6
Freud on Love and Sexuality: a Critique

6.1 Sexual Love

Freud thinks of all forms of love, including, the young child’s love – the baby’s love for his mother, the slightly older girl’s for her father – to be sexual in character, as having its basis in human sexuality. He thinks that this becomes apparent once their surface is scratched. He moves from seeing the child’s love as a phenomenon of sexuality to think of all love as essentially sexual in character.

Sexuality, he argues, has two aspects or ‘currents’, as he calls them: sensual and affectionate. In its sensual aspect sexuality, in the child, goes through certain stages in the child’s physical and affective development in accordance with the different parts of his body, ‘the erotogenic zones’, in which the child finds sensual pleasure. At first ‘auto-erotic’, later the child seeks to make bodily contact with those who look after him or her, through the stimulation of these zones. Simultaneously, in what Freud calls ‘the development of the ego’, the child moves towards a fuller recognition of those who care for him as independent beings – as opposed to mere satellites circling around him – and develops ties of affection to them.

As, in puberty, the genitals become the centre around which his sensuality comes to be organized and his affection and his sensuality come to be fused he moves closer towards adult sexual love. When thus ‘fused’, as Freud describes it, the two ‘currents’ come to share each other’s character: the growing adolescent lover’s sensuality is charged with affection, and his affection is sensual: he wants to touch, caress, embrace the loved one. When for one or more of many reasons they remain apart or come to be dissociated, one of the two components of sexual love is repressed. Where sensuality is repressed sexual love becomes lame, as in Dostoyevsky’s Prince Myshkin; and where affection is blocked through repression sensuality turns into obsessive lust, again as in Dostoyevsky’s Rogozhin.

I. Dilman, Love
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Their loves for Nastasya Philippovna are thus the antithesis of each other.

In its mature state, Freud points out, the aim of 'genital sex' is copulation which normally combines sensuality and affection and has the beloved as its object. When it is diverted from its aim Freud talks of 'sublimation'. Sexuality is thus transformed, Freud argues, when sublimated, but it is sexuality still and remains so. Thus transformed it is present in other forms of love where it remains unrecognized – in friendship, for instance, and in sympathy.

This is a very rough sketch of Freud's all embracing theory of sex and love. It calls for criticism. Certainly sexuality can take disguised forms of expression and also it can enter into the service of different non-sexual desires and quests in human beings. But from this it is a big step to the conclusion that all human ties are at bottom sexual, that all forms of love and attachments are sexual in character. It is true that various failures and obstacles can turn a person away from sexual pursuits. Such a person can invest the energy he would have invested in sexual pursuits in these other pursuits and interests. He may find some compensation in these for what he has turned away from but still craves for. They may even become a substitute for what in phantasy he still clings to and, indeed, in the affective organization of his life they may occupy the place given to sexuality in the life of a lover. If this is what sublimation is, it does not follow so far that what is described as 'sublimated' partakes of the character of sexuality.

Even if, however, we are willing to allow that it does so, it still does not follow that all our interests are of this kind, namely disguised expressions of sexuality. From the fact that sexuality can enter into and hide in almost any area of human life it does not follow that every desire and interest to be found in human life is at bottom sexual in character. Freud does not quite claim this; but he certainly sees the variety of human pursuits and interests as the expression of a very few fundamental instincts with sexuality looming large in the space he accords to it.

As for love, I would say, just as there are expressions of sex which have little to do with love, equally there are forms of love which have little to do with sex. Affection is a form of love. But, in contrast with Freud, I would claim that it does not belong to sexuality as such, although certainly it can be an expression of sexuality. Where, for instance, a person or an animal evokes affection in one so that one naturally wants to hug him or it, in most