

Death Drive

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In classical Freudian psychoanalytic theory, the death drive ("Todestrieb") is the drive towards death, self-destruction and the return to the inorganic: 'the hypothesis of a death instinct, the task of which is to lead organic life back into the inanimate state'. It was originally proposed by Sigmund Freud in 1920 in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, where in his first published reference to the term he wrote of the 'opposition between the ego or death instincts and the sexual or life instincts'. The death drive opposes Eros, the tendency toward survival, propagation, sex, and other creative, life-producing drives. The death drive is sometimes referred to as "Thanatos" in post-Freudian thought, complementing "Eros", although this term was not used in Freud's own work, being rather introduced by one of Freud's followers, Wilhelm Stekel.

The Standard Edition of Freud's works in English confuses two terms that are different in German, Instinkt ("instinct") and Trieb ("drive"), often translating both as instinct. 'This incorrect equating of instinct and Trieb has created serious misunderstandings'. Freud actually refers to the "death instinct" as a drive, a force that is not essential to the life of an organism (unlike an instinct) and tends to denature it or make it behave in ways that are sometimes counter-intuitive. The term is almost universally known in scholarly literature on Freud as the "death drive", and Lacanian psychoanalysts often shorten it to simply "drive" (although Freud posited the existence of other drives as well).

The making of the theory: Beyond the Pleasure Principle

It was a basic premise of Freud's that 'the course taken by mental events is automatically regulated by the pleasure principle... with an avoidance of unpleasure or a production of pleasure'. Three main types of conflictual evidence, difficult to explain satisfactorily in such terms, led Freud late in his career to look for another principle in mental life beyond the pleasure principle - a search which would ultimately lead him to the concept of the death drive.

The first problem Freud encountered was the phenomenon of repetition in (war) trauma. When Freud worked with people with trauma (particularly the trauma experienced by soldiers returning from World War I), he observed that subjects often tended to repeat or re-enact these traumatic experiences: 'dreams occurring in traumatic have the characteristic of repeatedly bringing the patient back into the situation of his accident', contrary to the expectations of the pleasure principle.

A second problematic area was found by Freud in children's play (such as the celebrated Fort/Da game played by Freud's grandson, who would stage and re-stage the disappearance of his mother and even himself). 'How then does his repetition of this distressing experience as a game fit in with the pleasure principle?'

The third problem came from clinical practice. Freud found his patients, dealing with painful

experiences that had been repressed, regularly 'obliged to repeat the repressed material as a contemporary experience instead of...remembering it as something belonging to the past'. Combined with what he called 'the compulsion of destiny...come across people all of whose human relationships have the same outcome, such evidence led Freud 'to justify the hypothesis of a compulsion to repeat - something that would seem more primitive, more elementary, more instinctual than the pleasure principle which it over-rides'.

He then set out to find an explanation of such a compulsion; and in Freud's own words, 'What follows is speculation, often far-fetched speculation, which the reader will consider or dismiss according to his individual predilection'. Seeking a new instinctual paradigm for such problematic repetition, he found it ultimately in 'an urge in organic life to restore an earlier state of things' - the inorganic state from which life originally emerged. From the conservative, restorative character of instinctual life, Freud derived his death drive, with its 'pressure towards death', and the resulting 'separation of the death instincts from the life instincts' seen in Eros. The death drive then manifested itself in the individual creature as a force 'whose function is to assure that the organism shall follow its own path to death'.

Seeking further potential clinical support for the existence of such a self-destructive force, Freud found it through a reconsideration of his views of masochism - previously 'regarded as sadism that has been turned round upon the subject's own ego' -so as to allow that 'there might be such a thing as primary masochism - a possibility which I had contested' before. Even with such support, however, he remained very tentative to the book's close about the provisional nature of his theoretical construct: what he called 'the whole of our artificial structure of hypotheses'.

Nevertheless, in later years Freud would build extensively upon the tentative foundations he had set out in Beyond the Pleasure Principle. In The Ego and the Id (1923) he would develop his argument to state that 'the death instinct would thus seem to express itself - though probably only in part - as an instinct of destruction directed against the external world'. The following year he would spell out more clearly that the 'libido has the task of making the destroying instinct innocuous, and it fulfils the task by diverting that instinct to a great extent outwards....The instinct is then called the destructive instinct, the instinct for mastery, or the will to power', a perhaps much more recognisable set of manifestations.

At the close of the decade, in Civilization and Its Discontents (1930), Freud would acknowledge that 'To begin with it was only tentatively that I put forward the views I have developed here, but in the course of time they have gained such a hold upon me that I can no longer think in any other way'.

Philosophy

From a Philosophical perspective, the Death Drive may be viewed in relation to the work of the German Philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer. His philosophy, expounded in *The World as Will and Representation* (1818) postulates that all exists by a metaphysical 'Will' (more clearly, a Will to live), and that pleasure affirms this will. Schopenhauer's pessimism led him to believe that the affirmation of the Will was a negative and immoral thing, due to his belief of life producing more suffering than happiness. The Death Drive would seem to manifest as a natural and psychological negation of the Will.

Freud himself was of course well aware of such possible linkages. In a letter of 1919, he wrote that regarding 'the theme of death, have stumbled onto an odd idea via the drives and must now read all sorts of things that belong to it, for instance Schopenhauer'. Indeed, Ernest Jones (who like many analysts was not convinced of the need for the death drive, over and above an instinct of aggression) considered that 'Freud seemed to have landed in the position of Schopenhauer, who taught that "death is the goal of life"'.

However, as Freud put it to the imagined auditors of his New Introductory Lectures (1932), 'You may perhaps shrug your shoulders and say: "That isn't natural science, it's Schopenhauer's philosophy!" But, Ladies and Gentlemen, why should not a bold thinker have guessed something that is afterwards confirmed by sober and painstaking detailed research?'. He then went on to add that 'what we are saying is not even genuine Schopenhauer....we are not overlooking the fact that there is life as well as death. We recognise two basic instincts and give each of them its own aim'.

Cultural application: Civilization and its Discontents

Freud applied his new theoretical construct in *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930) to the difficulties inherent in Western civilization - indeed, in civilization and in social life as a whole. In particular, given that 'a portion of the instinct is diverted towards the external world and comes to light as an instinct of aggressiveness', he saw 'the inclination to aggression... the greatest impediment to civilization'. The need to overcome such aggression entailed the formation of the superego: 'We have even been guilty of the heresy of attributing the origin of conscience to this diversion inwards of aggressiveness'. The presence thereafter in the individual of the superego and a related sense of guilt - 'Civilization, therefore, obtains mastery over the individual's dangerous desire for aggression by...setting up an agency within him to watch over it' - leaves an abiding sense of uneasiness inherent in civilized life, thereby providing a structural explanation for 'the suffering of civilized man'.

Freud made a further connection between group life and innate aggression, where the former comes together more closely by directing aggression to other groups, an idea later picked up by group analysts like Wilfred Bion.

The continuing development of Freud's views

In the closing decade of Freud's life, it has been suggested, his view of the death instinct changed somewhat, with 'the stress much more upon the death instinct's manifestations outwards'. Given 'the ubiquity of non-erotic aggressivity and destructiveness', he wrote in 1930, 'I adopt the standpoint, therefore, that the inclination to aggression is an original, self-subsisting instinctual disposition in man'.

In 1933 he conceded of his original formulation of the death instinct 'the improbability of our speculations. A queer instinct, indeed, directed to the destruction of its own organic home!'. He wrote moreover that 'Our hypothesis is that there are two essentially different classes of instincts: the sexual instincts, understood in the widest sense - Eros, if you prefer that name - and the aggressive instincts, whose aim is destruction'. In 1937, he went so far as to suggest privately that 'We should have a neat schematic picture if we supposed that originally, at the beginning of life, all libido was directed to the inside and all aggressiveness to the outside'. In his last writings, it was the contrast of 'two basic instincts, Eros and the destructive instinct...our two primal instincts, Eros and destructiveness, on which he laid stress. Nevertheless, his belief in 'the death instinct.. a return to an earlier state...into an inorganic state continued to the end.

Analytic reception

As Freud wryly commented in 1930, 'The assumption of the existence of an instinct of death or destruction has met with resistance even in analytic circles'. Indeed, Ernest Jones would comment of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* that the book not only 'displayed a boldness of speculation that was unique in all his writings' but was 'further noteworthy in being the only one of Freud's which has received little acceptance on the part of his followers'.

Otto Fenichel in his compendious survey of the first Freudian half-century concluded that 'the facts on which Freud based his concept of a death instinct in no way necessitate the assumption...of a genuine self-destructive instinct'. Heinz Hartmann set the tone for ego psychology when he 'chose to...do without "Freud's other, mainly biologically oriented set of hypotheses of the 'life' and 'death instincts'". In the object relations theory, among the Independent group 'the most common repudiation was the loathsome notion of the death instinct'. Indeed, 'for most analysts Freud's idea of a primitive urge towards death, of a primary masochism, was...bedevilled by problems'.

Nevertheless the concept has been defended, extended, and carried forward by some analysts, generally those tangential to the psychoanalytic mainstream; while among the more orthodox, arguably of 'those who, in contrast to most other analysts, take Freud's doctrine of the death drive seriously, K. R. Eissler has been the most persuasive - or least unpersuasive'.

Melanie Klein and her immediate followers considered that 'the infant is exposed from birth to the

anxiety stirred up by the inborn polarity of instincts - the immediate conflict between the life instinct and the death instinct'; and Kleinians indeed built much of their theory of early childhood around the outward deflection of the latter. 'This deflection of the death instinct, described by Freud, in Melanie Klein's view consists partly of a projection, partly of the conversion of the death instinct into aggression'.

Lacan for his part castigated the 'refusal to accept this culminating point of Freud's doctrine...by those who conduct their analysis on the basis of a conception of the ego...that death instinct whose enigma Freud propounded for us at the height of his experience'. Characteristically, he stressed the linguistic aspects of the death drive: 'the symbol is substituted for death in order to take possession of the first swelling of life....There is therefore no further need to have recourse to the outworn notion of primordial masochism in order to understand the reason for the repetitive games in...his Fort! and in his Da!.

Eric Berne too would proudly proclaim that he, 'besides having repeated and confirmed the conventional observations of Freud, also believes right down the line with him concerning the death instinct, and the pervasiveness of the repetition compulsion'.

For the twenty-first century, 'the death drive today...remains a highly controversial theory for many psychoanalysts... as many opinions as there are psychoanalysts'.