

## Freud's Death Drive And Eros – A Case

In this talk I want to focus on Freud's death drive which is the precursor to Lacan's jouissance. I will speak about jouissance in another talk. Today, it will only be about Freud's death drive. And do to this format, the discussion will by nature leave many things out. But hopefully not too much. I will try to say something to you about what the death drive is. How it differs for Freud from Eros, or the force of Love that binds things together to perpetuate life, sexuality, the pleasure principle, and so on.

To do this in a way that is not too dry and abstract, I will frame my discussion of the death drive with a vignette. A slice from a case that I am working on in the position of the analyst where the conflicts and in-mixings of destructive death drives and Eros in one man's psyche is at stake.

Before starting however I want to lay out the general form of my talk. First, I will give the briefest description of the vignette without, however, discussing death drives explicitly. The aim being just to introduce the case to you. Then I will begin to discuss what a drive is as a prelude to discussing what makes a death drive and why it is, in Freud's writing, *beyond the pleasure principle*. With this under our belt, I will then discuss a moment in the case where the back and forth between death drives and Eros are at stake in the direction of the cure. In conclusion I will make some general comments on how WWI impacted and altered Freud's analysis of the destructive drives (not yet called the Death Drive) and prepared the way for the death drive as a beyond the pleasure principle.

### I. The Vignette

Here is how the vignette begins. I work with an African American gentleman, age sixty three. He has lived in institutions or on the street for all of his adult life. Obviously, he is on powerful psychotropic medications that alter and influence his perceptions; and these effects have to be taken into account when we work with a person such as him. Regardless, beyond medication, he is someone who remains fixated, turning around terribly self-destructive death drives and aims that overwhelm him. For instance, he is plagued by persecutory voices of his father and mother calling him

stupid, telling him to shut up, and commanding him to hit himself in the face, which he does compulsively. He sleeps poorly and wets the bed. As far as I can determine, he has been in this state for his entire adult life.

## II. Thinking about this case in terms of drive theory — what is a drive?

How can we begin to make sense of this man's suffering? We have before us someone whose whole personality is overwhelmed by destructive urges and aims that Freud in the *Outline of Psychoanalysis* (1940) and elsewhere during the period 1920-1939 called the death drive. But what is that?

Before answering this, let me first make a few general comments about what a drive is. Because there is no concept of the drive before Freud's work and yet it is absolutely fundamental to him from his earliest work to his last. Thus, In the *New Introductory Lectures* (1933) Freud says that the drives are the *mythology* of psychoanalysis. By this he does mean that they are fictions in the sense of untrue and made up stories. But that they escape our empirical net by their very nature. At best, we can experience their effects in our bodies and in our speech, thoughts, and symptoms; and by working backwards draw some conclusions about them. They are foundational in the sense of being the *groundwork*. By groundwork I mean that they are the law behind the law. They ground us as living speaking beings but are 'in-themselves' unknowable and only secondarily graspable.

The first qualitative thing Freud said about the drives is that they are analogous to *energy in physics* (something else we don't really understand very well). But this analogy was never anything more than a metaphor. The drives do not correspond in any simple way to physical properties. Rather they are psycho-physical. They are energy in the sense of *work done to the psychic apparatus* by way of the body; in particular the erogenous zones. And work done in the body by way of the psychic apparatus to the erogenous zones.

Freud at first distinguished between sexual or libidinal drives that are directed outward towards objects and self-preservative or ego drives turned inward. His first major revision of this view occurs in *On Narcissism* (1913) where Freud maintained that the source and aim of the first libidinal drives are narcissistic. That is the ego drives are

themselves libidinal or sexual drives and that the original source of libido is egoistic. The first objects of libido being the ego and body. It is from this original narcissistic reservoir that libido is later projected onto objects and other persons outside the ego. That is, the source and aim of libido moves in this new way of seeing drives from the ego to the other. But these sexual aims can easily regress back towards the subject's own ego again when frustrated. This is what happens in mourning when some traits and perceptions from the lost object are taken back into the ego where the subject then remembers and idealizes the lost one while turning the pain of loss against itself. What makes this so important for our investigation is that it is an early and undeveloped movement in Freud towards a new separation; not between ego drives and sexual drives but between libido which can be both egoistical and object oriented and destructive drives that he will later in other contexts develop into the relation between Eros and Death Drive.

The name of the mechanism by which an object or a trait of someone is taken into the ego again and the libido flows back onto the ego is called identification. As Freud says in *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis* (1916) in regards to mourning: 'the shadow of the other has fallen on his ego'.

Let us take a moment to ponder this mechanism of identification as it is a very important one for the subject of our vignette. Identifications happen all the time. It is a fundamental relational mechanism linking ourselves and others narcissistically that Freud described in *On Narcissism* (1913) and returned to again in *Mass Psychology* (1924) and many other works. But it also occurs when someone adopts a trait, like mumbling, from someone else. And is an essential element to the delight a person takes in hearing a joke. It therefore can be connected to either an increase in pleasure or pain, depending on the circumstance.

In our vignette, the entire mechanism of identification has been overwhelmed by highly destructive painful drives that have taken up residency in his superego as self-deprecating voices assaulting his ego and body and which have the form of actual hallucinated perceptions of his relation with his parents and others.

One last general comment on the drives. An irony Freud took account of about the drives is that when you say drives=psychic work you would imagine that the drives

compel some sort of change in the body and psyche. And while on one level (the economic, for example, where the energy of a drive can easily be transferred onto another) this is true. On an other level, it is false because, as Freud stressed in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, the drives are *conservative by nature* in the sense that the action that they seek to produce and reproduce is a return to an earlier state of things. This being for him a foundational law of life and the basis of repetition in the psyche.

Old drives never disappear. They may become repressed. They may lose their libidinal force to other drives striving for their own satisfaction, with other aims and objects, but they persist and continue automatically to seek their same old satisfaction in the body and the unconscious. In this sense, each drive is a trace of a previous *historical situation* seeking to find a new route to and old aim or satisfaction in an altered psychological ecology. And this is why, the death drives, even when overcome, remains active, as it were, in the subject's unconscious, affecting his body; and can be renewed whenever there is some regression back to the old state do to a shock, loss, trauma, etc.

Incidentally, this is one of the reasons that Freud said there is no reality of time—of past, present, and future — in the unconscious. Our sense of time and death being the result of the experiences of the ego which has to take account of 'external reality' where the subject encounters mortality and the loss of loved ones in a libidinal way.

You can begin to see, I hope, that things in this realm are far from simple. But let us not get lost in the thicket of trees, even though it is through this thicket and its underbrush that the analysand and the analyst must traverse.

### III. But you haven't said what a death drive is yet or how it is different than those libidinal drives, or the pleasure principle either?

So, what is a death drive and how does it introduce a new beginning to Freud's understanding of the drives? The death drive is a new way of thinking about the relation of pleasure and pain in the ecology of the drives. It was introduced in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920). From the 1890s to 1920, Freud held a fundamental belief about the drives. It was that all the drives, whether sexual or self-preservative, were subject to the same fundamental regulatory principle that he called the *pleasure*

*principle*. Freud had first come to the pleasure principle in his work on dreams. And he stated it elegantly as follows: *All dreams are wish fulfillments*. That is, all of them aim at reducing psychic pain and transforming it, via the wish, into pleasure. He further defined pain in this system as an increase in psychic tension, or a too rapid rise or fall in the quantity of psychic energy; and he defined pleasure as caused by lowering psychic tension to a minimum or at least stabilizing the fluctuation of psychic energy in the system.

The pleasure principle therefore often comes into conflict with individual drives seeking *satisfaction*.

This is the bread and butter of psychoanalysis. But there is a problem with it, as Freud well knew. Not all pain converts into pleasure. And there are situations where the quantity of destructive drives simply overwhelms the conversion and puts the pleasure principle out of commission, as happens sometimes in the negative therapeutic reaction, traumas, and even some forms of child's play. You can also think back to our vignette where pleasure, such as it is, is totally put in the service of compulsively repeating old painful situations.

In response to these sorts of situations, Freud concluded that the ecology of the drives was regulated by not one but two regulatory systems. The pleasure principle and an *older* principle that he called at first the death drive; and that, he said, had ruled over all psychic actions before the pleasure principle; that is, before the organism could be guided by the aim of lowering psychic tension (pleasure-seeking); and, he added, it was to this older principle that we return whenever, do to war, trauma, shock, etc, we are overwhelmed by stimulation and danger; because at such moments the aim governing the ecology of the drives simply becomes repeating the painful situation again and again until such time as this influx of traumatic tension can be bound (decathexis).

Thus, the new way of thinking about the ecology of the drives led him to a new, different, dualism. The old duality between sexual and self-preservative ego drives, which had already become obsolete when Freud wrote *On Narcissism*, was now supplanted by a new dual system, that of the death drives and life drive or Eros.

Here is how Freud says it: “We have been led,” Freud writes in 1920, “to distinguish two kinds of drives: Those which seek to lead what is living to death. And others, the sexual drives, which are perpetually attempting to achieve a renewal of life.” In this single sentence, Freud places the pleasure principle under the sign of Eros. And, along with it, all the sexual drives aiming to extend life and to create more stable unities. And he opposes to them the death drives which sought, he said, to disturb or undo all unities and return the organism to an original condition, an inorganic condition before the disturbing forces of life had come into existence.

Painful situations, in this system, are simply stages in a movement inherent in the drive back towards death; and with it the ending of all pain. But in reality there is a terrible complication to this. Because all drives aim to repeat themselves, death is usually put off, even when the psyche is overwhelmed by death drives. In most cases, people simply regress to painful situations that they then repeat because they remain unbound by Eros and the ego. Their fixation causes the subject great harm, as our vignette demonstrates, but not death.

Perhaps because he had been misread so often, and by his fellow analysts more than anyone else, he returned these thoughts on death and suffering in *Outline of Psychoanalysis* (1940) where he stressed, in that programmatic text, that the death drives concern more than death. Its kingdom includes all the destructive drives no longer limited by Eros.

There is, Freud believed, moreover, a proper path towards death that occurs when one's libido is 'burnt up'. Very often however, as everyone knows, death comes to those we love too soon either by illness or accident or the hostility of others. Such untimely deaths that happen too soon and in the wrong way, he said on many occasions and in many ways, are among the greatest sources of suffering and can sometimes be unbearable for those who survive them.

#### IV. Returning To Your Vignette, Does Eros And Thanatos Effect The Direction Of The Cure?

The destructive drives are of course working to destroy his personality and unbind any stable unities in it. But this does not mean that Eros is not operative,

too. The death drives are far stronger and louder than Eros, to be sure. But Eros is operative and this constitutes the direction of the cure. We should stress that for Freud so long as we are alive and not dead, the death drive always operates in tension with Eros or the life drive. Since the one, the death drive, is a more regressive narcissistic drive that seeks to destroy or flood with pain all the unities that love and life have established between the ego and others. Thus, death destroys unities and unleashes destructive unbound energy that increases pain, while Eros seeks to bind and limit the influence of the death drives on us.

To wit, while his perceptions of his past and present are overwhelmingly dominated by accusatory voices, he also has some good memories from childhood. He recalls that when things became too hot at home he could go spend a few days with his godparents whom he recalls fondly. The problem is that while he is conscious of these memories they mean absolutely nothing to him in the sense that they have no effect on the grip that his destructive drives have on his personality.

He also recalls that as a boy his father took him to see all the great acts at the Apollo Theater. But, once again, although he returns to this in every session, as a kind of anchor point, the memory of it had absolutely no value for him. They didn't help him subjectively move towards binding his destructive impulses, and so moving closer to the kingdom of Eros.

But we had some good luck from the start. His transference to me was positive. And, there was more good luck, too. He began to ask me to play songs from his childhood (the one's he had heard song at the Apollo theater with his father). He at first listened to these songs in a compulsive way that did little to bind his painful drives. But over time hearing them with me opened a subjective time when the harassing voices were quieted. A time of respite.

We had a third piece of good luck, too. Ever since he and I began to work together, he asked me in a compulsive manner if X or Y, usually a singer from the Apollo theater, is dead. For a long time, however, these requests (really demands) also had no impact on his destructive drives. But overtime, they began to lengthen the time of respite when the voices, never totally absent, were quieted.

Then, one day, he entered my office transformed. He was much calmer and focused and was not vocalizing his inner voices. When he sat down he calmly told me that *his mother was dead*.

This was an hallucination too, In 'reality' his mother was very much alive and living in a nursing home, and he knew it on some repressed level. We all distort reality. But for those of us who are neither neurotic nor psychotic, these distortions usually take the form of a group illusion that we believe because they make our lives easier and keep us from certain unpleasant realities. But this was no illusion. It did not function to make his life easier by forming a social link to others. Rather the hallucination, which he believed in with total certainty, created a suturing which allowed his ego to bind a great deal of free floating destructive energy for the first time. It is likely that his compulsive saying 'Is X or Y dead?' prepared the ground for this hallucination, which undoubtedly existed for a long time in his unconscious.

#### V. Returning to Freud, How Did The War Impact This Work?

Perhaps Freud's ultimate regret about WWI, and he stated this in a number of essays as early as the beginning of 1915, was that too many lives were cut short too soon and too many springs lost for too many young men. Freud was very bothered by the intensity of destructiveness unleashed by nations in the war; a destructiveness that too many, indeed almost all people, combatants and civilians alike, succumbed to, to a very great degree.

He also was particularly concerned that so many who were the spokespersons of the highest civilizational ideals, without much ado, placed themselves and their ideals at the service of violence and nationalism and worked for the destruction of 'the enemy'. In the blink of an eye, it seemed, those espousing the highest ethical values regressed and embraced what was for him a more 'primitive' destructive attitude.

To understand how this came about, he made use of the concept of illusion. Most people he said rely on illusions to make themselves believe that they are better than they are and to bind them more tightly in the social link. In doing this, they have not sublimated their destructive drives as much as they believe. Many have scarcely

done so at all. But only acted ethically out of a fear of punishment, what Freud called social anxiety, or because it gave them a place in the social link.

For such people, the war acted as a holiday from their inhibitions; all those self-centered and destructive urges could at last be acted out without social sanctioning. While others who were not so crass turned away from their illusions towards disillusionment and depression. In either case, they remained trapped in a cycle of illusions and disillusionment that had a lie at its foundation.

Freud's one hope in these desperate times was that the shock of so much death and violence would awaken people; and that enough would shake off the big lie so that once the war ended they could begin together to build a civilization not on illusions and false ideals but on a firmer foundation.

In sum, he concluded that Europeans have fallen less far than he thought because they had never been as good as they pretended to be. He hoped that enough people, chastened by the war, might embrace this sobering ethic and from its base built a new world without illusions. He no doubt hoped situating drive theory on the opposition of Eros and Death drives might support this new ethic after the war.

## VI. Conclusion

There is no doubt that the effect of trauma to combatants, especially shell shock trauma, played an important role in the formulation by Freud of the death drive. We see it, for instance, where Freud stressed that an environmental shock traumatizes the whole psychic apparatus so that it is flooded by unbound energies. Until these can be bound (decathexis) they will repeat the traumatic situation over and over. This is a tragic side of the dualism between Eros and the Death Drive. But we can, as Freud hoped, but in a one by one manner, work with our suffering analysands to bind these massive holes and make their lives more livable and capable of enjoyment. We saw this *in situ* in our vignette. But for this work to proceed, we need to be free of illusions or at least be on guard against them.

I will leave you with the way Freud ends *Civilization and its Discontents*:

The fateful question for the human species seems to me to be whether and to what extent their cultural development will succeed in mastering the disturbance of their communal life by the human instinct of aggression and self-destruction. Men have gained control over the forces of nature to such an extent that with their help they would have no difficulty in exterminating one another to the last man.

This is stunningly similar to what he says in 'Thoughts on War and Death' in 1915. But it is written in the middle thirties. Not any longer as a comment on the destruction unleashed by WWI but perhaps a premonition of the coming war and Holocaust.

Eros and Thanatos, or the Love and Death, these are the laws beyond the law guiding human life. Only, we can live in the shadow of the destructive death drive and its jouissance or seek via love to bind it and bind ourselves to others in more sublimated ways. The history since Freud's death in 1939 bespeaks to how little we have moved passed the men and women who fought or were victims of WWI and WWII. But the duality of love and death, destruction or sexual union with others, means we can always try to place our life's on an other path.

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