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# Zhi Mian and “Oistros” of Life

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## **Abstract**

“Oistros,” or oestrus, or estrus, is a concept with many meanings and implications. In ancient Greece oestrus was a gadfly that stung animals and drove them to react. Socrates was the first to use the image allegorically in describing himself as a gadfly that awakens people from their lethargy and laziness. It is connected with the passion for life, with creativity, and an awakening from the indolence of everyday living. It is also directly associated with the female reproductive cycle via the estrogens related to pregnancy and childbirth. It is thus related to the ideas of attraction, union, and creation in general, as well as to spiritual, mental, and psychic elation, enthusiasm, and inspiration. “Zhi Mian” is a concept that the Chinese Institute for Existential Psychology introduced to the existential community a few years ago. It means to “face life directly” and to have the courage to look at our existential issues with no pretenses. This is similar to the concept of “oistros” evolved by “gignesthai,” the Hellenic Association for Existential Psychology, that is, to the awareness and awakening that promote change and turn life into an intense and meaningful experience. When stung by death awareness, we give greater importance to life by realizing our time limitations and are not wasting time as if we were eternal. “Oistros” leads to a life full of passion, energy, and creativity, helping us to achieve the Epicurean dictum that “To live well and to die well is the same task.”

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## Introduction

The concept of “oistros” is an evolving one that is emerging through the work of “gignesthai,” the Hellenic Association for Existential Psychology, which was established in 2004 with the aim of introducing the existential approach to psychotherapy and counseling to the Greek community and of exploring and extending existential concepts from a Greek perspective. In our view, “oistros” is fundamental on three levels. It has

1. an *energizing* function, which is able to motivate and give us the necessary force to proceed with life and life’s tasks;
2. a *directing* function, which helps us to move toward something, instead of wondering around with no purpose; and
3. a *generative* function, which allows us to be creative and to live life to its fullest.

“gignesthai” has included “oistros” as an existential concept in its approach to counseling and psychotherapy since it has become obvious that this characteristic way of viewing life is a very powerful tool for both the instillation of hope and of a dynamic attitude toward living one’s life. This approach has proved useful when working with individuals and with groups. It encourages growth through and despite pain and promotes further creative development by transcending difficulty and focusing on the positive aspects of life.

From the beginning it was obvious that the concept of “oistros” had great appeal to those who participated in our weekly seminars on existential thought. It is often present in spontaneous group discussions as a much desired quality and state of being. Even in recent days where Greek society is faced with grave difficulties, “oistros” is ever present and brings with it a sense of strength and hope in fighting adversity and growing despite hardships. Since we have found the concept useful for relating among ourselves almost the opposite sense of our fear of death, we often use it as a consolation and awareness of the bright side of life. As such, we decided to share it with the larger existential community with the hope that it will introduce another view of life and of our capacity to live well and create.

## **Definition of Oestrus**

In the Greek language, oestrus is not only a physiological process associated with the female reproductive cycle in mammals, as in estrus, estrogen, and so on, but it also has two further meanings. It is

- A state of mental and spiritual exhilaration and inspiration, a sense of creative and passionate enthusiasm
- An insect, like a large fly, that arouses and infuriates the animals into which it inserts its larvae

It is these two meanings of the word oestrus that “gignesthai” has particularly in mind when relating it to the Chinese concept of “Zhi Mian,” which means to face life and life’s issues directly. Thus, oestrus is considered as a state of arousal provoked by the sting of death awareness (the “insect” that awakens us to the importance of life), which leads to creative inspiration and passionate enthusiasm. This state of alertness and active involvement is, of course, also present in the bodily dimension of physical–sexual arousal. Physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual dimensions of being can be aroused by this “sting.”

## **Historical Background**

Socrates, one of the best-known Greek philosophers who lived between 469 and 399 B.C. believed it was his duty and destiny to function as this gadfly that stung and aroused the consciousness of his fellow citizens. Plato (396 BC/1992), his student, relates to us that during his trial for corrupting the youth of his day and blaspheming the gods, Socrates defended himself by claiming thus:

. . . 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.

Despite his great speech in court, he was sentenced to death by the Athenian society of his times, a society extremely discomfited by the philosopher’s presence. The main reason for their discomfort was because Socrates challenged the Athenians to pursue a more authentic life in which the individual

is less likely to succumb to outside pressures. Inner consciousness, alertness, and personal choice overrides any other external power. Such a citizen/human being, most often, is not wanted by a society, for obvious reasons.

The essence of the concept of oestrus is also found in the Greek writer Kazantzakis (1961). In his famous quote from the book *Report to Greco*, he writes: “. . . To leave nothing for Death to take from me, just a few bones.” He specifically makes a call to live life consciously and face death courageously. Living in spite of our knowledge of death and perhaps because of it choosing to live fully and actively. It is Yalom (1980) who mentions that although “the physicality of death destroys us, the idea of death can save us.” Death awareness need not necessarily lead to a freezing of the individual (although sometimes it does), it may instead function as a driving force. This is what Kazantzakis (1952/2008) implies in his *Zorba*, the Greek hero who lives life to its fullest and faces adversity and death straight in the eye, as with Zhi Mian.

Finally, we find the concept of oestrus in a well-known poem of the Greek poet Empeirikos (1965). In his poem *On Philellinon street*, he writes, “. . . the Greeks turned their fear of death into oestrus (zest) for life.” Fear of death is transformed into a love for life and all it can bring. The acknowledgment of our human destiny and of our limitations (especially of the fact that we will die) propels us into a stance, or attitude, of living life intensely and fully. In this courageous stance of being, we cherish every moment and realize the value of life.

## Current Use of the Term *Oistros*

Dr. Wang (2011) mentions in his article, “Zhi Mian and Existential Psychology,” that it is difficult to fully explain what Zhi Mian means because words are often too poor to transmit a feeling and a state of being. Similarly, it is very difficult to put into words what “oistros” is for a Greek person. We could say that it is the life force, a felt sense of being fully alive, living as opposed to just existing. It is being in the present moment, being fully alert and aware, while using one’s energy and talents unstintingly. This way of living leads to a feeling of “having **lived life** to its fullest.”

Living in such a manner means, as with Zhi Mian, having the courage and the strength to face up to life. To savor life and to make it your own in an active manner rather than just seeing it go by. To seize every moment as if it were the last and to make the best of it. It is a determination for life; it is the will to live. It is a pervasive mood of optimism that predisposes individuals to have a positive stance toward life.

Another characteristic of “oistros” is that it can be present both in quiet moments, like reading a book or contemplating as well as in intense moments, like painting or participating in a riot. It can be present in sorrow and in happiness. It is a state of being that is characterized by a felt sense of intensity that can be both quiet and loud. It is experienced in the body as a form of elation that gives power and propels the individual to move forward.

When in a state of mental and spiritual arousal, we are better able to examine our life and the inner workings of our mind and soul. In this state of being, which is connected to Zhi Mian, the full potential of man is at its best. The basic idea of both Zhi Mian and “oistros” is to face life directly with courage and meaning. Courage is required in order to face life with no pretenses and meaning is required in order to be able to sustain a hopeful attitude and continue living, despite the sorrow and pain that one inevitably faces in life. This courageous stance in life is also found in Nietzsche’s (1974) concept of *Amor Fati* where we are encouraged to accept our fate and move, through and despite the pain involved, to a higher state of being. Of course the presence of meaning can help us in this process of becoming, since as Nietzsche (1967) mentions “he who has a *why* can bear any *how*.”

“Oistros” generates the driving force, the potential, the power that energizes us and gives us the courage to pursue a life that is not only fully lived, but also fully sensed. “Oistros” can often catch us unaware, in sheer *joie de vivre* when, for instance, we are transported by a sunset or deeply moved by the presence of a child, or a work of art. The sharp pain of loss or the dragging weight of despair may also become the catalyst for taking stock, cutting one’s losses, and actively seeking change. In this sense, “oistros” is akin to the notion of mindfulness and openness to sensing the moment. It is, “the final common pathway of what makes us human, our capacity for awareness and self-knowledge” (Jon Kabat-Zinn, 2005).

“Oistros” encompasses both chance events and those that have been willed and planned, so that it is equally present in the powerful experiences of suddenly falling in love or bringing a long-term project to fruition. It fuels creativity and generates a sense of expanded awareness, providing us with the stamina to persist even when things are not as we would have them and with the determination to meet challenges with courage and optimism.

Zhi Mian has an ethical/militant dimension that is not necessarily present in “oistros.” We can be energized by our relations to the world around us, by the wonders of nature, even by the realization that we are alive. We are not always struggling in life; there is space for peaceful acceptance, love, fun, and enjoyment. We seek authenticity, but we must accept that we cannot always be authentic (Heidegger, 1927/1996).

In this sense, Socrates' dictum that "the unexamined life is not worth living" acquires relevance, as it is our responsibility to decide from moment to moment whether to go along with the crowd and hide behind inauthentic pretenses, to merely pursue some form of aesthetic pleasure, or to elect to make our mark on life by consciously guiding our efforts into personally meaningful channels. Similarly, Sartre (1943/1993) claims that "we are our choices" and we have responsibility for all that we choose to do and not do. He is also the existential philosopher who gives great importance to action. One has to live according to his beliefs and act by them. "Oistros" offers this motivating force to act, do, and be what one believes and dreams of.

"Oistros" is also related to the concept of flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1988). When in a state of "oistros," our entire being is present and fully 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. In addition, "oistros" is related to moving out toward the world, which implies that one finds the strength to face adversity. Adversity and even a sense of the tragic are part of the process of becoming true to one's self, of being oneself.

Like Zhi Mian, "oistros" is a quality that can be cultivated. It is a stance in life, and toward life, that one has to practice. Everyday practice can keep one aroused to the danger of falling into the trap of a convenient and mechanical manner of living. The daily exercise of the mental question: "If this was my last day how would I want to live it?" is a useful way of keeping us on the track of a more personal way of living that makes "oistros" more possible. This exercise keeps us alert to the possibility of living our life as others want and expect of us, rather than living it as we feel will be best for our development.

While not disregarding the tragic side of life and of living (Unamuno, 1954), one has to make a more conscious choice toward the life enhancing qualities of our being. "Oistros" is about opening our being toward life forces instead of toward death forces. However, it is by facing death (the dark side) that one can rejoice in life. As Lu Xun mentions, "the real warrior dares to face life directly as it is, no matter how gloomy it might be, and to look unflinchingly at one's circumstances, no matter how blood drenched it might be" (Lu Xun, 1981a, p. 274 as cited in article of Xuefu Wang). The avoidance of the pain and sorrow of life stifles life forces since as Dr. Wang (2011) mentions, "if we overly defend, then we reject and escape from the truth of life and even life itself" (p. 4).

### Authors' Note

All four authors are cofounders of "gignesthai," the Hellenic Association for Existential Psychology. The article is based on a presentation at the Second International Conference on Existential Psychology held in Shanghai, May 2012.

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## Bios



**Evy Dallas** is one of the co-founders of “gignesthai.” She holds an MA degree in counseling from Ball State University (Muncie, Indiana) and a PhD from the University of Surrey (England). Since 1981, she practiced as a psychologist at a center for rehabilitation of cerebral palsied children in Athens. At this time, she also became an instructor of undergraduate and graduate psychology at the University of La Verne (Athens), attaining the rank of professor. Since 1984, she has been in private practice, working largely with children and their parents as well as with adolescents and adults. She has participated in several conferences and seminars and has published mainly on issues relating to the adjustment of cerebral palsied children and their families. Her orientation has evolved over time into a primarily short-term existential approach, with systemic influences.



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**Alex Harisiadis** holds a master’s degree in counseling psychology from the University of La Verne, California, and also a master’s in business administration. Currently, he is a PhD candidate in clinical psychology at the Panteion University of Social and Political Sciences. He is a cofounder of “gignesthai,” The Hellenic Association for Existential Psychology. He maintains a private practice as a psychotherapist in Athens working with individuals and groups. He has been teaching existential

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**Katerina Zymnis-Georgalos** was born and raised in Buenos Aires. She studied at the University of Belgrano. Since 1980 she lives in Athens, Greece. She holds a master's degree in counseling psychology from the University of La Verne, California and is a PhD candidate at the Department of Clinical Psychology at Panteion University of Political and Social Sciences in Athens. Her main area of research is on psychotherapeutic change. She has been trained in Systemic Family and Group Psychotherapy at the Athenian Institute of Anthropos (AKMA), is a certified psychotherapist (European Association for Psychotherapy),

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