

Eros, Thanatos, and the Awakening of “Oistros”: Being in Love with Life and “Our” World.

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This paper is based on a presentation for the symposium on “Existential Reflections on Love, its Complexities, Meanings and Possibilities” held at the 2018 APA conference in San Francisco. The article highlights the value of the concept of “Oistros” both for therapy and for the way in which we live our lives. It offers a definition of Oistros and explores the conditions, namely Eros and Thanatos, that serve to bring forth and sustain this way of Being. A discussion of the function of Oistros and its relevance to living life well is offered to illustrate its potential primacy as an existential concept.

Key words: Oistros, awareness, living creatively

Introduction

‘*Oistros*’ as an existential concept was developed by the Hellenic Association for Existential Psychology. The initial inspiration and conceptualization were taken from a poem by the Greek poet Empeirikos. It was then implemented and studied in a number of workshops and seminars. Through this process its importance and relevance to existential psychotherapy became evident. In 2012 it was presented at the 2nd International Conference on Existential Psychology in Shanghai, China and was published in the *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* (Dallas, E., Georganda, E., Harisiadis, A. & Zymnis – Georgalos, K. 2012). It refers to our ability to maintain our “zest for life” and our willingness to participate fully in all aspects of life despite, or perhaps because of, our knowledge of its inevitable hardships and our awareness of its brevity.

The word originates from the Greek oestrus, or estrus, which forms the root of the word estrogen, the primary female sex hormone. Estrogens are responsible for the development and regulation of the female reproductive system and secondary sex characteristics, with higher hormone levels promoting procreation by enhancing female sexual receptivity and fertility. However, estrogens also affect women at an emotional and experiential level. Low levels of estrogen are associated with diminished energy and a lack of desire, which goes beyond the purely sexual to more generally affect temperament and well-being. This biologically-based energizing and generative function is mirrored on a psychological level by oistros. Individuals who are in a “state of oistros” experience this as a state of heightened energy and enthusiasm, accompanied by the desire to work towards more creative and personally satisfying solutions to their life situations.

In another form of the use of the word oistros we see Socrates referring to it in his *Apology* (Plato, 396 B.C. / 1992) as the gadfly that awakens those whom it stings into a more authentic way of being.

For if you put me to death, you will not easily find another who, to use an absurd figure, attaches himself to the city as a gadfly to a horse, which though well bred, is sluggish on account of its size and needs to be

aroused by stinging. I think god fastened me upon the city in some such capacity and I go about arousing.
(p. 63)

Socrates believed it was his duty and destiny to function as this gadfly that stung and aroused the consciousness of his fellow citizens since this state of arousal leads to a more authentic life in which the individual is less likely to succumb to outside pressures. Inner consciousness and alertness override any other external power. Of course, as we well know, Socrates paid a high price for his stance towards an examined and mindful life and was sentenced to death by the Athenian democracy, for “corruption of the youth”. He was not afraid of death and although it was possible for him to escape prison, and thus death, he consciously decided to abide by his principles.

In Modern Greek, oistros is the love of life, the drive to create and produce. It is powered by love, primarily the love we call ‘Eros’, i.e. the feeling of being in love, the passionate form of love that is part of all creative work. It is love (in Greek *agape*) and being in love (in Modern Greek, *erotas*) that make life worth living and provide us with this powerful force for life that we call oistros. When in this state of creative upheaval, we are better able to face up to life’s challenges: its absurdity and meaninglessness in the face of death, sorrow, pain, illness, misfortune, poverty, old age and decay, with the courage and strength suggested by Tillich (1952) and Nietzsche (1967). Love is a mode of being that, as described by Boss (Craig, 1993), “opens individuals to the world, enabling them to surpass finitude, earthliness, isolation, narrowness, meaninglessness and nothingness” (p.267).

To summarize, there are three main ideas in defining oistros: the biological aspect related to the reproductive and energizing function of oestrus, the aspect of the mental inspiration and spiritual exhilaration that lead to a creative and passionate life style, as well as the element of arousal that leads, those who are awakened by the stinging of the ‘gadfly’, to a more authentic life. A person living with oistros is an individual who is awakened to the importance of life and of living passionately with enthusiasm in a productive and creative manner. The experience is one of heightened emotional involvement and desire to be, to do and to seize every moment as if it is the last one. Let us then examine which conditions can serve as this ‘gadfly’ for our existence.

Conditions that awaken Oistros

Eros in Greek mythology was the *god of sexual desire and attraction*. In the earliest sources Eros appears as one of the *primordial gods* involved in the *coming into being of the cosmos*. Aristophanes, (400 B.C./1993) beautifully illustrates the coming into being of Eros and of the human race:

At the beginning there was only Chaos, Night (Nyx), Darkness (Erebus), and the Abyss (Tartarus). Earth, the Air and Heaven had no existence. Firstly, black-winged Night laid a germless egg in the bosom of the infinite deeps of Darkness, and from this, after the revolution of long ages, sprang the graceful Love (Eros) with his glittering golden wings, swift as the whirlwinds of the tempest. He mated in the deep Abyss with dark Chaos, winged like himself, and thus hatched forth our race, which was the first to see the light. (p.113)

In early Greek poetry and art, Eros was depicted as an adult male who *embodies sexual power, and a profound artist*. In later writings and during the Roman times, he is represented as a blindfolded child, the precursor to the chubby Renaissance Cupid. Eros is responsible for creation and creativity; a powerful source of positive energy that drives us into “Oistros”.

Thanatos- Death, comes from the word, θνήσκω/ *thnēskō* “to die, be dying”. In Greek mythology he was a minor figure often referred to but rarely appearing in person. He is referred to by both Homer and Hesiod as the twin brother of Hypnos (Sleep). He has a heart of iron and is described by Hesiod in his *Theogony* (700 B.C. / 2007) as follows:

And there the children of dark Night have their dwellings, Sleep and Death, awful gods. The glowing Sun never looks upon them with his beams, neither as he goes up into heaven, nor as he comes down from heaven. And the former of them roams peacefully over the earth and the sea's broad back and is kindly to men; but the other has a heart of iron, and his spirit within him is pitiless as bronze: whomsoever of men he has once seized he holds fast: and he is hateful even to the deathless gods. (p.93)

However, death serves as the gadfly that awakens us to the importance of life and the importance of the moment: that the only thing that exists is the now that quickly vanishes into the past. Being aware of our ultimate destination may make life seem meaningless, but it may equally serve to arouse us to the importance of living before we die. As the Greek poet Empeirikos (1965) wrote: “It is Greeks, I believe, who first turned fear of death into Oistros for life” (p. 12). It is oistros that can goad us into living our life as fully as possible so that we may come to die with a sense of fulfillment for a life well spent, or at least one consciously chosen.

Both Eros and Thanatos awaken Oistros. They are our gadflies that sting us into a more aware state of being. Eros as the primordial source of creation and creativity propels us to live life as artists. As Otto Rank writes in his diary at age 20, “Life itself must be formed artistically. ... Real living must be created so that it has need of no other life, no art, beyond itself”. As mentioned by Wadlington (2012), «life lived fully — not avoided, but experienced with all its pain and joy, and despite its limitation in death — is the ultimate creative act» (p.382). Rank also suggests that psychotherapy leads us to this creative way of living: “an artist-type, a creative individual whose approach to psychotherapy encourages an art of living” (Wadlington, 2012, p.382).

Oistros, the “art of living” and the obstacles

The *art of living* is related to our ability to cherish the moment and to be present within it. Nowhere is this capacity to be fully present more strongly evident than in the gaze of two lovers. The experience of being in love is so intense that, in those moments of full devotion to the other, death ceases to be present. Eros is a “slap in the face of death,” but it cannot last for long. It vanishes as the shadows of time and doubt creep in, and the glorious feeling is battered by disappointments, boredom or betrayal which make the heart heavy. It is not to be expected that any one person can fulfill all needs and expectations, so that being in love with another must be substituted by being in love with life, if one is to have an enduring love that survives the inevitable hardships.

Being-in-love-with-life presupposes some kind of meaning or goal that makes life worth living. The importance of meaning becomes very obvious at times of intense pain. However, oistros can be awakened by both emotional intensities: great Joy and great Pain. Much artistic work is an expression of pain and can be viewed as ‘sublimation’, according to psychoanalytic theory. It is no coincidence that Freud (1959) referred to Eros and Thanatos as the Life and Death instincts innately present in human beings. He also astutely noted our lifelong tendency to transform these instincts into various other forms. How creative and life- enhancing this transformation can be, will depend on the choices made by the individual. It is in this ability of the individual to

respond and take a conscious stance towards “life and death issues” that our freedom and our responsibility are primarily found.

As Irvin Yalom (1980) suggests, “Though the physicality of death destroys an individual, the idea of death can save him” (p.159). It is death awareness that alerts us to the importance of life and of living in the here and now. When we become aware of what we can lose at any moment we are awakened to its importance. So much of life’s wonder is being squandered by taking everything for granted and forgetting to feel grateful and in “awe” (Schneider, 2017) of what is already there. This is commonly seen in relationships as well as in the way we treat our body, taking for granted everything we have and can do. It is only when we lose a loved one, or a bodily function, that we realize how important they were. In one of our workshops a student comments: “I admire oistros for life. It is a recognition and respect for the miracle of existence”¹.

Our existence as being-towards-the-future (Cooper, 2016) is such that we constantly forget to live the now, entangled in the ‘what to do next’ mode that we all live in. Mindfulness (Kabat-Zinn, 2005) and meditation are trying to reverse this tendency but if we accept our being-towards-the-future as an ontological given, it is highly unlikely that our efforts to stay in the present moment will meet with lasting success. The stream of consciousness will rapidly take us to our next plan (or equally often to misgivings about the past). It will take a lot of practice in order for the Western mind to be trained otherwise. In addition, the entire value system of our societies cherishes not the moment, but the productivity of a person, company, or nation. Thus, whatever we do to alter our way of being will have to come from a deeper change in values.

We cannot adhere to the value of being mindful of the now while remaining embedded in cultures that reward future results, evidence and hard-core facts or materialism. It is the deep-seated values of gain, success and recognition that annihilate our ability to stay in the moment and cherish it because in the next instant it may be gone. This realization becomes forcibly evident (not just on a cognitive level but as a ‘lived experience’) to chronically and terminally ill individuals. This is why, as Yalom (1980) relates, being diagnosed with a serious condition is such a transformative experience. The individual no longer has the capacity, or the luxury, to deny the presence of death. Death becomes ever present and with this the realization of the importance and urgency of each moment. Rather than wasting time on trivialities, it becomes essential to concentrate on what is important, to stop procrastinating and to act. Action is very important because, as the Chinese proverb goes “to know and not to do is as if not to know at all”.

May (1969) in his book *Love and Will*, suggests that at the root of human freedom is intentionality: the basic human tendency to move towards something that we wish. Thus, action needs to be propelled by a deep desire. We very often forget to ‘desire’: to want something very strongly. Our fear of loss, our fear of failure and of rejection are so high that we find it difficult to invest in something of great value to our heart. We tend to invest in more superficial, logical, or culturally maintained values and ideas, which render the cost of loss or failure less painful and reduce the risk of rejection. Action that is powered from deeper inner important values and ideas is, however, more powerful, has longer duration and better results. We must be willing of course to take the burden of our life and our personal choices on our shoulders. We must be willing to claim ownership of our life and of all that has been ‘thrown’ at us. (Georganda, 2016).

¹ Written comments from students and participants at workshops held at the Hellenic Association for Existential Psychology are used in order to illuminate how the concept of oistros is interpreted and understood.

Existence in addition to being-towards-the-future is also limited (Cooper, 2016). It is not only death that limits us by placing a physical boundary on time; it is all the little deaths in between that are important. Karen Horney (1966) mentions that it is the ‘loss of love’ that is the most painful and punitive aspect of our life and our upbringing and what we are most afraid of. Death and annihilation are experienced by the young child who is rejected, neglected or abused. It is the neglect, disrespect and abuse of others that will continue to make relationships painful throughout our lives. The others are hell for Sartre (1993), and for most of us, because of this critical and oftentimes resentful and rejecting gaze that we pick up in the other’s eyes. Relationships wouldn’t be so painful and difficult if people were more conscious of the effect of their actions and words (spoken and unspoken) on others. Life is of itself painful due to its decaying modality and we need not make it even worse with this stance towards others. Although human beings have the capacity for evil and may prefer to cause pain rather than endure it, our ability for self-reflection and compassion can hopefully guide us to a more mindful way of being.

Loss and ‘thrownness’ are unavoidable essences of life. Nothing that is born will not die and everything that is born has not been asked to be born. Neither is one capable of choosing the circumstances of his/her life. S/He is brought into it unwillingly, will be thrown out of it unwillingly and in between a lot of things that s/he has not willed will be thrown to her/him (Spinelli, 2008). The challenge is, as most existential thinkers will agree, how we face all these givens and challenges. It is important to have the inner strength to respond to life with courage and continue to be creative despite its hardships. It is natural to want to defend against painful experiences, however, our use of ‘defenses’ often hides the truth from our eyes. We primarily seek to escape from strong unpleasant emotions. We are ‘pleasure seeking’ beings that want to avoid pain. However, when we subdue our painful emotions and try to avoid pain at all cost, we also subdue are joyful emotions. Joy and pain can equally trigger strong emotional reactions. They are antithetical emotions but both awaken us to a more vibrant way of being. The result is ‘Oistros’ and this is very important since it helps us face up to life’s hardships with a sense of purpose and meaning that is very often lost in moments of crisis.

The importance of ‘Oistros’

The Greek existential writer Kazantzakis (2008), in his book “Zorba the Greek” powerfully portrays this kind of living whereby we are able to live as if we are never going to die and at the same time as if every moment is the last one of our life. Zorba was a real person that Kazantzakis had met, who had ‘drunk life’ to its fullest enabling him to die replete and without regret for not daring to engage in whatever he wanted to do. The essence of the concept of oistros is also found in Kazantzakis’ (1969) famous quote from his autobiographical novel “Report to Greco”, where he writes: “. . . To leave nothing for Death to take from me, just a few bones” (p.367). This was Kazantzakis’ stance throughout his life and writings and depicts the basic attitude of living life to its fullest, which is the essence of oistros.

In one of our seminars a student writes about the way the book “Zorba the Greek” helped her in understanding oistros: “For me any other form or way of explicating the concept of oistros wouldn’t really do it so well. It helped me to have not a theoretical understanding of oistros but rather the feeling of it, the image, the lively form and thus I can make it my own”. Another one relates: “When reading Zorba I am reminded that how you live your life is unrelated to how much you know. Especially in our day and age where everything is focused on how much we know, how educated and skilled we are, how well we use time . . . Zorba was good at living and

acquiring life skills and experiences. His use of every moment had a completely different meaning". Kazantzakis' powerful writing has the capacity to make the concept of oistros understood as a 'lived experience' rather than as an abstract theoretical concept and to portray the importance of how we live our everyday².

Many philosophers and writers suggest that we need courage in order to face up to life. Apart from courage, however, our ability to find meaning, even sometimes to attribute meaning to our own suffering, as Victor Frankl (1984) suggests, is of great importance. Lack of meaning is often a primary source of depression and non-compliance for individuals with chronic illnesses. Working with individuals with chronic and life-threatening disorders it is very obvious that the struggle for meaning is primary for compliance and thus, oftentimes, for survival. Why would one be motivated to comply with complicated, disruptive and often painful treatments designed to sustain life, if life is not worth living? The issue of what makes life worth living is of course a very personal question that can be answered only by the individual herself/ himself. There are no ready-made solutions to the problem of meaning making. As Viktor Frankl (1986) writes, we each need to struggle with our own conscience in order to discover, or maybe even *create*, our own meaning in life.

When we are in oistros life is full of meaning and purpose. We want to create, we want to be and to do. However, oistros is a state of being which, like authenticity, is not stable. It is a condition which we move into and out of and which cannot be steadily maintained. If it could be maintained we would reach a state of bliss or 'eudemonia' similar to that of an enlightened being. Since both joy and pain, Eros and Thanatos, can awaken oistros we could safely say that if we did not avoid engaging fully with life and with others, out of fear of being hurt by loss, we would experience ample opportunities for 'being-stung' by these gadflies and thus live a full and creative life.

As one of our middle-aged students describes, in one of our seminars:

In the flatness of my everydayness, from which joy, liveliness and happiness are continuously fading, the word oistros arises to remind me of something forgotten. For me it means passion for life. Passion for every moment that goes by. Intensity in joy and in sadness. It is the color of life, the smell, and all the senses together, expressed and lived in everyday small things. One doesn't need to participate in big and important moments to experience oistros. On the contrary, when oistros is present in the small things of everyday life, then life is full of meaning.

Conclusion

"Oistros" is life force, being alive, living as opposed to just existing. It is being in the present moment, being fully there and aware. Oistros is not static but is a dynamic process by which we are impelled to create and live creatively. It helps us to be in a state of flow where we are deeply engaged with whatever we do (Csikszentmihalyi, 1988). When in a state of oistros, our entire being is awakened and involved. Mind, body, emotions, attention are all attuned and often not only in a state of flow but accompanied by the sense of a peak experience.

As a participant in a workshop wrote:

² For more information about Kazantzakis's book and its connection to oistros see: "The myth of Zorba the Greek and the existential concept of Oistros", in *Existential Psychology East-West* (Vol.2), University Professors Press, In print.

Oistros is to live every moment as a whole, as if it is the first and the last one. To transform simple moments into experiences. To be an adult child who explores and is inspired by everything around you. To see opportunities everywhere and to create: a work of art, a poem, a book, an object, a relationship. To create and to express freely what and who you are through whatever you create each and every time.

Furthermore, oistros is in this realm of opening our being towards life forces rather than death forces, as it guides us towards being productive and creative instead of resentful and destructive. Although it is by facing death (the dark side) that we can rejoice in life, oistros is connected to our will and desire to live and live creatively. As we have seen oistros can be present both in sorrow and in happiness, it can help us sustain meaning in times of crisis. Oistros is, also, a state of being that is characterized by a felt sense of intensity that can be either quiet, as in moments of meditation and deep contentment, or loud, as in moments of exhilaration and happiness.

Individuals who seek therapy are often on an antipodal position from that of oistros and it is important for therapists to recognize its potential value for the recovery of the individual's love of life. The desire to be and to create has to be restored in order to move to a more satisfying life style. This rekindling of hope and of desire is a fundamental aspect of the healing process of therapy. Oistros is not a therapeutic goal per se but can help us on three levels: it provides us with the energy and motivation necessary to proceed with life, gives us the necessary direction that helps us move towards that which is desirable and finally helps us be creative and live life to its fullest.

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