

GOD-PLEASING,

THE WEST'S COMMON MOTIVATIONAL ROOT ----- ELLIOTT #1821

Freud used "the pleasure principle" to signal his (the Late Enlightenment's) notion of what, at the deepest level, moves the human organism and human society. This thinksheet uses the phrase to signal what, at the deepest level, motivated the ancient Jews/Greeks/Christians, viz., the will to please God. God-pleasing is the pleasure principle in the Bible, and was so among Hellenes.

1. I take you first to the steps of a temple somewhere (it could be anywhere) in ancient Greece. The town has gathered, and a priest is about to bless, to "the pleasing of the god," an athletic contest whose winner will receive, as token that he's pleased the god, a laurel wreath mimetic of the god's halo. The wreath means (1) "He has pleased the god (2) by excelling over the other contestants." Secularized, the Olympics (the lineal global descendant of the ancient Greek games) retains only what the winner did to the other contestants (viz., defeated them): what the winner did for the god (viz., pleased Him) has been forgotten--but much of the temple trappings have been retained, to the glory of man! In the light of ancient Greek piety, our Olympics are an instance of obscene degeneracy and blasphemy. (This, without mentioning economic and nationalistic corruptions, or what raw competitiveness does to the human soul--on which see Jn. Updyke's RABBIT RUN.) ETYMOLOGY of the above: areté ἀρετή, usually translated "virtue," originally meant not character in general but "excellence" in the sense of doing your best or of being the best (the latter being the later meaning of the two). The noun is from the verb areśco ἀρέσκω; "I (intend to) please (the god)," "I strive to please (the god)." "Mama, come see me!" sings out a child self-pleased with some achievement and wanting the further pleasure of seeing Mother pleased: the primordial experience behind/within God-pleasing, spouse-pleasing, child-pleasing, boss-pleasing, ruler-pleasing ("May it please the King,...."). But is the religious context primary in the stem's history? It is, and this primacy is heightened in biblical Greek (OT & NT). See the lexicons and concordances, Strong's for both if you want to avoid the Greek alphabet.... A dozen other Greek verbs mean, in some sense or other, "to please"; only areśco's stem has a noun meaning excellence. Anc.Gk. has more than a score of words for "pleasant," and the root char- (whence Gk.wds. for "joy" and "grace") is in several parts of speech signifying pleasure--including charma (!), pleasure resulting from joy; and charis ("pleasure" among pagans, "grace" among Christians: note the complex tone of "grace" as joy, favor, mutual pleasure, gratitude, indeed the atmosphere of NT). From the root hed- we get Eng. "hedonics," the study of pleasure (as from the root aret- we get Eng. "aretaics," the study of excellence/virtue; and as from the root daim- through the stem eudaim- we get Eng. "eudaemonics," the study of happiness/peace (emot. related to Heb. shalom)).

2. God-pleasing is even stronger Hebraically than Hellenically even though pleasure is itself not as prominent a life-theme. Of the three main roots, the primitive ideas seem to be inclination toward (chaphets צפון), softness ('dn רך), and breathing (nephesh נפש). A simple way to study this: See "please," etc., in Strong, and these in Strong's Hebrew Index: 2656 (fr.2654), 5315, 5730 (fr.5727), 7522 (fr.7521). In canonical order, here are typical passages: 1Ch.29.17; Ezra 10.11; Job 22.3; Ps.103.21;147.11;149.4; Mal.1.10. SUM of these: God takes pleasure in his fearers, his people, his ministers as they will to discover and do his pleasure--but not in fools.... "Eucharist" in bibl.Gk.--2Mac.2.27--means pleasing God by gratitude.

3. Sad: Victorianism feared (the body and) pleasure, so virtually nothing in traditional Bible dictionaries: nothing in the 5-vol. IDB; Jas. Hastings has about one inch in the 5-vol. HDB. Especially

The Voice at Jesus' baptism says he's God-"well-pleasing" (Mt.3.17; M.1.11; L.3.22mg).

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sad in light of the fact that biblical peoples, and even the Puritan ancestors of the Victorians, were pleasure-fond (philedés φιλῆδης).

4. I see our culture now, in the mid-1980s, struggling toward an ethic of responsible pleasure. In drama and film, here are stages we've been through in my time:

STAGE 1: People got "theirs": the moral universe defeated sinners.

STAGE 2: People got "it": pleasure-seekers won, tough luck for the moral universe. (In the 1920s, "it" meant sex as pleasure. Here, I'm using the term more broadly, for all pleasure-rewards.)

STAGE 3: People got neither "theirs" nor "it": the blahs (the theater of the absurd, as amoral as godless). Poor box-office.

STAGE 4: People got both "it" and "theirs"--pleasure-achievements at awful cost (seen more as fate and bad luck than as recompense or punishment).

STAGE 5: People are getting more "theirs" than "it." We're back to the morality tale, to "Everyman," but at a far more mature level than that of 1/2 century ago. Sex/violence/space is the headiest mix for good box-office; but that's less significant than the fact that morally/spiritually/humanly solid films are now good box-office. Instead of being insipid (as in most consciously "religious" films) or plain absent (as in paleo-secular films), God is now the Present Absence (what I'll call the neo-secular films).

I'm resisting the temptation to scatter a few score films into the above categories: I fear diverting you from culture-critic to film-critic!

5. Two endemic hungers--the hunger for reality, and the hunger for righteousness--are resurfacing in our culture. Our sobering century has been intensifying (1) our knowing/feeling the consequences of individual and social neurotic and anomic behavior, (2) our sense of our fragility as human beings, as civilization, and as biosphere vis-a-vis Holocaust, unrenewable resources depletion/pollution, and techno-holocaust (i.e., nukes; by "Holocaust" with capital "H," I mean genocidal tendencies within societies), and (3) our feel for the preciousness and ennobling potential of life against death and malice.

6. We're at the dawn of an age of moral renewal converging body/soul (pleasure/responsibility), reality/righteousness, the needs of nature/person/society, "God"/world. (I put "God" in quotes, for it doth not yet appear what form the divine will take.) Scattered pleasing (of oneself and to hell with the rest; of "the powers and principalities," to whom the fearful are obsequious; of soul and to hell with body, as old Faust; of body and to hell with soul, as hell-rejuvenated Faust). No better guide, in my opinion, than NT (e.g., see p.105 of Arndt & Gingrich's GK.-ENG. LEXICON, on words of the stem aresk-; Col.1.10: "We ask God to fill you with the knowledge of his will....Then you will be able to live as the Lord wants and will always in everything do what pleases him."). (*Versus gathered, integrated pleasing--the gathering focus and power being "God" as a reversible proposition.)

7. Allergic as a I to white space, I'll fill out this page with a quote from Alex. Lowen (THE BETRAYAL OF THE BODY, Max/67/75, p.126): "The conflict of modern man stems from the opposing values represented by his ego and his body. The ego thinks of achievement, the body of pleasure. The ego functions with images, the body functions with feelings. When image and feeling coincide, the result is a healthy emotional life"--otherwise, "illusion and desperation.... Behind every illusion is the desire for freedom and for love."