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## The Idea of Happiness between Symbol and Idol

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### Introduction

The word happiness is much abused and refers to various life situations. In everyday language it has ingenuous and acritical meanings, since it is thought of only as a conscious experience. It thus loses its specificity and becomes, as required from time to time, a synonym of pleasure, well-being, euphoria etc.

My intention is to investigate possible non-alienated meanings of the word happiness. To this end I maintain the substantial correspondence between the concept of alienation and that of idolatry as put forward by Erich Fromm (1955, pp. 88-109) and seek to follow the itineraries of happy experience and of its decline, through the flow of symbolisation processes and their interruptions. The vital movement that pervades the symbol and the alluring power of the idol are kept to the fore.

My point of view is chiefly based on Fromm's radical humanism, underlining the symbolic side which includes Georg Groddeck's position on the human as a symbolising being. All my psychoanalytic considerations are based on the works of these two authors, behind whom stands the fundamental book by Johann Jakob Bachofen (1815-1887) „Das Mutterrecht“ (Maternal Right) published in 1861. The topmost point of my references is Meister Eckhart (circa 1260-1327 or 28) from whose concept of „beatitudo“ I attempt to draw the highest meaning of the word happiness.

*.... in the future the presence and degree of happiness might be inferred from an examination of the chemical processes in the body” (Fromm, 1947, p. 115)*

In the history of thought numerous conceptions of happiness have been expressed (Spitzer, 1963; Natoli, 1994), both in terms of physical well-being and pleasure and in relation to spirituality. But the very fact that we torment ourselves without respite on the question tells us that direct reflection gives no wholly satisfying answers. The change in point of view that psychoanalysis offers may indicate unexpected approaches, since the concept of the unconscious alters the stating of the problem. If we allow that happiness and unhappiness may be unconscious, the content of conscious considerations is called into doubt and compared with other indicators that are often apparently extraneous to what we are investigating. The field broadens and tends to include the totality of the human being which, according to psychoanalysis, is almost entirely unconscious, whatever concept of unconscious is considered among the various ones put forward by different authors.

Taking Erich Fromm's concept of the unconscious, the conscious side of the individual psyche is largely a social datum, an historic relative, enabled by defence mechanisms as subjective as they are socially conditioned. Cultural filters are



unconsciously active (Fromm, 1960, p. 321-326) that block any psychic content incompatible with the functioning requirements of society. So conscious and unconscious are qualities of the contents of the psyche, qualities chiefly resulting from social processes which are themselves unconscious. In this way the conscious area of the average individual is given mainly by illusory representations that are shared and collectively generated within a given society or social class, whereas the universal human components remain unconscious. The biological, psychic and spiritual wholeness of the human being, „rooted in the Cosmos“, does not rise to the average, daytime consciousness of a person, yet his unconscious contains plant, animal and spirit. In all cultures, „man ... has all the potentialities; he is the archaic man, the beast of prey, the cannibal, the idolater, and he is the being with the capacity for reason, for love, for justice“ (Ibid., p. 328). The „whole man“, from the remotest past to the potential future, remains unconscious.

Fromm's ideas on this subject were influenced by Georg Groddeck (Biancoli, 1995) who called the unconscious „Es“, a neuter singular pronoun in German, translated into English as It to distinguish it from the Freudian Id. Man lives in the It, which is outside time and ageless. Its continual movement keeps us alive and accompanies us to death, brings illnesses and cures. The It is the great stream of life which flows ceaselessly and generates everything. It cannot be opposed because it is ungovernable (Groddeck, 1923). The Ego is a linguistic artifice and the awareness it has of itself is self deception (Groddeck, 1912). Human life is a symbolic representation of the It, which finally presses on towards death as a return to the womb.

Both Groddeck and Fromm believed that psychic content precedes the word. Groddeck states that the deepest interior life is mute. Verbal language cannot express it because the incessant movement of mental content, in all its changing modalities, cannot be translated into words (Groddeck, 1912, p. 249). The more a thought is fine, delicate and profound, the more need there is for gesture, contact, glance or nonverbal, musical sound (Groddeck, 1912). The unconscious uses phonemes in a symbolic way, employs the larynx to express given interior

processes. The symbols „accumulate“ in the larynx and are embodied in such a way that unconscious content finds a voice in their movements (Groddeck, 1922, p. 168).

The distinction between „body“ and „soul“ refers only to two functions, two ways of the It manifesting itself in its existence beneath the phenomena ceaselessly generated by symbolic creation. „The unconscious is neither psyche nor physis“ (Groddeck, 1917, p. 128). Groddeck's writings continually point out symbolic operations and correspondences with reference to symptoms, organs of the human body, physiological functions, thoughts, actions and behaviours. The human being experiences the compulsion to symbolise, he is a symbolising being (Groddeck, 1922).

It seems to me that we can agree with Groddeck and Fromm that the body lends itself with great versatility to symbolising mental content: the most powerful emotions are recognisable from body language. Muscle tone too reveals gloomy or cheerful moods, as do gesticulation and the skin. Gestures can be so eloquent and unequivocal as to be understood better than a verbal explanation. While ordinarily understood conscious contents are expressed in verbal language, the unconscious universal ones, which belong to all humankind inasmuch as they consist of a human nature that subtends socio-cultural specifications, often have recourse to the symbolic languages of the body no less than those of the dream, of artistic creation, of religious experiences and phenomena.

In such a conception of the unconscious, ideas of happiness and unhappiness are seen as intellectual and often ideological figurations resulting chiefly from defence mechanisms, especially dissociations, idealisations, projections and rationalisations. Strongly influenced by stereotypes of common sense, these ideas have trouble envisaging extremely complex and conflicting interior processes that escape awareness. It may also happen that schematic conceptualisations, assertive and non critical, are the symptom of blocks in the processes of symbolisation. Psychoanalysis possesses the tools to lift the veils that defence mechanisms draw over the ferments and conflicts of the interior world. What appears on the surface as a sensation of well-



being or malaise is not taken for granted but questioned. But psychoanalysis is no longer the only discipline that investigates the profound motions of the psyche. In setting out the theoretical elaborations of Edith Jacobson (1964) on libido and aggressiveness, which are mutually referential and alternating, both being necessary to development of the individual, Stephen Mitchell and Margaret Black (1995, pp. 77-78) offer an appropriate and to-the-point footnote of a neuropsychological nature. They cite the research presented by Besser Van der Kolk (1988) on endorphin releases in the first year of life, which would appear to be fixed as a reaction to emotions in the child's relationship with the mother. If the experiences are traumatic the release of endorphin will be connected with pain and anguish, seriously marking the future life of someone with disorders in the subtlest physiological mechanisms of perception of pleasure and well-being. So Fromm's apparently hyperbolic words in 1947, about chemical examinations that might give us the measure of happiness, now come under the heading of a concrete prospect given by developments in the neurosciences. To shift to the body the focus of the attention with which we wish to pursue a psychic phenomenon does not mean, in terms of the present work, to adopt an organicist approach. On the contrary, in order to safeguard the scientific autonomy of psychoanalysis we must deal with the totality of the human being, which includes the body, reactive to and interrelated with the mind. Moreover, a sound principle of psychoanalytic clinical teaching is to pay attention to the patient's physical aspects when he complains about his spiritual pain and to pay attention to his psychology when he complains about his body.

### **The unifying movement of the symbol in function**

The word symbol derives from the Greek *symballein* (to put together). The symbol operates by uniting two sides, that which appears and is therefore conscious, and that which does not appear and may be unconscious, thus rendering also the link between them unconscious (Ry-

croft, 1968). My reference theory is mainly Fromm's theory of symbols (1951). This theory differs from the classic one (Freud, 1911, 1920; Jones, 1916) which sees the symbolic function as essentially aimed at maintaining interior equilibrium. Fromm's thought may be placed with that of Sandor Ferenczi (1932), and not without reason since both enjoyed a long and involving relationship with Groddeck, the „psychoanalyst of symbols“ (Biancoli, 1997). Symbolic creation, in their opinion, concerns not only the interior world but also relationships with others, with the external environment.

Fromm's definition of the symbol as „something that stands for something else“ appears simple, but examining it in the correlation between symbol and symbolised a depth and a complexity emerge. He posits three types of symbols: conventional, accidental and universal. The conventional symbol is understandable in a precise manner because its relation to what it symbolises derives from a well known shared practice or from a convention, as in the case of a linguistic symbol or a road sign. The applicative contexts are extensive but generally not very profound. Contrarily the accidental symbol is valid for one person only, who has associated it with a given experience. The context in which this type of symbol operates is individual and may be based on an experiential link which even if intense is subjective. That is to say, there is no objective connection between what functions as representation and what functions as represented theme. The limitation of both types of symbol is the absence of an intrinsic relationship between symbol and symbolised content, a relationship that is characteristic of the universal symbol, founded on „experience of the affinity between an emotion or thought, on the one hand, and a sensory experience, on the other“ (Fromm, 1951, p. 179). In this case the link is objective and is valid and active in general. Moreover, it has been deliberated by no one but posits itself with a force of its own, sometimes very powerful, that moves within the soul and imposes itself there (Groddeck, 1922), manifesting itself in ways that are not rarely hermetic, undecipherable or fleeting. To experience the sense of the arcane within ourselves may disturb, even frighten, but if the anguish is not so intense as to



induce the defence mechanisms to switch off the experience of an alarming symbol, that ferment of vitality grazed by a shiver contributes to the wholeness of human feeling that comprises the non-alienated happy experience.

The theme of the universal symbol unwinds on networks of „palpitating links” (Dolci, 1985). In movements that never stop, the exercise of the senses such as seeing, hearing smelling, touching takes the place of an interior experience, an emotion, a feeling, a thought. „Symbolic language is a language in which inner experiences, feelings and thoughts are expressed as if they were sensory experiences, events in the outer world” (Fromm, 1951, p. 174). Analysis of dreams often confirms the operation of a symbol in a play of images that permits a sensorial datum to make itself the representation of psychic content that is sometimes very hard to verbalise.

I'd like to point out that I don't believe the universality of the symbol should be understood in an absolute sense of fixed and idealised permanence, as if it were a case of Platonic ideals. Although the symbol transcends the immediate social relative and draws on more general conditions of the human situation, on the „thrownness” (Heidegger, 1927; Fromm, 1947) of the human being into the world, it lives in the life of civilisations, which are transient and, in their passing away, involve deep repressions and changes in symbolic manifestations. In the literature perhaps the most impressive example of inversion in the turning of the wheel of symbols is the one reported by Bachofen (1861) with regard to a hypothesised passage from matriarchy to patriarchy. The values of the matriarchy and their associated symbols were: love for one's mother and sister and death sentence without appeal for matricide; freedom, equality, peace, predilection for the night, the moon and the earth; the cult of the dead, sisters preferred to brothers, the newborn preferred to older siblings, the left preferred to the right. After terrible struggles the patriarchy overcame female power and imposed its own values and symbols: individual independence, love for one's father, patrilineal law, spiritual procreation of which adoption was a clear example, the prevalence of day over night, sun over moon, sky over earth

and right over left.

Bachofen influenced Groddeck's cultural background (Biancoli, 1995) and inspired admiration in Fromm for the matriarchy (Biancoli, 1998), this to such an extent that both psychoanalysts found that they had a shared interest in the perceptiveness and sensitivity of the female world and the value of the sensorial datum. Through the senses the body is brought in by symbols and by symbol-animated dreams. To grasp a symbol in action and have the insight thereof is a moment of integration, fullness, expansion of the conscious sphere, one of the traits most worthy of the specifically human.

It seems to me a touching experience to re-alise and feel the truth of what Groddeck had understood: symbols are incarnated and act on the biochemical and physiological plane. The language of the body is symbolic language that speaks through the functioning of the organs. Psychic content is translated in a mediated or immediate way into aspects of the body and into events that regard it. People may also want to hide their feelings, but what happens is that unconscious forces will symbolise them on their faces, in their gestures and postures and in their step, which also speaks of mood (Groddeck, 1922, p. 170).

We find an echo of Groddeck in Fromm (1947) on the subject of certain felicitously rapid visions in which a person's character can be deduced from his physical aspects: bearing, way of moving, hands, gestures, voice and gesticulation. The receptive character is revealed by his mouth, with lips tending to be parted as if asking for nourishment, and by his „inviting and round” gestures. The exploitative character has a mouth that seems poised to bite and his movements are direct and aggressive with sharp gestures. The hoarding character is tight lipped and has withdrawn attitudes and angular gestures. In the marketing character the body is alienated as an instrument of success, to be maintained youthful and pleasing on the personality market. Interest in smells is expressed on the face of the necrophile character, giving it the typical „sniffer” feature; the face speaks of the inability to laugh, it is inexpressive and, with its dry yellowish skin, gives the impression of a dirty face (Fromm, 1973).



Someone who can easily and spontaneously seize these aspects in their continual disappearing and reappearing is certainly not going to enjoy, as a result, a life of fairytale happiness, nor will he feel euphoric. Sometimes it may even bring a sense of sorrow or sadness or pain. But from the fine perception of his own gift for interpreting symbols in himself and others, and from the flight of his eyes from the visible to the invisible, he will draw a subtle sense of being alive in the midst of life.

### Symbol and idol

The shifting between symbol and thing symbolised, the referral of one to the other and the return, the flow and the ebb, are the breathing of pulsating unities that break up and are recomposed, inside and outside, present and past, body and mind, matter and spirit, dream and wakefulness. Symbolic configurations and configurations of symbolic configurations without respite cover and uncover, dis-close the human being in whom they are embodied and to whose elusive identity they allude (Biancoli, 2006). In the play of repressions of the symbolised, what is repressed disappears and returns, especially in dreams.

The symbol lives on the nexus with the symbolised content, on the reciprocal reference of one to the other, also in the most obscure and inexplicable ways. Their unity is a result that continually appears and hides, and it is always a unity of two different and distinct things with two different and distinct functions. If it should happen that the dialectic of reciprocal references is interrupted, that a trauma shatters the symbolic interchange, the symbol no longer referred to anything is dispelled or becomes a „broken symbol“ (Bonomi & Borgogno, 2006). It is no longer a symbol but something other, with the unhappiness consequent upon loss of wholeness.

The fate of a broken symbol may also be to give rise to an idol. If the cutting of the link between symbol and symbolised object brings about, over and above their splitting, an overlaying in the sense that there is no longer the representation of hidden content because the representation coincides with the content, the

symbol itself become the thing symbolised and dialectical unity is locked in an identity of two no longer distinct terms. The symbol no longer functions, it dies. Sometimes an idol rises from the dead symbol. I feel that the most fitting example is found in the field of religion: a figure or a sculpture that represents the divinity functions as a symbol when believers have recourse to it as an intermediary, when worship of the symbol favours their experience of the divine; but if they believe that the image is indeed the divine, then it is reduced to being an idol.

The formation of an idol is mainly a social process, and every society has its own idols which are shared by a great number of people. There are cultural factors that favour given idols, but these are possible because individuals lend themselves to acceptance of simplifying, acritical and fundamentally tranquillizing suggestions.

The symbol, contrarily, often involves intense, complex experiential contexts, brings disturbing enigmas into awareness, raises questions that may find no answer. When the non-sense is not limited to the logical and discursive plane, from which it is easy to discard it, but emotively strikes a person's *raison d'être* and his identity rendered indecipherable, that person may feel gripped by anguish. So the defence mechanisms step in. What the symbol unites – such as the interweaving of incompatible affects, the intolerable ambiguity of a face – the split divides, cutting away the unbearable and bad elements. The dissolving of ambivalences by curtailment simplifies the affective situation by impoverishing it, removes conscious anguish and appeals to other defence mechanisms, such as idealisation, which emphasises and definitively fixes the goodness of what remains.

It may happen that a symbol gets blocked in its functioning, that the movement between representation and represented stops if the content of the latter is no longer animated by the contrasting of its components which have been split in such a way that there remains only one, without the others that countered it. On what remains, falsified by the idealising definitive fixing, the symbol may be reified as identical thereto. There is no more vital dubiousness, the enigmatical that never stops talking because it is indefinable and cannot be formalised. There is



no more symbolisation, there's a murdered symbol. On the remains of the symbol, for example a good content definitively fixed and reified, an idol may rise up.

### Clinical vignette

The following clinical case illustrates how an idol may be set on symbolised content and suppress its symbol. At the 218<sup>th</sup> session, when he told me the dream in question here, Giovanni was 41 years old, unmarried and a well off professional. His mother had died three months earlier and his father nine years previously. He had always lived with his parents in a fine big house with garden and courtyard. He has a younger sister who is married with three children and lives in a flat in the same town. He's been engaged to Paola for more than ten years. They've split up several times and they often quarrel. Here's the dream:

„Paola and I had argued and I'd left her again. I see her coming towards me. She wants us to get back together. She comes forward. She's really beautiful. I don't want to but my desire gets the better of me. Her breasts are completely covered with tiny red capillary blood vessels, very obvious, which disfigure them. Those ugly red veins, those tangled red threads are horrible. I think that this is the reason I don't want her any more, but it is exactly these disfigured breasts that I desire. She comes closer, opens her arms, and I have an orgasm and wake up”.

Giovanni found the dream absurd and incomprehensible, but he came up with the association between the capillary vessels, which made Paola's breasts so horrible, and the red cotton embroidery of the family initials on the corner of all the household linen. This association was the key to understanding the central symbol of the dream. The disfigured breasts are a symbol of complex contents: the dreamer's breast fixation, breasts which are confirmed as maternal due to the attraction-repulsion blood bond; incestuous attachment to the family of origin (red capillary blood vessels associated with the red

embroidered initials); the assimilation of Paola into the family; invincible repulsion and fascination. The intensity of the incestuous reference is indicated by the orgasm. In the symbolised content there is a conflict which Giovanni feels he can't bear.

In the analytic work of subsequent sessions the repulsion element emerged as a healthy rejection of incest, but Giovanni bent this interpretation into a fantasy that was increasingly reinforced: to really leave Paola once and for all and invite his sister to come back and live with him in the family home, counting on the self interested assent of his brother-in-law who would save the rent for their apartment, and on the fact that the children would have much more space, as well as a courtyard where they could play. He imagined how fine it would be to have a day to day relationship with his sister's children. The family would be back together and he, as an unmarried uncle, would be a part of it forever. A fantasy within the fantasy was to have the family initials embroidered in red cotton on all the sheets, pillowslips, towels and napkins that still lacked them, including his sister's things and all the new things they would buy. As for his relationships with women, he reduced them to mere sexual problems resolvable through occasional encounters.

The fantasy was long analysed and gradually liquidated, but it is no less interesting than the dreamt symbol. The fantasy splits the symbolised content in such a way as to eliminate the person of Paola who renders topical the strong erotic component, unacceptable but irresistible, of the incestuous attachment. This is de-eroticised on the manifest plane through recourse to his sister's family. The emphasis falls on the red family initials which become, in the fantasy, not so much the family coat-of-arms or seal as figures similar to the statuettes of the *Lari* of ancient Rome, domestic gods of house and family, spirits of forbears. Idols.

Giovanni's only association with his dream directly brought an idolatric image on Paola's breasts. In the subsequent fantasy the symbol is threatened with death by the idol superimposed on it. Only years of analysis kept the symbol alive in all its warmth and multiplicity of meanings, which were gradually integrated into an



overall vision.

### The power of idols

The dichotomy between symbol and idol can be traced to the basic conflict, in Fromm's opinion (1947, 1955), of human existence: to be part of nature and at the same time transcend it, with the two great options that are opened up: the process of individuation and the „flight from freedom“. The latter is traceable to the need for protection and security, which may modulate in various ways and even become a burning desire for a „paradisical existence“ (Fromm, 1992, p. 40). Scared by the process of individuation, which calls for courage, a sense of responsibility and also willingness to follow the road indicated by symbols, human beings find it easy to indulge in the fantasy of a „magic helper“ (Ibid., p. 42) who will take care of them, provide for their needs. This is the precondition for worshipping an idol that gives comfort without any ambivalence whatever and promises to satisfy the need for a „paradisical existence“.

Idols are things, but not negligible things. They have made and are making history, almost in its entirety. The idol appears to be a magnet that attracts human projections. In religions, idols are often made of stone. Somehow in their fixity they are metaphorically of stone in many fields. Projections augment the idol like concretions set upon it, and crusts upon crusts make it gigantic. Human faculties projected onto the idol are themselves turned to stone. Humans lose their own properties, their substance and strength in a colossal conferring of power. The tragic fact is that in this way humans subject themselves to their own projected power and that they do not only deprive themselves of their abilities and attributes: these get detached, become other, an alien other, which may turn out to be hostile precisely to the humanity from which it originates.

With pulsating life, at the heart of the symbol lies unconscious creativity which if it takes content from consciousness and then returns it transfigured and obscure, illegible and at the same time inviting interpretation, is sometimes an enigma that fascinates because it at once rejects and asks to be solved. This is not the case with the idol, which feeds on the removal of content projected onto it and does not return as



much as it has removed but renders it rigid on itself. Historically given symbols change. Those too distant from the spirit of an age may fall into the unconscious and never reappear unless almost indecipherably transformed. When idols fall they shatter, like statues of dictators pulled down by the fury of the people.

Idolatry comes easy and is widespread because it remunerates the delivery of human energies with the temporary placating of anguish. It steals and consoles. Since the mechanisms that form and sustain it are unconscious – at least on the part of those who submit to it convinced that they have chosen it – idolatrous people tend to feel consciously happy and comforted by their normality. Given the common propensity to run away from anguish and seek reassurance, society can be governed by manipulating the formation of idols. Without going into social psychoanalysis themes that lie outside the present enquiry, one need only mention the star worship found today in the fields of showbiz, sport and politics itself, where care in the building of personal images produces seductive effects on the public at large and is repaid by the devotion and adoration of fans and followers who form a great part of today's mass idolatry phenomenon (Bianchi, 2004).

There are also complex cases such as those of certain very charismatic political and religious leaders who embody the symbols of their credo and then undergo distortion due to mass idolatry, which is to say they are subject to a socially widespread transference (Fromm, 1992; Biancoli, 1998). In these cases however psychoanalysis, at least in principle, can separate the two superimposed orders of psychic reality and demonstrate the existence of the symbolic plane beneath the cloak of fanatical projections.

Moreover, it has often happened in history that a leader, symbol of a great idea, has chosen to make himself the subject of idolatry due to his narcissistic and authoritarian traits, leaving the symbol to die in the cult of personality. The body of Lenin, preserved and exhibited to the public in a museum, is a corporeal and tangible example of an idol materially constructed on the mineralised cadaver of a symbol, precisely in a literal and not metaphorical sense. Lenin had been the symbol of social deliverance for mil-

lions of people, and then his authoritarian aspects, and especially those of Stalin, who was also necrophilic (Fromm, 1973) made him a ruinously worshipped idol.

Idols are not merely protective. There are also terrifying idols built on the evil, frightening and persecutory aspects of the human soul. They are all the more threatening in proportion to the intensity of the projection of hostile affects that gradually accumulate at an individual level and above all at a collective level. The average person's paranoia involves idols on a large scale: when in a society the hatred and fear of an enemy embody the projections of individual interior contents, then idolatrous hostile affects are attributed to that enemy. We need only think of the „cold war“ of some decades back, or the current relationship between western society and the world of Islam, highly tense or in a state of war.

If we think of mental health as the ability to symbolise and live in accordance with interweaves of symbolic connections that are formed and reformed, the word happiness in a romantic sense and also in the currently accepted senses seems suspect even more than inadequate. It is suspected of an acritical alignment with idealising and definitively fixing operations that section the processes and isolate individual aspects, fix and substantiate them, removing them from the transmuting turns of symbolic functioning. Ideas of happiness, precisely because they seek to be condensed into definitions to the extent of becoming stereotypes, go well with rigid data which do not flow and which obstruct the courses of symbolisation. Moreover, the mystics speak of beatitude rather than happiness.

#### **Brief psychoanalytical considerations on the „beatitude“ of the poor in spirit**

With the greatest respect I put forward some psychoanalytical considerations regarding one of the highest themes of western spirituality. My argument sets out from Christ's *Sermon on the Mount*. In the Gospels according to St Matthew (5, 3-12) and St Luke (6, 20-26) it opens with the enunciation of eight *beatitudes* in Matthew and four in Luke. Each enunciation begins with





the word „Blessed”. Blessed be the poor, blessed be the afflicted, blessed be the meek etc. I shall limit myself to examining the first *beatitudo*: „Blessed be the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven“. My reflection is based on the interpretation of this beatitudo offered in the German Sermon by Meister Eckhart (1995, pp. 130-138) entitled „Beati pauperes spiritu, quia ipsorum est regnum coelorum“ (Blessed be the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven).

Eckhart states that „a poor man is one who wants nothing, knows nothing and has nothing“. Material, external poverty is not relevant: what matters is the interior poverty brought about by willing nothing and desiring nothing, not even the spiritual wealth that satisfies and flatters the Ego. The ascetics and penitents err and are not poor because „they hang on to their own personal ego which they consider important... These people are called saints due to their external appearance, but inside they are asses „ (Ibid., p. 131).

The passages of the sermon that explain the meaning of poverty caused by knowing nothing do not praise ignorance – Eckhart was a cultured man – but put forward the refusal of knowledge as possession and not as the act of knowing, as suggested by Fromm’s interpretation (1976, p. 315).

To have nothing is even more radical: not only not having an Ego, not only knowing nothing but also not having God. „... I pray to God to free me from God „ (Eckhart, 1985, p. 136). Beatitudo is in a total emptiness of having.

Meister Eckhart, who often expresses himself in symbolic and metaphoric language, is one of the writers who most inspired Fromm in his formulation of the two categories „having mode” and „being mode”. The having mode may be summed up in the formula „*I am what I have*“ (Fromm, 1976, p. 325). If I am what I have, I am a thing. Fromm (1968) distinguishes „Ego” from „I“. The Ego is the socially connoted reification of our identity, a thing, a possession, „the mask we each wear“, „a dead image“ (Fromm, 1976, p. 332). Inasmuch as it is a thing the Ego can be described in words, whereas it is very difficult to describe the I, which can exist as experience but not as possession. Possession of

the I is illusory since the very act of defining it, delineating it and framing it in an objectivization is an operation that alienates it into an Ego (Biancoli, 2006). The I emerges in the way of being as something that can be experienced yet not grasped (Ibid.).

So the human being blessed because he is poor in spirit abandons the having mode. In itself it does not mean that he abandons things but that he removes from them the affective accent that makes them idols. Eckhart was not an ascetic, closed in a cell and fasting. He was an authoritative member of the Rhineland clergy who was in charge of monasteries and taught at universities. As we might suppose, he enjoyed a comfortable though sober lifestyle. A case of what Fromm (1976, p. 331) calls „existential having“: the human being in order to live requires various material and spiritual things to satisfy his needs. Whereas „characterological having“ is expressed in the passion for appropriation, retaining and preserving. This is an important point in the matter because not having is easy to distort. Leaving external things can be very difficult, but it is even more difficult to silence in the soul the echo of the things left behind, the feeling of their absence or the pride and satisfaction in having succeeded in leaving them. It is a case of subtle interior tributes to the object, a refined and often unconscious idolatry.

My argument here is aimed at the theme of narcissism as obstacle to poverty of spirit and therefore to beatitudo. It is a fact that Fromm’s description of having as an existential mode charged with passions almost coincides with his phenomenological-experiential presentation of narcissism.

According to Fromm (1973, p. 180) narcissism brings a person to experience affective accents in such a way as to feel as wholly real only the things that belong to or are connected with himself. His own body, his intelligence, his skill, his needs, his car, his house etc., but also his children and everything else he believes to be his, exist with an affective charge and colour which are lacking in his perception of all the rest. What doesn’t concern him, has nothing to do with him, doesn’t belong to him, seems weightless, toneless. He knows these things exist but knows it only intellectually, without warmth



or interest. Certainly he knows they are real, but they are faded and he is reluctant to consider them or keep them in mind.

To clarify Eckhart and Fromm, narcissism stands as self-idolatry and impedes beatitude understood as non-alienated happiness, and all the more so if we also consider the „rage“ caused by „narcissistic wounds“ (Kohut, 1972). But that’s not all. The penitents hanging on to their Ego, „saints“ for those who care for appearances, „asses“ for Eckhart, sometimes press on towards self-induced physical pain. We thus return to the theme of the body and the aforementioned research by Van der Kolk on suffering rewarded by interior opiates: a long way from beatitude, such people risk experiencing pleasure associated with pain, risk being masochists.

At bottom psychoanalysis confirms the thought of Meister Eckhart, so radically anti-idolatric: possible non-alienated happiness comes from reducing narcissism, the destructiveness of narcissistic rage and sadomasochism, which is to say it corresponds to a mental healthiness in which we find not only the capacity for joy and love but also the ability to appreciate pleasure and tolerate pain, referring these two experiences not from one to the other but to distinct and appropriate contexts.

### Conclusion

The life of the symbol and the condition of happiness go together. Both imply respect for the totality of the human being and the functional unity of body and psyche. Fromm (1959, p. 5) expresses this aspect very efficaciously:

„Together with some other people I believe that any thought which is not dissociated already is not only a thought of our brain, but a thought of our *body*. We think not with our muscles; we think with everything in our body, and if we think not with our body, if our body is not participating in a thought, then it is already a dissociated thought“.

Psyche and body entrust symbolic processes with

their interpenetration in concealments and manifestations. At bottom, if in its totality the unconscious, as Groddeck (1917) believed, is neither psyche nor body but lives and functions through them and their interrelation, then every interruption of the symbolic processes is a cause of unhappiness. Blocked symbols, murdered symbols, are a disabling, a mutilation of the human being, one of the reasons why he turns to an idol.

The ideas of happiness and unhappiness examined in the logic of symbols elude common sense understanding and also that of formal logic. To mechanically link happiness with pleasure and unhappiness with pain is not only reductive but also misleading. We need to go beyond words and images. If these signify only themselves then they are idols and should be abandoned, as Meister Eckhart preached. If they refer to other things then they are symbols and point the way to a road that psychoanalysis can take, by way of pain and sadness as much as pleasure and joy. In this perspective the analytic work comes into contact with the human being’s wholeness in becoming, which is to say his possible non-alienated happiness.

### Abstract

The meaning of the word happiness is commonly referred to conscious experiences, which psychoanalysis overturns by introducing the concept of the unconscious. An idea of possible and non-alienated happiness is sought, considering the mind-body relationship seen as terrain where the processes of symbolization are expressed. Interruptions of these processes are viewed as causes of unhappiness, whereas illusory forms of happiness are found in the worship of idols. Deeming one of the highest degrees of happiness to be what Meister Eckhart calls „beatitude“, an argument is developed in which it is in opposition to idolatry. Between the symbol that expresses the ceaseless movement of living and the idol that takes from humans their powers and faculties that are projected onto the idol itself, non-alienated happiness lies with the symbol, in both pleasure and well-being and in pain and sadness.



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