*, vol. 23, London: Hogarth Press, 1964, p. 235.

methodically varied, manner'.¹⁰ To an observer, these actions might appear meaningless, but for the patient this is far from the case, for 'any deviation from the ceremonial is visited with intolerable anxiety'.¹¹ The ceremonial is 'a "sacred act"',¹² similar to, although not exactly like, a religious ritual, most notably because these actions do not have the public and communal quality of religious practice, but are, rather, forms of 'private religion'.¹³ Freud aims to show how such actions are related to specific repressed events in the patient's life. These actions are thus highly meaningful, providing ways of coping – however inappropriately – with unresolved issues and repressed instincts.

Of course, Freud's intention in exposing the sources of such actions is to cure the patient: once the origin of the obsessive act is revealed, they will be able to let go of the action. And the same goes for the illusion that is religion, for religion is 'a universal obsessional neurosis'.¹⁴ Yet this very description of religion as 'a *universal* obsessional neurosis' presumably suggests much about how *all* humans, not just neurotics, attempt to come to an accommodation with the world that threatens to consume and destroy them.

So how might one attempt to come to an accommodation with this threatening, terrifying world? Supernatural religion offers one way: attention is paid to a world that is believed to transcend this one. But Freud provides an alternative perspective that suggests the celebration of transience, rather than a denial of its force.

¹⁰ Sigmund Freud, 'Obsessive Actions and Religious Practices' (1907), *Standard Edition*, vol. 9, London: Hogarth Press, 1959, pp. 117–18.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 118.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 119.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 126–7.

In his essay 'On Transience', Freud suggests that the belief that it is possible to transcend this human realm may not be the only way in which this life can be rendered meaningful. He describes a conversation with two young friends, one of whom (a poet) is deeply depressed by the inevitable destruction of natural beauty, believing that it is impossible to find meaning in a world that is subject to decay and death. (Matthew von Unwerth has argued, rather convincingly, that the poet is Rainer Maria Rilke, and the other participant in this conversation is Freud's confidante Lou-Andreas Salomé.¹⁵) The poet identifies the fundamental transience of the world as the source of his unhappiness, and Freud reflects upon the different ways in which one might respond to this ephemerality. The poet has shown one possible way of responding: 'aching despondency'. All is dust, and to dust all shall return. Alternatively, one might experience 'rebellion against the fact asserted'.¹⁶ This beauty cannot be destined for destruction, and in this refusal of transience lies the seeds of the belief in (or, as Freud sees it, the *wish* for) immortality. Freud, however, resists both approaches. The first is too pessimistic; the second is illusory, based in the dubious conclusion that what is so lovely cannot, ultimately, be destroyed ('what is painful', he observes, 'may none the less be true'¹⁷). Instead, he considers what kind of value the fragile beauty of the physical world might have, and concludes: 'Transience value is scarcity value in time. Limitation in the possibility of an enjoyment raises the value of the enjoyment.'¹⁸ The very fragility of that which causes the poet's agony is what makes it so lovely in the first place. Freud goes on to suggest a this-worldly view of what is eternal. He highlights the cyclical nature of things: Nature's beauty, destroyed in winter, returns in the spring, so that 'in relation to the length of our lives it can in fact be regarded as

¹⁵ Matthew von Unwerth, *Freud's Requiem: Mourning, Memory and the Invisible History of a Summer Walk*, London: Continuum, 2005.

¹⁶ Freud, 'On Transience' (1916), *Standard Edition*, vol. 14, London: Hogarth Press, 1957, p. 305.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

eternal'.¹⁹ Freud suggests that we should accept the fragility of things, and value them precisely *because* of this fragility. As he rather poetically puts it: 'A flower that blossoms only for a single night does not seem to us on that account less lovely.'²⁰ Perhaps it is possible to accept the passing nature of things, to find in their very mutability beauty and value.

To read Freud in this way, to consider some of his ideas that are not usually highlighted, is to find sources for a this-worldly form of religion. And arguably what he presents us with is still a religious viewpoint, for he draws our attention to the ritualistic nature of the human animal, thus grounding religion in those very activities that differentiate us from the rest of the animal world. The human animal is the ritualistic or religious animal. At the same time, Freud offers us a way of engaging with the passing nature of things, and allows a perspective to develop which grounds the meaning and beauty of the world in its transient, seasonal nature. Perhaps we can find a way in which religion can co-exist with an affirmation of what it is to be human in a world like this?

Dennis Potter: Religion and the 'Wound' of Being Human

What we are suggesting, then, is that it might be possible to develop a form of religiosity that is not about providing answers to the problems of life, but that emanates from the human engagement with the world. Our second source suggests ways of developing this perspective. The controversial playwright Dennis Potter has been described by D. Z. Phillips as a 'priest of our time'.²¹ For Phillips, Potter represents those who feel uncertain when confronted with religious claims; and particularly when confronted with the transcendent values that seem to permeate many religions. Many of Potter's plays deal with specifically religious themes, albeit in unconventional and often

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid, p. 306.

²¹ D. Z. Phillips, *From Fantasy to Faith*, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1991, p. 30.

highly controversial ways. *Brimstone and Treacle* exemplifies this trend. Here, the day-to-day life of Mr and Mrs Bates, a couple caring for their severely disabled daughter, is interrupted by Martin, a strange, possibly demonic, possibly angelic, young visitor. Martin, while supposedly caring for their daughter, rapes her. During one such rape she recovers consciousness: the demonic has apparently 'saved' her.²² This is a shocking, disgusting and disturbing idea. Potter's plays invariably unsettle us, and this has led some to characterize his work as 'blasphemous'. Yet it is a strange kind of blasphemy, for in his last interview Potter made a point of referring to the importance of the spiritual. What did he mean by this? Importantly, his vision of the spiritual is not one that is juxtaposed to the physical: God is not to be understood as standing apart from the world, in contradistinction to that which is human. And Potter is careful not to frame his understanding of religion in the language of theism. Indeed, he is at pains to reject the traditional view of God, interestingly, because he sees such a conception as being based upon the attempt to terrorize human beings into accepting 'Him':

I mean, the kind of Christianity, or indeed any other religion, that is a religion because of the fear of death, or hope that there is something beyond death, does not interest me. I thought, what a cruel old bugger is God, if it's terror that is the ruling edifice, if you like, of the structure of religion? And too often for too many people it is. Now that to me isn't religion.²³

In place of this kind of religion, he returns to a description that he had previously given of what he considers religion to be: 'religion to me has always been the wound, not the bandage'.²⁴ Religion is not there to augment human life, or to apply salve to the hurts and pain which invariably afflict us.

²² Dennis Potter, *Brimstone and Treacle*, London: Samuel French, 1978.

²³ Dennis Potter, *Seeing the Blossom*, London: Faber & Faber, 1994, p. 5.

²⁴ Ibid.

Religion, he seems to suggest, should not attempt to cover up the wounds of life – should not, in this sense, seek to act as a bandage – but should instead confront and engage with all aspects of existence. It should not attempt an escape from life: not an escape from its beauty and enjoyments, nor an escape from its horrors and fears. Rather, it should be grounded in deep reflection upon all that we experience.²⁵

²⁵ The believer might well agree: see Christian theologies of the Cross which read Christ's crucifixion as placing suffering, death and failure at the heart of the Christian idea of the divine.