

# Thanatos and Eros

## (Death-Urge and Life-Urge)

*I am bound for the promised land, I am bound for the promised land.  
O who will come and go with me? I am bound for the promised land.*

**W**ho here ever thinks about his own death? I don't want your psychological problems, but rather your sense after that spirit gift of being concerned with your death.

In the ancient Greek understanding of life, there was always the death urge, *thanatos*. And there was also *eros*, the life-urge. Freud, of course, used those terms, though I never thought he pushed it far enough; and I think he did not overcome a sense of negativism. This was not true of the Greeks.

The Greeks knew that the death-urge was just as much part of life as the life-urge. When you read their great tragedies you and I tend to be ashamed of it; which, I imagine, points to a part of our sickness — or that we're one-legged in our humanness. I suspect the Greeks saw this. My guess is that every civilization and every culture, every invention of humanness dealt with precisely this. In one way or another, if you did not have the death-urge, then you did not have the life-urge.

Now, in our time, the whole existential thrust expresses the fact that until you become aware of your death (not any symbolism! I mean the six-foot hole in the ground when you are no more, or beyond which you know nothing at all) you have never lived at all! Your problem, if you are a man of spirit, is to stick your fist through that death-urge. The first aspect of it is just acknowledging it as the fundamental pole out of which you're operating. But it's something more—to put your fist through it, to force it into transparency. That's a bit of a problem. My guess is that in the hymn, *When we all get to heaven, what a day of rejoicing that will be; When we all see Jesus . . .* the church was fooling with this death and life urge.

In our time, you and I are forced to deal in depth here. This is not a moment when history is on the downbeat. Some of you weren't alive when the downbeat was experienced in our time. The bottom was hit in the forties. From the forties on the upbeat was the propensity.

This is when a man like Sartre says that the value of somebody sticking a pin in you or a knife into your guts was that you knew you were alive. The value of your wife telling you to go to hell is that you *knew* you were alive. We're on the upbeat. That little play, *No Exit* has changed the whole course of history. That little play deals with hell, with life after death. A lot of inverted sentimentalists continue to beat their Sunday school teacher over the head, and with them such symbols as heaven and hell, while people who wouldn't be caught dead anywhere near a controversy about a Sunday school teacher are dealing with the problems those symbols in a past age were pointing to. Sartre was dealing with the problem: life after death. What a play!

Hell, or life after death, is the solidification of your authenticity or your inauthenticity. There is the coward in that play. You know, of course, he wasn't a coward. The external circumstances were such that he had to do exactly what he did. But hell doesn't give one good damn about your pretensions and your illusions. That's what Sartre was trying to get said. The man was a coward. He ran when he had to stand. It's very interesting that he chooses the male figure for that. And then he picks out the female. What was she? The murderess and the whore. Of course she wasn't a whore. But hell doesn't give one good damn about my rationalizations or yours. That's the important thing. When you die, you die dead. That's another way of saying what Sartre was saying. You are frozen. Up until the last one-thousandths of a second before that happens, which we poetically call death, (nobody's got the foggiest of what it is, objectively) there is always possibility there is freedom, not just freedom of will, just *freedom!!* I am one big hunk of freedom. As a matter of fact, death would be defined as frozenness --of authenticity or lack of authenticity.

*Everlasting . . . eternal*—what do those metaphors mean, those great inventions of the human mind? For eternity you're a coward. For eternity you're a slut. For eternity, you are a murderer. That's what Sartre was saying. Once you hear that, to use other poetry, you'd better run to your knees and start praying in one big hurry for fear somebody drops a bomb in that window right now and you get trapped in your crummy "is-ness" for all eternity.

Another one of those interesting things about hell is that you were stuck fundamentally by two things: one was the gaze of another person. (*Oh, the man, Sartre, was smart*). The second thing is *a mirror*, and you must look in it. And all the while the door was open. No one was keeping you there. You were just frozen, that's all. Hell is the one place in which they never need guards.

There's an insight here that has been articulated in many cultures—very clearly in ours—that Being-in-itself makes no distinction between those who go to hell and those who go to heaven. The romantics in life, the ones who don't want to face this to begin with, say, "Oh, there couldn't be a hell in life because God would be unmerciful." You bet! He's just utterly impartial. That's his love. That's what frightens the daylights out of me. He loves me in my slobhood, just as much, but not any more than he loves you in your sainthood. He's just as fond of you trapped down there in the blinkless gaze and the mirrors as the ones in whatever alternative. That is the wisdom of life declared in the Old Testament, but not just in our culture. What it means to be human is that if you sow to the wind, you reap the whirlwind. You are exactly what you thrust. That's the insight held here.

What is heaven? *When we all get to heaven what a day of rejoicing that will be; when we all see Jesus, we'll sing and dance the jubilee.* What is heaven? Who is going to write this play? How would you write it? We are not dealing with moralism. This is ontology.

What does it mean to be *frozen in authenticity*? That old man, Samuel, (*in Kazantzakis' story of Samuel from Report to Greco, p. 269*) had a struggle. One who can't tell God what you know He is, in this or that situation has no authenticity. The

old man says, "NO! Why, if I go and do that, my whole life up to this moment has been a joke, for I made Saul that king." (*Reminds me of clergymen who can't come to terms with the fact that they haven't been preaching the gospel for the 25 years they've been preaching. The greatest burden is that they have to say the last 25 years of their lives were wasted, when in their imagination they were "called."*) Part of that authenticity was, for old Samuel, "KILL ME!" He saw the situation and was coming to terms with it.

This brings us back to the death urge. Whenever that death urge is not there, authenticity is not present. Only when you stick your fist through that death-urge do you understand the life-urge. This life-urge is not the prevalent superficial aspect of your existence. In the depths they are both there . . . This is why these young glowing brides always make me nervous—who want this to be such a happy moment in their lives. They want that to be the moment in which they forget what life is really like, and what they know is going to be on the other side of that glowing moment. I want that bride, as a symbol of myself, to be all aglow. But, as a man of faith, I want her to get her fist through that death-urge. This is what Kierkegaard meant when he said, "Last night I was the scintillating heartbeat of the party, and after that I wanted to go out and blow out my brains." Anyone who participates in the very bottom of happiness finds this death-urge.

I don't know what *going to heaven* is. I would like to suggest it is one who is living in the struggle. Mark you, the moment you abstract authenticity and begin to define it, you are out of the ontological, and into the moral. However else you are going to deal with authenticity, it's going to be in the midst of the struggle of "KILL ME!" You'll remember that the old man, Samuel, went on his mission. But there was an anger at the bottom of his being against Being itself. Only *that* man knows what it means to love being, or to put it in theological poetry, only the one who isn't afraid to punch God in the guts—not out of any virtue but out of his struggle with life—knows what it means to love God. I'd like to tell the story of Abraham, and how he became the friend of God. I'd like to tell the story of Moses, and how he became the friend of God. I'd like to tell the story of Jacob, and how he became the friend of God . . . *When we all get to heaven . . . when we're frozen in the ripping, gouging struggle to be human!*

How will you write a play on that? When you are fooling with hell, don't you yank in that Christ word here too soon. Luther and Calvin both, and me with them, say that if we end up in hell shovelling coal, we're going to shovel it to the glory of God; the Apostles' Creed states that Christ descended into hell, as well as ascended into heaven. Don't get in here too quickly with this Christ Word. How are we going to tell that story? Do you suppose for a moment that the Christ Word was the open door in Sartre's play? That didn't change anything. You sow to the wind, you reap the whirlwind. You find your way out of the struggle through a billion-and-one possible deceits, illusions, and then change.

Yet, you see the burden on Samuel. I DON'T WANT HUMANNESS, IF THIS IS WHAT IT IS! That's what it means to struggle against Being itself. The one who doesn't hate life, never loved it. The one who does not protest against God will never

know what it means to love God. In hell you have the gaze of the neighbor and the mirror —I tried to find other things for heaven—what are those going to be? It's a little too simple: it's injecting the Christ word in too quickly to say it will just be the same thing. The blinkless eyes will still be there. When the guy in heaven looks into the mirror he doesn't find a saint staring back at him. I don't want to say what he finds. I'm reminded of Revelation: There won't be any Temple anymore. The temple is the gaze of the neighbor. What will he speak? You are frozen for eternity. Do you suppose that's the reason we fear having to live the next year, the next ten years, the next twenty years? I asked a group the other day to consider the question: What are you going to do in the next 20 years? *What are you going to do the next 20 years?* Do you suppose, really, the horror of that kind of question is this business of being frozen for eternity?