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## The Origins of Creativity: Sexuality, Neurosis and the Artist

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Starting from the perspective of Blake's notion "Energy is eternal delight," this study is a theoretical speculation of the origin of artistic creativity which expands Freudian theory in a new direction. Since Freud admitted that "the nature of artistic achievement is inaccessible to us psychoanalytically," an alternative theory of the aesthetic appreciation of art and nature as well as artistic creation is presented drawing on concepts from Reichian bioenergetics, phenomenology and existential psychology, Otto Rank, and the gestalt therapy approach of F.S. Perls.

Ever since Freud first ventured into the problems of creativity, orthodox psychoanalysis has stressed the darker, negative aspects of art. Plato, long ago, noted that the artist was divinely inspired and therefore mad. Freud's classical theory of psychogenesis of art—that art arises from sublimation of sexuality, is now well-known and respectable. But is it still accurate in today's world?

The creations of the artist, in Freud's view, are primarily an expression of the creator's unresolved neurotic conflicts—usually sexual conflicts. The artist is pictured as a kind of sexually-frustrated, childish neurotic, who weaves his wild fantasies as a substitute for his unsuccessful attempts at fulfillment in the Real World. His painting may thus be compared to the symptoms of the neurotic, the pervert's perversion, or to the religious libations of the faithful church-goer. In Freud's words:

The artist has also an introverted disposition and has not far to go to become a neurotic. He is one who is urged on by instinctual needs which are to be clamorous. He longs to attain to honor, power, fame and the love of women; but he lacks the means of achieving the gratifications. So, like any other with an unsatisfied longing, he turns away from reality and transfers all his interest, and all his Libido too, to the creation of his wishes in the life of phantasy, from which the way might readily lead to neurosis(...) It is well known how often artists in particular suffer from partial inhibition of their capacities through neurosis. Probably their constitution is endowed with a powerful capacity for sublimation(...) (1)

The artist, as described in these psychoanalytic terms, is a man who somehow has been able to sublimate his unconscious conflicts; that is to say, he has channelled his unreleased, deflected sexual energy (libido) into a useful, socially acceptable production. His work is ultimately a mere manifestation of his neurosis. Inherently, he is always a sick man.

That art has a neurotic source may be readily observed in some instances, but obviously there are great artists the lives of whom reveal little evidence for the universality of this conception. Thus, while Rembrandt's tragic suffering points in this direction, the happy un-neurotic life of Rubens gives us a contradictory example.

Following Freud's theory (while overlooking the exceptions), many writers and art critics have consequently sought to explain a work of art by delving into the undisturbed emotional life of the artist. In their view, the theme of the composition is always autobiographical and reflects the artist's own unresolved sexual problems. Freud started this trend with his epochal study of Leonardo da Vinci, which traced the relationship between Leonardo's inverted sexuality and his art.

Yet the point that must be emphasized here is that many people, not only artists, have endured anguish and suffering. Growing up is a hard task for all; our quiet desperation, said Thoreau, is endemic. In Kierkegaardian terms, each man leads a life of fear and trembling, the sickness unto death. A biographer who digs enough can always locate some evidence of emotional instability and a pained Psyche in everyone. In this broader sense, man's twisted agony—or if you prefer—his existential *Angst*, is universal. But not

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all of us utilise this feeling for creative purposes. Why then seek the origin of art in the endless cesspool of man's constant anxiety?

The true well-spring of art comes forth from sources deeper than the neurotic symptom, and is the common denominator of our basic human-ness. The neurotic does not produce art *because* of his sickness; his artistic capacity is there first, as a natural development that emerges *in spite of* his neurosis.

Although Sigmund Freud has greatly influenced our understanding of art, he was neither a connoisseur nor a man gifted with aesthetic appreciation. His amanuensis, Dr. Ernest Jones, described Freud's interest in art as very limited. Of all the arts, Freud liked poetry most of all, followed in descending order of preference by sculpture and architecture, and finally music.

Freud's son, Ernest, who became an artist, also described his father as having little aesthetic taste. Freud himself admitted this, and he was the first to be cognizant of the limitations of applying this psychoanalytic method of art. He often cautioned his heady followers against over-reaching analytic pronouncement in this area.

As early as 1910, Freud stated: "Since the gifts and abilities of the artist are closely bound up with the capacity for sublimation, we have to admit that also the nature of artistic achievement is inaccessible to us psychoanalytically" (2). Nearly twenty years later, Freud wrote the following tempered words in his essay on Dostoevski: "Unfortunately, analysis has to lay down its arms before the problem of the creative writer" (3).

However, modern psychoanalysts and psychologists have not often heeded Freud's admonition. An example of contemporary psychoanalytic interpretations of creativity is a recent article by Dr. William Niederland in *American Imago*, a leading Freudian journal. Dr Niederland, a practicing psychoanalyst, theorizes that artistic creation can be traced to a drive for restitution for early injury. In a kind of Adlerian "striving for superiority" the artist presumably compensates for his loss and subsequent maladjustment by successful expression of his rich fantasy life.

Although this quasi-Freudian motif of art as grounded in illness has wide acceptance at present, many significant objections can be raised against it. Are artists really sexually frustrated? A Kinsey report on artists might actually produce astounding results weighing in the other direction. True, some artists may fit the notion of sublimated sexuality, but these few ascetics do not generally produce great masterpieces. Their creations are more likely to be weak, over-sentimentalized spiritual fabrications.

Another common sense and traditional view of creativity, diametrically opposed to the Psychoanalytic mode holds that strong eroticism leads to powerful art. Thus, Renoir is reported to have said, "I paint with my penis". Baudelaire and Heine had similar notions. Modern literature, from Henry Miller to Norman Mailer, gives ample evidence for this hypothesis.

It can thus be argued that the Freudian psychoanalytic position fails to do justice to the artist. If one compares people from various occupations today, it is difficult to reconcile the analytic opinion of the artist's frustrations with observable reality. Creative people—especially artists, can hardly be said to suffer from a lack of sexual or other satisfaction. Picasso, for example, is a man who appears to have had a hearty appetite for sex and life, even into his 80's. In all fields of the arts, one can point to those who have shown signs, not of frustration, sickness or lack of zest for life, but on the contrary, many who have carried the full expression of sexuality and richness of life's experiences into their older years: Casals, Kodaly, Victor Hugo, Degas, Goethe, Matisse, just to name a few names.

With this in mind, it might even be said that the creative artist has a sounder, not a sicker attitude toward sex and life. Is it perhaps analysts' Victorian middle-class morality that has shielded this salient fact from them? In order to explore this problem thoroughly a broader concept of normality is necessary.

Instead of seeing the artist as a maladjusted neurotic monstrosity who has been rejected by the world of "normal" people, we need to turn around this usual categorization to perceive the artist as the healthiest individual who rejects the limited aspirations of mundane normal existence: healthy because he is first an individual...and moreover an individual who can create and achieve fulfillment from his productivity. Generally speaking, he is healthier and more sexual than others. If he has been set apart from "normals" it is because they too are repressed. Cut off from

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realizing their creative potential, they limit growth and expansion by this loss of a vital development function.

The roots of creativity need not to be sought in the artist's unconscious, because the act of creation is *not* as widely held, an abnormal function, but a basic natural potentiality of human existence. Creation is found at all levels of life and should be interpreted as indication of vigorous self-expression rather than a compulsive act of warped sexuality. The artist, instead of being a driven, unsatisfied man, may be more correctly regarded as the man who is fulfilled, the one who sees more profoundly into life. The true artist can communicate his vision of life to others; the neurotic, on the other hand, cannot. He tries, but his conflicts prevent him from adequately formulating and communicating his ideas. Even the neurotic, however, may be considered "healthier" than the so-called "well-adjusted" normal person.

The neurotic, whatever his hang-ups, is at least striving for growth and fulfillment, which places him in a sense above the "normals" who have completely lost their capacity for self-expression. They have become mass men, who take things as given. Passively accepting all, the dull normals of our society merely go along with the conceptual framework imposed by the environment. The neurotic rejects this framework in an attempt to construct his own system of ideas.

The artist, rejecting the "normal" foundation, replaces it by building his own individualized vision of life, which he can then successfully express to others.

In one paper, Freud clearly states the close relationship between neurosis and art, while affirming the significant distinction:

The artist, like the neurotic, had withdrawn from an unsatisfactory reality into this world of imagination; but, unlike the neurotic, he knows how to find a way back from it and once more to get a firm foothold in reality. His creations, works of art, were the imaginary satisfactions of unconscious wishes, just as dreams are (...) but they differed from the asocial narcissistic products of dreaming in that they were calculated to arouse sympathetic interest in other people. (4:64)

Although here Freud affirms the difference between the artist and the neurotic, he still insists that the *source* of all creativity is located in the Id,-the hidden irrational, somewhat mystical area of the unconscious which is also the source of our dreams and sexual impulses.

By taking a broader, phenomenological perspective of the function of creativity, it is possible, however, to avoid Freud's mythological reductionism and pose an alternative theory.

I would like to attempt a reinterpretation of creativity, including here both scientific and artistic creativity (which are closely related), by looking at their natural roots; not in terms of pathology. We should remember, first of all, that psychoanalysts, who work with pathological cases, tend to develop a prejudicial clinical approach to life. They implicitly assume that this pathology is normal and natural. Always emphasizing man's ailments, analysts neglect the fundamentally healthy potential of human nature (which, so far in human history, has been hidden by an unhealthy, repressed order). Lying even deeper than man's unconscious Id (which Freud delineated so well), there is an inner layer of health within all of us, that has been overlooked by Freudian pessimism. This central core of one's being, which might be roughly compared to Jung's *collective unconscious*, is the positive source of life energy that becomes shielded from our awareness by the protective but negative Id.

Why is it that we are not aware of this interior core? Some individuals *do* tap this source of energy, and say Yes to life, giving

themselves wholeheartedly to love, work, play and thought. But since most people live under a repressive society in a perennial state of unnatural fear, their basic good nature remains obscured by the defensive covering of the Id, and only occasionally, as in bursts of creative energy, does it break through the armor.

It is this dormant but healthy energetic centre that affirms our humanity, and one sign of this core may be found in man's creative urges, which are a manifestation of the flow of energy. Creativity arises from this healthy core, not from the Id. And the full flowering of this instinctive human layer will only come about when man breaks the chains of repression and remakes his cultural environment into a world of love, an idea found in ancient religious prophets as well as in modern Utopian idealists (and echoed by the hippies of yesterday).

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Living organisms may be described as pulsations of energy within structures of matter. All forms of life are charged with energy that is constantly being tensed and discharged. This pulsating cycle—life's natural rhythm of expansion and concentration, may be summarized as: tension—charge-discharge—relaxation. In the varied functions of breathing, orgasmic pulsation, the circulation of the blood and other basic rhythms, we see that the organism first expands outward and then contracts. In human consciousness, this rhythm takes the form of looking outward and then looking inward, of perceiving and then conceiving; of seeing and then understanding. At its most intense, this rhythm takes the form of an alternation of *vision* and *theory*. Art and science share this common rhythm, but art puts the accent on vision, science on theory.

A painter must first have a vision of a landscape; then he resorts to technique to reproduce his vision. Even abstract painting, even music, are representational in this sense—of rendering symbolic representation of states of feeling (cf. Suzanne Langer). Now a scientist needs to have a vision, too, and then he embodies it in his theory. The difference is that in art the technique subserves the vision. Thus, the essential technique in oil painting is the brush stroke. When the Venetian masters, Giorgione, Tintoretto, and Titian made the brush stroke visible, they made the technique part of the vision. Rembrandt did the same with the technique of chiaroscuro. To some degree, every successful artist does this, because if the technique itself is not part of the vision, then the statement of the vision becomes flat and inartistic.

The basis of both art and science is the joy in functioning, the pleasure in exploring the environment. One of the most fundamental functional splits in human creativity is that between art and science. However, these can be understood as two branches of the more primary behavior pattern labelled *exploring*. Such primitive acts as sucking, eating, grasping and defecating come under this broad rubric of “exploratory modification of the environment”, and in a very general sense, they may be considered the precursors of art and science. But science may be conceived as having its special beginning when the recently born organism begins to look around *inquiringly*. In this connection, one eminent psychologist compared scientific curiosity to the sniffing around of a puppy. But even before the newborn being or infant looks around inquiringly, his senses are awakened by particularly attractive stimuli, such as shining light or a bright color, and he responds with pleasure and *admiration*, as may be seen by observing the facial expressions of a baby. This admiration is the beginning of the sense of the beautiful, out of which appreciation and creation of art both grow.

Admiration is more primary than curiosity, and art may be considered more purely creative than science. In art the predominant motive usually is creation itself, while in science the predominant motive is the discovery of an explanation, which is a *product* of the creative process of thought. Poincaré, the famous mathematician, writes movingly about his moments of inspiration, but if he did not tell us about them, we could never detect their traces in his finished formulae. By contrast, a work of art usually gives perceptible evidence of the excitement of its inspiration. The French poet Valéry expressed this truth when he said that a work of art is never finished, only abandoned. The force of the difference is visible in the personality of the typical scientist compared to that of the typical artist—one characterized by a greater than normal degree of repression, the other by a “certain looseness of repression”. This last phrase was written by **Freud in 1925**, and it conflicts significantly with his often-stated thesis that all cultural achievement is due to repression.

Freud has stated that the origin of scientific interest can be found in the scientist's fixation at the phallic stage of libidinal development. McClelland (5), a modern Harvard psychologist, taking cues from Freud, has collected a great deal of empirical data to show that the significant factor in the formation of the scientist's character is his repressed hostility. No doubt, there is some truth in both of these observations of scientists. But what they omit is more important than what they include—and that is the crucial point that scientific curiosity is a universal human endowment that is usually eradicated by conventional education and acculturation. The fixation of the phallic stage, together with the repression of hostility at this time, merely prevents that pathological distortion of the basic human nature by substituting an alternative pathology. This alternative pathology distorts other parts of the personality, but the trait of “scientific curiosity” is left intact.

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In the same way, Freud has indicated that the artist is fixated at the oral stage of development. (Here again is an indication of a greater emotional intensity in art than in science, since the oral stage is earlier than the phallic stage, and thus nearer the primordial beginnings.) Ernst Kris, who was an artist-turned-psychoanalyst, has made an important modification of this Freudian concept of regression by pointing out that the regression of this earlier stage is not compelled by fixation, but that it is temporary, reversible, and controllable. Kris called this “regression in the service of the ego” (6). Certainly this formula seems to brilliantly describe art in general and modern art in particular—modern art in particular because it has consciously learned much from the art of primitives, the insane, and children. However, Kris' formulation obviously doesn't fit the art of the 3-year-old-child, who has little ego, or of the psychotic, whose ego itself has regressed. So far as it is explanatory, this theory only explains how certain adults are able to recapture the original faculty of artistic creativeness, but it does not explain that faculty itself.

The concept of regression tacitly assumes that human development, like organic development in general, consists of a gradual flowering of the full genetic potential. Not only is this not always the case, but among the vast majority of human beings, repression actually *reverses* the course of development, so that as the child grows older, some of his potential dries up and eventually dies. It is common knowledge that all children have artistic talent as an original capacity, destroyed in homo normalis, that is retained, or gone back to, in the artist. In art, the “regression” is not to Freud’s “primary process” of hallucinatory Id logic, but to a deeper layer—the truly primary process of lawful, rational, energetic functioning. In this context, it could be said that Kris’ formula, “regression in the service of the ego” describes the surface of a process, the depths of which might be described as “the reactivation of blocked energetic potential”. Here we see a close connection between art and therapy, which are often considered to fulfill similar functions. (Modern mental hospitals, for instance, often utilize art therapy for disturbed patients.) Both serve to release the normal stream of energy which has become blocked.

What is it about children’s behavior that seems superior, in this sense, to that of most adults? It may be their *earnestness*, the capacity to be involved in a task with total absorption and seriousness, even if that task is something as “unimportant” as, say, play. The average adult, because he gradually gets caught up in “important” everyday responsibilities can only feign this earnest quality, and so we often speak of him as “playing games”, of only pretending at play. Another childlike capacity that the artist brings to his work is *spontaneity*. By retaining the child’s spontaneous outlook along with a more mature ego, the artist can respond at a level somewhere in between infantile unconsciousness and deliberate over-controlled adult rigidity. Thus the artist can playfully manipulate his material with a concentrated yet open “freshness” that gives his work its unique appeal.

It has often been remarked that many great scientists and artists were emotionally ill. On the other hand, it is generally accepted that creativity is a sign of psychic health. Apparently, artists and scientists are often sicker than other people *and* healthier. This paradox may be resolved by the view of life as a flowing energy system. Health, in this conceptualization, can be described as the free flow of pulsating energy through the body; and sickness, all sickness, as traceable to the blocking of free energetic flow. Thus, the genius has a stronger energy field than other man, and is therefore healthier. Because of the greater strength of his energy flow, he experiences the agony of its blockage more intensely, and therefore he is sicker (in a sense) than other men. Nietzsche, who knew this “paradox of the crucifixion” at first hand, said that the extent of a person’s health could be measured by the amount of sickness he could endure.

In this view, life itself, including human life, is the working of the creative process, and therefore healthy human beings are procreative, as all other mammals are, and also symbolically creative, as all healthy human beings can be.

(As sexual reproduction—procreation—may be considered a basic principle of animal life, which sets off higher forms from those lower on the evolutionary scale, we may construe the capability for symbolic creativity as a special endowment of still higher creatures, especially humans.)

Evidence of the universality of symbolic creativeness among unimpaired human beings may be

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found in the fact that this occurs among man’s closest relatives—monkeys and apes. Half a century ago, Wolfgang Köhler, one of the originators of Gestalt Psychology, demonstrated that chimpanzees could solve problems insightfully. Köhler showed that these primates were not limited to the mechanical trial-and-error method of learning, but that they could come up with creative solutions to problems by using what he called “insight”. By this use of proto-theory, we may label apes as proto-scientists. Yet, interestingly enough, in contradiction of psychoanalytic theory, they never went through the phallic stage of libidinal development. Other scientists have shown, for example, that chimpanzees can be taught the rudiments of monetary economy, including hoarding. Yet these animals never had any toilet training problems. Now, many researchers have shown that, given paper and paints, primates will paint pictures. They have no oral fixations to regress to. Yet they paint—eagerly, and without any other reward than the process of painting itself. Here it is clearly evident that it is the process rather than the product that counts, because the painting is discarded as uninteresting as soon as it is finished, though it was worked on with utter absorption.

A modern zoologist, Desmond Morris, has written a seminal book on ape art, *The Biology of Art*, which demonstrates that animal painting is not a behavior pattern performed for any external reward and therefore conditionable. In fact, instead of being able to improve the quality of simian art through reward, Morris found that all attempts in this direction invariably resulted in the opposite tendency. The animals would lose interest in the art for its own sake and shift their concentration instead to the awaited reward, with the result that the drawings became less complicated, less interesting, less subject to the monkey’s control (7).

This might be considered somewhat analogous to the situation of the human commercial artist, whose performance likewise deteriorates when it is motivated by considerations of extrinsic reward (i.e., money, fame) rather than intrinsic self-expression.

While it is true that no monkey has ever been able to do a representational drawing—that is, to draw an image, such as a face, their abstract art shows definitely that creativity is a basic function of living organisms.

Furthermore, it might be said that the same processes seem to be fundamentally involved in animal art as in human art, and both animal and human art share fundamental qualities with all creative acts, such as scientific thinking, inventiveness, etc.

Another area of research that lends support to the notion of creativity as a basic human function is the clinical finding that brain-damaged individuals show their impairment most readily in dealing with the abstract symbolic processes. Thus, man’s symbolic creativeness may be thought of as an evolutionary development resulting from his complex brain and nervous system.

Just as art explores the world in common with science, at its deepest level, art is often a celebration of man’s relation to cosmic forces. Here, where it touches the roots of the religious experience of living contact with cosmic energy, art can shade into something higher—living one’s life with quickened preceptions and deepened understanding, (see F.S. Perls, et al, *Gestalt Therapy*) (8).

This leads to an understanding of the aesthetic creed of Walter Pater and Oscar Wilde of art for art’s sake, a decadent variety of hedonism, but with a germ of truth in it. These aesthetes may be right in the sense that, while art for art’s sake may be an empty conceit, it is

a pale model of the pleasure of functioning, of functioning for functioning's sake, of life for life's sake. Perhaps what they were pointing to by saying that art has no meaning was the "existentialist" conviction that life has no meaning other than itself, other than to be lived. This belief is supremely realized by those who make of their own lives works of art. But how often is this the case with aesthetes? To find such men we must look among the religious leaders and teachers of mankind, and perhaps even none of them has given us a flawless example.

With these considerations in mind, let us conclude with a tentative definition of art: art is the admiring exploration and manipulation of the environment. It is one of the chief virtues of this definition that it includes aesthetic appreciation of both art and nature, as well as artistic creation. Both appreciation and creation emerge from the energetic stream of admiring exploration.

*Sexuality*, in terms of this definition, is by no means an antithesis of art; *Neurosis* is a limiting

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factor of the artist's life. The positive, healthy nature of sexual expression is congruent with the development of healthy, non-neurotic creativity.

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