

THE DUALITY BETWEEN LIFE AND DEATH INSTINCTS IN FREUD

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ABSTRACT. The purpose of this study is to examine the nature of the death drive, Freud's discovery of a death drive at the heart of mental functioning, and the distinction between life and death drives. We are specifically interested in how previous research investigated Freud's dualistic view of life and death drives, Freud's formulation of the role and function of the death drive, and death's fundamental effect on life.

Keywords: Freud, death drive, mental functioning, psyche

1. Introduction

Considerable research attention has focused on Freud's notion of the death instinct, the destructive function of the death drive, the death drive as the basic constituent of the psyche, and the silent existence of the death drive. The main focus of this paper is the study of Freud's reading of the death drive, the explanatory value of the death drive, and the logic of the death drive. In the present paper, I focus on Freud's notion of the death drive, the division into life and death drives, and the question of life and death drives.

2. Freud's Ambivalence about the Constitutive Role of Death

Thurschwell states that, for Freud, the death drive is not connected with aggressive impulses towards others. Death promises the ultimate experience of stasis and complete calm. *Reenacting unpleasurable experiences is a rehearsal for our own deaths.* The deaths we experience are never our own.¹ Death cannot be represented, while fear of death is always secondary to other psychic factors.² Caropreso and Theisen Simanke re-examine the second instinctual dualism hypothesis introduced by Freud in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, pointing out that death instinct is an internal necessity of Freudian metapsychological theory. The life instincts should be regarded, ultimately,

as death instincts.³ Fancher remarks that Freud posits the death instinct as oppositional to, yet intertwined with the pleasure principle. The death instinct is the aspect of the mental apparatus that do not protect life or preserve pleasure. “The death instinct is a destructive cathexis that must be repressed or sublimated in order for civilization to progress. Freud identifies three manifestations of the death drive: 1) Ambivalence – the displacement of cathexis between love and hate; 2) Sadism – pleasure derived from inflicting pain; and 3) Masochism – pleasure from experiencing pain.”⁴

In Thwaites’s view, Freud speaks of the death drive as a sort of primal destructiveness in the human psyche. The death drive is largely invisible in its work. The death drive is the name for what does not seem to be governed by the pleasure principle. Thwaites claims that the life drives are the tendency of any organism to seek *its own* death, while the death drives seek to return the organism to a simpler, preanimate state. The death drive aims to reduce excitation to zero, and extirpate it completely. “The death drive has a paradoxical position. On the one hand, it is not really a type of drive at all, to be contrasted with drives of another sort, but a name for what – in the drive, any drive – escapes any dynamic, economic, *or indeed conceptual* model whatsoever. It is a series of awkward remainders that fit nowhere. On the other hand, it is the *epitome* of the drive, exhibiting in a particularly pure form all of those qualities that define a drive.”⁵ The life and death drives are in practice inseparable from one another. *The death drive is a name for the inconsistency at the heart of drive itself*, and is the name for what makes Eros possible. “The death drive names what in Eros itself does not press towards ever greater unities, but without which drive itself, including Eros and its syntheses, would not exist.”⁶

3. The Function of Death in Psychic Reality

Carel draws out the metaphysical picture underlying Freud’s discussion of death, providing a framework for understanding death as an active force within life. Freud supports a dualistic picture of life and death drives, and regards the death drive as a primary force within life. *The death drive is a fundamental primary force active within life*. Carel asserts that Freud gives the death drive an active role in the organization of the psyche. Constructing a reflexive attitude to death is central to understanding life. The death drive is used by Freud to explain the regulation of several psychic functions. Freud’s death drive can illuminate our understanding of the relationship between life and death.

Based on the considerations above, it is not difficult to show that Freud’s notion of the death drive can shed substantial light on the question of the relationship between life and death. Carel notes that, as Freud puts it, the life drives have no effect on the death drives, but the death drives affect life.

Death structures and influences life, while life has no similar bearing on death. *Death is both external and internal to life.* “Freud explains the general aversion towards the death drive and the problems with its clinical application as manifestations of the human tendency to repress death. But the skepticism with which the death drive was greeted can be traced back, at least in part, to the intrinsic unrepresentability of the death drive, which is one of Freud’s central postulates: the death drive is mute and traceless.”⁷ Carel holds that Freud describes his interest in the death drive as a tentative theory and a process of overcoming repression. In his formulation of the death drive Freud validates two contradicting notions: the first describes death as the Nirvana principle (death is the discharge of all excitations), while the second regards the death drive as aggression, destructive energy generating violence and tension. The death drive is an umbrella term covering several tendencies and forces, which are contradictory on economic and dynamic levels. Life is a detour on the way to death. “Freud cannot provide an example of non-libidinal drives. This formulation pushes him into a monistic position in which all drives are libidinal. In order to resolve the problem without falling into a monistic position Freud replaces the sex drives/ego drives dualism with a new opposition between *life* drives aiming to extend and replicate life and *death* drives, pushing towards death.”⁸

In Carel’s view, according to Freud, sadism is a death drive driven out of the ego that reappears linked to an object. All the ego or death drives Freud can point to are libidinal. The close association between the pleasure principle and the Nirvana principle makes the life and death drives linked (the Nirvana principle serves and expresses the death drives). Freud explains life as subjected to death in the form of the death drive. The death drives is the regulative principle of life. The life and death drives are two opposing forces that *share the same origin, serve one another at times, and obey the same principles.* “When the death drive is directed inwards, it causes self-destruction. When directed outwards, the death drive might cause an organism to kill another one, thus contributing to its self-preservation.”⁹ The distinction between Eros and death drives is purely hypothetical (the death drive is the main regulative principle of life, while Eros creates undesired interruptions).

Carel reasons that Freud reconciles the death drive with a multiple-agency and drive model, *ruled by a dynamic balance between several forces.* “The death drive splits into two: part of it remains completely unknown because it is unbound, and another part is externalized as sadism, or turned once more into the ego as secondary masochism. By identifying primary masochism with the death drive Freud assigns to both a fundamental regulative role and posits them as the primary source of aggression.”¹⁰ Life is permeated by the death drive and governed by the conflict between it and Eros. Ambivalence and integration characterize the split between the internal and external work of the death drive. *The death drive contains metaphysical ideas that are*

relevant and useful to our thinking about death. Any behavior meriting the adjective “aggressive” arises from the death drive. “Freud introduces the death drive in order to explain all behavior that is not in accordance with the pleasure principle. He does so by offering a theoretical construct in the form of an aggressive drive but also posits the Nirvana principle as the aim of all organic systems to rid themselves of excitation and strive towards complete rest. This leads to contradictory formulations of the death drive.”¹¹

According to this discussion, the death drive is a drive towards death, *towards an inanimate state*, is opposed to Eros (but the sexual drive contains a sadistic component that is a portion of death drive), is more fundamental than Eros and exists independently of it, is necessary for the function of Eros as constituting its sexual aim (the death drive is a pre-condition of Eros), and is a fundamental force of aggression and destructiveness. Death is a process within life, is exerting its influence on life processes in the form of the death drive, and is a psychic force playing a prominent role within mental life. The death drive is *prior to* Eros, is an operative force *within* Eros, and in its externalized form serves Eros, *preserving life by generating aggressive behavior in the organism*. Carel points out that Freud needs the death drive as an *instinctual source* and as a *metaphysical construct*. “The death drive explains both sadism and masochism by providing a metaphysical foundation for aggression, tying the different forms of aggression to a common source and bringing out the affinity between processes that appear extremely different, if not opposed.”¹²

4. Freud’s Dualistic View of Life and Death Drives

Ragland says that Freud evolves a theory of psychic energy in which a death force opposes a life force. The death drive causes people to pursue pleasure, aims to lower the excitation level or pressure points in human life, *brings the human subject back to an inorganic state of nature characterized by constancy or entropy*, seeks entropy or constancy (the pleasure principle dominates psychic processes), and is the push toward an absolute state of objective, affective well-being. The power of the death drive is welded to the *jouissance* of being that makes of desire a lost cause. Freud cannot grasp why the pleasure principle runs up against the death drive in the form of repetition.¹³ Lear notes that Freud uses the death drive to explain human aggression. There is in human nature a fundamental force for death, destruction and decomposition (the death drive). The death drive is an entropic tendency in every living organism. Freud posits a basic tendency toward decomposition and death, explaining aggression as the deflection outwards of this internal tendency to fall apart.¹⁴ Sugarman contends that, for Freud, the death instinct (Thanatos) functions in opposition to the life instincts (Eros). Whereas the life instincts

seek to unify living matter and create more of it, the death instinct aims to dissolve it. The death instinct denotes the tendency of every living thing to drift toward a state of minimal excitation. The Nirvana principle denotes organisms' tendency toward quiescence, expressing the death instinct. *The death instinct assumes increasingly active characteristics*, and must be neutralized in some way by the life instincts. The pleasure and reality principles dominate mental life.¹⁵

Laplanche writes that, as Freud puts it, in the unconscious, death will be the death of the other. Neither life nor death are direct terms of reference for psychoanalytic practice. The essential dimension of the affirmation of a death drive lies in the idea that the aggressiveness is first of all directed against the subject. "Every living being aspires to death by virtue of its most fundamental *internal* tendency, and the diversity of life, as observed in its multifarious forms, never does anything but reproduce a series of transformations determined in the course of evolution, a series of adventitious detours provoked by any one of a number of traumas or supplementary obstacles: the organism wants not simply to die, but 'to die in its own way.'"¹⁶ According to Laplanche, Freud integrates the death drive into the oedipal conflict in the form of hatred. The *very idea of life* that serves as mediator and catalyst *in the transition from a mechanism regulated by the death drive to an organization subject to the constancy principle*. "Opposite the ego, a binding, vital form, the *death drive* is the last theoretical instance serving to designate a logos that would necessarily be mute, were it to be reduced to its extreme state, to the pure predicative movement effecting the flow across the copula of the entire substance of one term into the neighboring term."¹⁷

Mills argues that Freud makes death an ontological *a priori* condition of the coming into being of human subjectivity. Death-work is in the service of restoring or reinstating a previous state of undifferentiated internal being. Death maintains a dialectical tension in juxtaposition to a life principle under the ancient command of Eros. *Death has multiple facets of interpretation and meaning within conscious experience, and is an ontological category for unconscious experience that can never elude psychic existence*. Death, destruction, anguish, and tumult become the conflictual properties of the psyche, and form the ontogenetic edifice of the underworld. Death is inseparable from Eros, becoming *the necessary touchstone and catalyst of psychic existence*. Mills insists that Freud isolates the "origin" of life within a psychic ontology constituted by death, and makes death an inner attribute and impetus *originally summoned from within the psyche itself that is awakened by an external stimulus*. Death is brought about from the cessation of internally derived activity, is activated by endogenous motives, and must be executed by the agent itself. The impetus toward death is internally derived. The ultimate *telos* of a drive is death. *The life instincts or Eros harness the power of death to serve their own transformative evolutionary purposes*. Death is ultimately in

the service of the pleasure principle, while the unconscious mind aims toward death. Death is the “original drive” or urge in the embryonic psyche. Death lends structure to the embryonic mind.¹⁸

5. Conclusions

The current study set out to identify Freud’s attribution to the centrality of death, the function of death in psychic reality, and the distinction between the life drive and the death drive. The paper generates insights about Freud’s ambivalence about the constitutive role of death, the nature and meaning of death and its influence on mental functioning, and the existential significance of death.

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