Chapter 1

Analyzing Fear and Desire

Relational Threat and Relational Promise: 
The Anticipation of Pain and Pleasure

To start, I shall briefly comment upon the distinction between fear and anxiety often associated with Freud, where fear is understood as “a reaction to a real or threatened danger,” and anxiety as “a reaction to an unreal or imagined danger.”

This definition of fear rests on what I consider to be a misleading opposition between real and threatened danger. The experience of fear is always the experience of being in danger—of painfully anticipating pain. Thus even while one might be said to be already in pain, it is the threat of this pain’s continuation that constitutes the fear relation, which is a relation of avoidance to pain.

Because a danger can no longer be said to be a danger once its painful consequences are realized and are no longer expected to realize themselves, it is in the nature of danger to be an anticipation of unrealized or imagined pain, which is itself painful. In sum, it does not make much sense to speak of a danger as real, since it is in its nature to be unrealized. And since the notion of threat grounds that of danger, it is equally unhelpful to distinguish between types of dangers on the basis of whether they constitute a threat. Danger, or anticipated pain, is by its very nature a threat. It suffices to say that one is in danger, or that one is threatened, or that one is afraid. It is certainly unnecessary to explain that one is threatened by a danger, endangered by a threat, or afraid of a danger, unless of course one is designating the experience of fear as a moral danger. To the extent that it can be treated as a moral danger—as a force that ought not to be as it is and about which one ought to do something—it is true that fear, as the painful urge to overcome danger, can itself become an object of fear, or a danger.

This means that an anticipated painful outcome, whether the chances it will become realized are high or low, remains a danger and
prompts the urge to overcome it. Relational threat constitutes danger, even if the realization of the pain with which it is associated is unlikely. This is why potential painful outcomes that are made salient are more likely to be feared than those that are not, irrespective of the likelihood of their occurrence.³

If it is in the nature of fear to involve the painful anticipation of unrealized pain, then one should not make a distinction between fear and anxiety on the basis of their opposing relations to some unrealized pain, or on the grounds that in the one the danger that is anticipated is real and in the other it is not. The moral relation to fear that governs experiences of anxiety or of distress, which I later discuss,⁴ produces a quality of fear, but does not make these experiences species that are distinct from it. Fear requires that subjects experience, through the painfully felt anticipation of pain, the painful outcome of the realization of pain. It is the painful expectation that relational effects will be painful that makes the fear experience. And it is the felt nature of this expectation that makes this experience affective.

Fear is a painfully felt anticipation of pain that is also a relation of avoidance to unrealized pain. Fear is the felt urge to avoid anticipated pain. This unrealized pain exists by virtue of an anticipated and therefore imagined (remembered) relation to a force that it is felt will cause it and that I call “danger.” The threat posed by a force is always imagined, since a force cannot be said to be dangerous in and of itself, or to contain danger. Fear is not an unmediated reaction to an inherently dangerous force. It is triggered by the perception that a particular kind of relation will engender pain. Fear is both anticipatory and a form of remembering.

Much of what I have been saying about fear can be also said about desire. Desire is a pleasurably felt anticipation of pleasure that is also a relation of pursuit to unrealized pleasure. Desire is the felt urge to seek anticipated pleasure. This unrealized pleasure exists by virtue of an anticipated and therefore imagined (remembered) relation to a force that it is felt will cause it and that I call “security.” The promise posed by a force is always imagined, since a force cannot be said to be securing in and of itself, or to contain security. Desire is not an unmediated reaction to an inherently securing force. It is triggered by the perception than a particular kind of relation will engender pleasure. Desire is both anticipatory and a form of remembering.

Simply put, fear is the painful anticipation of pain that produces the urge to overcome danger, while desire is the pleasurable anticipation of pleasure that produces the urge to implement security.