

REFLECTIONS ON THE DEATH DRIVE

Jon Mills, PsyD, PhD, ABPP

Adler School of Graduate Studies

and Toronto Society for Contemporary Psychoanalysis

Freud's thesis on the death drive is one of the most original theories in the history of ideas that potentially provides a viable explanation to the conundrums that beset the problems of human civilization, subjective suffering, collective aggressivity, and self-destructiveness. Contemporary psychoanalytic theorists tend to view the death drive as fanciful nonsense, an artifact of imagination, but I wish to argue otherwise. Freud accounts for an internally derived motivation, impulse, or activity that is impelled toward a determinate teleology of destruction that may be directed toward self and others, the details of which are multifaceted and contingent upon the unique contexts that influence psychic structure and unconsciously mediated behavior. Although Freud largely believed that his ideas on the death drive were "left to future investigation," he was committed to the notion that mind seeks "a return to an earlier state," a notion that is verifiable through clinical observation. Despite the psyche's inherently evolutionary nature, death becomes the fulcrum of psychic progression and decay.

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What could be more banal than death, than the inevitable, something predictable, utterly certain? It is banal by virtue of the fact that it is unimaginatively routine—eternal. Death cannot be waved or amended, what Heidegger (1927/1962) avows "stands before us—something impending" (p. 294), something imminent—our thrownness—to be postponed, even denied. For Freud, death is much more than that which stands before us, rather it resides within us, an impulsion toward annihilation. But before the will to murder exists an insidious self-implosion, namely, suicidal desire. Here the banality of death is not just something that happens to us, it is us—our inner being, only to be experienced in novel fashions, repetitiously, circuitously, ad nauseam.

Death-work for Freud (1933/1964) was ultimately in the service of restoring or reinstating a previous state of undifferentiated internal being, a drive "which sought to do away with life once more and to reestablish [an] inorganic state" (p. 107). Freud did not

Jon Mills, PsyD, PhD, ABPP, Adler School of Graduate Studies; Toronto Society for Contemporary Psychoanalysis.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Jon Mills, PsyD, PhD, ABPP, 1104 Shoal Point Road, Ajax, Ontario L1S 1E2, Canada. E-mail: jmills@processpsychology.com

argue that death was the only aim of life, only that it maintained a dialectical tension in juxtaposition to a life principle under the ancient command of Eros, yet the two forces of mind remained ontologically inseparable. In this relational age, the death drive appears to be a drowning man. Even many classical analysts have difficulty accepting this central postulate in Freud's theoretical corpus. From my account, these attitudes appear to be either based on unfamiliarity with what Freud actually said in his texts, are opposed due to theoretical incompatibilities, or are the result of reactionary defenses. It is incumbent on any critic to know exactly what one is criticizing, and that means having to delve into the nuances of what Freud truly had to say, not to mention what he implied or the logical inferences that can be inferred. Freud's seminal work on the primacy of death particularly highlights his ability to think as a philosophical scientist using the discipline of logical rigor wed to clinical observation.¹ Regardless of what opinion contemporary psychoanalysts have toward Freud's conception of the death drive, it becomes worthwhile for historical, clinical, and philosophical reasons to engage Freud's thoughts on the matter. As a result, this essay is largely an exegetical reflection on Freud's introduction of the destructive principle to psychoanalytic theory and is therefore not intended to address all the controversy, dissension, or detractors who have debunked his contributions largely on evolutionary grounds. If psychoanalysis is destined to prosper and advance, it must be open to revisiting controversial ideas that gave it radical prominence to begin with.

The force of the negative is so prevalent in psychoanalytic practice that it becomes perplexing why the death drive would remain a questionable tenet among psychoanalysts today. From a phenomenological standpoint, it is impossible to negate the force and salience of the negative. The world evening news is about nothing but death, destruction, chaos, conflict, tragedy, and human agony. Even advocates who champion a pure trauma model of self-destruction or externalized negativity in the service of explaining human aggressivity must contend with inherently destructive organizing elements that imperil the organism from within. Even medical science is perplexed with the internally derived forces that deleteriously ebb the healthy organism from life, adaptation, and survival based upon attacks by its own immune system or endogenous constitution (e.g., cancer, AIDS, ALS). Consider the paradoxical processes of how sleep is both regressive yet restorative, and particularly how going to sleep is associated with wanting to return to a previously aborted state of peace, tranquility, or oceanic "quiescence"—perhaps a wish for a tensionless state, perhaps a return to the womb. Excessive sleep is also one of the most salient symptoms of clinical depression and the will toward death. Furthermore, it would be inconceivable to argue that mankind's externalized aggression is not inherently self-destructive for the simple fact that it generates more retaliatory hate, aggression, and mayhem that threatens world accord and the progression of civil societies. Given the global ubiquity of war, genocide, and geopolitical atrocities, in all likelihood we as a human race will die by actions brought about by our own hands rather than the impersonal forces of nature. *Homo homini lupus*—"Man is a wolf to man."²

Contemporary psychoanalysis seems to be uninterested in Freud's classic texts on the primacy of death, to the point that they are dismissed outright without even being read simply because credible authorities in the field say so. Here I have in mind the whole

¹ Recall that Freud had aspirations to become a philosopher before deciding on medicine, was tutored by Franz Brentano in university, and told Fliess that "Through the detour of being a physician. . . I most secretly nourish the hope of reaching my original goal, philosophy" (1896/1985a, p. 159). See Letter to Fliess, January 1, 1896.

² Derived from Plautus, *Asinaria* II, iv, 88; see Freud (1930/1961a), p. 111.

relational school's anti-drive theory campaign. In my opinion, proponents against the death drive simply do not grasp the inherent complexity, nonconcretization, antireductionism, and nonlinearity of what Freud has to offer us. Critics claim that the death drive defies evolutionary biology; therefore, it must be bogus. But this criticism is merely begging the question of what we mean by death. And more specifically, what we mean by the function of death in psychic reality. To be even more precise, how death is organized as unconscious experience. Just because a species is organically impelled to thrive does not mean it is devoid of destructive principles derived from within its own constitution that imperil its existence and proliferation. A logical claim can be advanced that life is only possible through the force of the negative that brings about higher developmental achievements through the destruction of the old.³ This is the positive significance of the negative, an artifact of psychic reality that derives its source from internal negation and anguish while at the same time transcending its descent into psychic pain. Psychoanalysts are often confused by viewing death as merely a physical end-state or the termination of life, when it may be memorialized in the psyche as a primary ontological principle that informs the trajectory of all psychic activity. Death has multiple facets of interpretation and meaning within conscious experience that are radically opposed to the logic of negativity that infiltrates unconscious semiotics. What I hope to impress upon the reader is that death is an ontological category for unconscious experience that can never elude psychic existence; for what we know or profess to know epistemically as mediated inner experience is always predicated on our felt-relation to death, that is, to the primordial force of repetitive negation, conflict, and destruction that alerts us to being and life, a dialectic that is ontologically inseparable and mutually implicative. What we call a life force, drive, urge, pulsion, or impetus is intimately conjoined with its opposition, that is, its negation, termination, or lack. Here life equals death: Being and Nothing are the same.

Freud never used the term "death instinct" to refer to the organism's innate propensity for destruction; rather, he called it *Todestrieb*, which is more accurately translated as the "death drive." Philosophers have placed great importance on the role of death and destruction in the constitution of human subjectivity, but Freud gives it paradigmatic primacy as the ontological force behind the origins of mind. This interpretation may only be properly appreciated after we come to understand how libido, and later Eros, is borne from death, the details of which are most thoroughly articulated in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920/1955b).⁴ Freud's attribution to the centrality of death is the result of laborious theoretical evolution, a notion that gained increasing conceptual and clinical utility as his ideas advanced based on appropriating new burgeoning clinical data, not to mention the fact that death and decay had a profound personal resonance. Recall that

³ The impetus, loci, and movement behind the force of the negative is the basis of Hegel's entire logic of the dialectic. This is exemplified in his treatise on the evolution of cognition, self-consciousness, and the ethical development of the human race in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807/1977), and is ontologically grounded in his formal system introduced in the *Science of Logic* (1812/1969).

⁴ All references to Freud's texts refer to the original German monographs compiled in his *Gesammelte Werke, Chronologisch Geordnet*, 18 Vols., Anna Freud, Edward Bibring, Willi Hoffer, Ernst Kris, and Otto Isakower, in collaboration with Marie Bonaparte (Eds.) (London: Imago Publishing Co., Ltd.). *Jenseits des Lustprinzips* appears in Book XIII, 1920-1924, pp. 1-69. All translations are mine. Because readers of this journal may not have access to the original German texts, I have cited the page numbers to *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, 24 Vols. (1886-1940); James Strachey (Trans. & Gen. Ed.) in collaboration with Anna Freud, assisted by Alix Strachey and Alan Tyson (London: Hogarth Press).

Freud had lived through the savagery of World War I, lost his daughter Sophie to influenza the same year he published *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, and was in the early stages of cancer of the palate, which was formally diagnosed three years later, the same year when he formally classified his dual drive theory.

Yet Freud was not always favorably disposed to the primordially of destruction: His early position was to subordinate aggression to libido or make it a derivative of such. Freud's ambivalence about the constitutive role of death was a visible tension in his thinking from as early as his dispute with Adler on the existence of an "aggressive drive" (*Aggressionsbetrieb*) (see Freud, 1909/1955a, p. 140, fn2). We may further observe his own personal confessions about his unease with the inextricableness of sex and death to the point that it needed to be repressed, a narrative Freud reported as early as 1898 (1966, pp. 292–294), although he later elaborated his views more fully in *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* (1901/1960, pp. 3–5). Regardless of his ambivalence, Freud was preoccupied with the nature and meaning of death and its influence on mental functioning since his early psychoanalytic writings. In one of his early communications to Fliess (Draft N, enclosed in Letter 64, May 31, 1897), he discusses how death-wishes are "directed in sons against their father and in daughters against their mother" (1985b, p. 255). This passage may arguably be Freud's first allusion to the Oedipus complex.

Death, destruction, anguish, and tumult not only become the conflictual properties of the psyche in both content and form, they form the ontogenetic edifice of the underworld—"chaos, a cauldron full of seething excitations" (1933/1964, p. 73)—as Freud puts it. Furthermore, Freud makes death an ontological a priori condition of the coming into being of human subjectivity that is "phylogenetically" (1933/1964, p. 79) imprinted and laid down within the aboriginal structural processes that constitute our unconscious strivings. Freud situates these strivings within an inherent tendency toward self-destruction combated by the reactionary impetus toward growth and greater unification, hence the dialectic of life and death. Yet Freud (1920/1955b) ultimately makes death the "first drive" (p. 38), a compulsion to return to an original inanimate state. In fact, Freud (1933/1964) tells us that the death drive "cannot fail to be present in every vital process" (p. 107). It is inherent in the whole process of civilization, which is "perpetually threatened with disintegration" (1930/1961a, p. 112), just as conspicuously as Eros ensures its survival. Freud built upon his 1920 introduction of the destructive principle and systematically forged his dual classification of the drives in 1923, showed its presence in masochism in 1924, made death a key component to anxiety by 1926, and avowed in his final days in his posthumously published monograph, *An Outline of Psycho-Analysis* (1940/1970), that death is inseparable from Eros, which "gives rise to the whole variegation of the phenomena of life" (p. 149). Therefore, death becomes the necessary touchstone and catalyst of psychic existence. Here we have a very grave philosophy indeed.

But how does death require such a primary position in the psyche? In other words, how is death interiorized from the beginning? Freud (1920/1955b) provides an initial explanation by appealing to what he observed, namely, the phenomenon of repetition. He noticed this in the traumatic neuroses, particularly those suffering from posttraumatic stress because of the baneful effects of the great war, and who were continuously being resubjected in horrific dreams, thoughts, fantasies, and perceptions to the traumatic moments they previously encountered. In fact, here was Freud's first major amendment to his thesis that dreams represented the disguised fulfillment of a wish. On the contrary, traumatic dreams were experienced as a fresh charge of anxiety against the fulfillment of a wish. And for good reason. Under these circumstances the psyche is fighting against what it had internalized through unwanted surprise, ambush, and impingement—sheer

terror. Anxiety is a bid for survival. But Freud quickly turns to more normative experiences of separation from the primary attachment figure, hence one's mother, thus ushering in anxiety, abandonment, and loss as an impetus to repetition. In fact he uses his own grandson Ernst as an example, the illustrious *fort-da* narrative, thus canonizing the ambivalence and helplessness associated with the anxiety of uncertainty and anger over the disappearance of a love object. In short, Freud observed his 18-month-old grandson invent a game by throwing various objects, mainly his toys, and simultaneously saying "o-o-o" when his mother left him during the day. Freud interpreted this to be the linguistic signification of "*fort*" (gone). It is only when he discovered a yo-yo that he could make the object return again once he threw it away, followed by a joyous "*da*" (there). Here Freud not only illuminates the motive that drives a repetition, namely "mastery," but he also shows the economic element that "carried along with it a yield of pleasure of another sort" (p. 16). The inherent aggression in throwing away the toy coupled by the undoing of destruction through the satisfaction of its reappearance points toward how this childhood game is in the service of recapitulating loss through return. Freud is suggestive, but he does not elaborate that this yield of satisfaction of "another sort" is achieved in the context of absence, hence lack or nothingness, a property of death. Death enters into "every vital process," and this is certainly so between the dialectic of presence and absence, being and nothingness, abundance and lack.

The nature of repetition naturally leads Freud to examine the phenomena of self-destructiveness, what he observes in the structure of psychopathology itself, the "compulsion to repeat" trauma via symptom formation, a topic he addressed earlier in "Recollecting, Repeating, and Working Through" (1914/1958). Death is manifested in repetitions of thought, fantasy, and behavioral action, parapraxes, in masochism and sadism, in symptoms such as melancholia, paranoia, and psychosis, and in the uncanny, just to name a few. Death residue impregnates repressed schemata that find expression in repeating the unconscious material itself as it is happening in the moment rather than remembering what had been an occurrence of the past. When repressed events take the form of "fresh experiences" rather than properly ascribing to them the reproduction of the past, reality is clouded with negativity, affective contagion, paranoid phantasy, and subsequently, qualitative suffering. These repetitions driven by inner compulsions do not bring satisfaction, only "unpleasure." This conundrum led Freud to believe that instinctual life was driven by more than just libidinal discharge, and "that there really does exist in the mind a compulsion to repeat which overrides the pleasure principle" (1920/1955b, p. 22). He needed to go deeper than simply relying on his customary economic explanations, something "more primitive, more elementary, more instinctual than the pleasure principle which it overrides" (p. 23). Moving from the empirical, Freud had no other recourse than to engage inferential logic, what he carefully referred to as "speculation," and "often far-fetched speculation" at that (p. 24). Despite his critics' renunciation of the death drive on evolutionary grounds that allegedly betray Darwinian biology (Sulloway, 1979; Webster, 1995), there is nothing "far-fetched" about it at all. From my account, the death drive is Freud's greatest theoretical contribution to understanding the dynamics of the unconscious mind. Let us explore this notion more fully.

Freud (1920) situates his argument within the language of embryology, and postulates that a living organism in its most simplified form is in a state of undifferentiation yet is "susceptible to stimulation" from the many forces that comprise the external world. Freud conjectures that the organism must have an intrinsic capacity to protect itself from powerful stimuli through a resistive process internally operative and sensitive to intrusive encroachments from externality that threaten its potential destruction. The human mind is

no exception. Here Freud's entire discourse is an economy of energetics designed to transform stimuli in the service of self-preservation, thus defending from both external and internal stimuli that create states of unpleasure. This example from embryology is extended to the psychical apparatus, what Freud later referred to as the soul (*Seele*).⁵ Here the role of trauma becomes paramount,⁶ and Freud is specifically referring to external events that have the capacity to breach the protective barrier and flood the mental register with excessive states of excitation, thus rendering it unable to master or bind the breach, nor find appropriate modes of discharge. The so-called "traumatic neurosis" is one such outcome of an extensive breach of the protective barrier or systems of defense, thus leading to a compulsion to repeat, what Freud says exhibits a high degree of "instinctual" (*Triebhaft*) character, meaning the degree of felt urgency it assumes in the psyche, what he sometimes equates with possession by a "daemonic" power (p. 36).

Under the pressure of disturbing external forces, a drive becomes an urge or pulsion to repeat itself, the motive of which is to return to an earlier state of undifferentiation, the "expression of the inertia inherent in organic life" (p. 36). It is here where Freud extends his hypothesis that all drives aim toward a restoration of earlier events or modes of being, namely unmodified quiescence. Because drives are "conservative," that is, they follow a conservative economy of regulatory energy, are acquired historically and phylogenetically in the species, and tend toward restorative processes that maintain their original uncomplicated immediacy, Freud speculates that an "elementary living entity" would have no desire to change, only to maintain its current mode of existence. Here Freud attributes the process of organic development to the disruptive press of the external world by factors that impinge on the quiescent state of the organism, factors it is obliged to internalize and repeat. It is here where the organism acquires the *telos* to return to its original inorganic state. As Freud concisely puts it: "*the aim of all life is death*" (p. 38). Therefore, the first drive comes into being as a tension introduced by an extrinsic force stimulating the impulse to cancel itself out. It is here that the genesis of organic life becomes death, itself the "origin and aim of life" (p. 39).

⁵ It should be noted that the language of energetics, homeostasis, and hydrolics has been replaced by equivalent metaphors in contemporary discourse that stress activity, experience, process, and action when describing mental functions. Even physicists use the language of quantum mechanics but they stress non-material reduction, highlight the energetic stratification of material interactions via systemic and holistic paradigms, and use the poetics of determinate possibilities when describing the emerging processes of cosmology.

⁶ It should be observed that Freud's original theory of neurosis is based on defensive albeit adaptive reactions to trauma. Here in his mature theory he cannot escape the resonance of his earlier position by privileging the role of traumatic interference on psychic organization introduced by the forces of external reality. In fact, the death drive is constituted in the immediacy of trauma, itself a defense against annihilation. Here Freud may be begging the question as to whether death is constitutive or reactionary, but it nevertheless is present in the genesis of the self-preservative drive toward life. Paradoxically, it is this defensive psychic order that is also inherently oriented toward destruction, whether this be internally or externally manifested. Proponents of an extrinsic trauma model may have no need to posit the primacy of a death drive when external intrusions give an adequate explanation. Freud, however, felt the theoretical need to explain the internal processes operative within unconscious mentation before incurring external trauma. Therefore, in my opinion he attempts to logically prepare the psyche's response to trauma by accounting for a priori forces that govern the mind's primordial activity. Here Freud interiorizes death qua trauma as well as privileges its sequence as an exogenous intrusive act that simultaneously arouses and institutes the psyche's aim toward self-destruction, albeit in routes it chooses through its own determinate teleology.

It is important to note that Freud is attempting to delineate a philosophy of organic process by isolating the “origin” of life within a psychic ontology constituted by death. What Freud does with death is to make it an inner attribute and impetus originally summoned from within the psyche itself that is awakened by an external stimulus. According to Freud, all living organisms die for “internal reasons,” that is, death is brought about from the cessation of internally derived activity: death is not merely executed by an extraneous force, rather it is activated by endogenous motives. But death does not happen any which way, it must be executed by the agent itself, and more specifically the unconscious ego aligned with fulfilling the wish of its own destructiveness. Here the psyche is given determinate degrees of freedom to “follow its own path to death” (p. 39), that is, to bring about its end fashioned by its own hands.⁷ But this end is actually a return to its beginning, a recapturing, a recapitulation of its quiescent inorganic immediacy. This is why Freud thought that the unconscious forces operative in repetition were ultimately in the service of self-destruction as a wish to return to its original undifferentiated condition. But because the impetus toward death is internally derived, there are many choices the ego can seize upon in its death-work accomplished through the circuitous routes and detours that often accompany the variegated phenomena of life. Although the ultimate *telos* of a drive is death, hence its final cause, it may only be enjoyed via postponement through unconscious volition. This is why *Todestrieb* is beyond the pleasure principle: Not only does it precede the life-preservative drives, it is operative over them as a supraordinate organizational thrust. And this is how the life instincts or Eros harness the power of death to serve their own transformative evolutionary purposes. Here evolution is not merely unquestioned conformity to Darwinian principles oriented toward a single aim, rather it is modified internal organization oriented toward higher modes of existence and self-development via defensive adaptation forged through forays into conflict, negativity, and death.

But what is to become of death if life supercedes it? What Freud concludes particularly highlights his genius, for death is ultimately in the service of the pleasure principle. This is a very delicate theoretical move and is only successful when you observe the logic of the dialectic as the confluence of mutually implicative oppositions that share a common unity. Following the laws of psychic economy, the pleasure principle is a tendency to free the psyche of excitation, or at least minimize stimulation levels so that there is a tolerable degree of constancy. The ultimate condition of pleasure would therefore be a state that is free of tension: Through this end, cessation of tension would represent its fulfillment, hence its completion. From this impersonal account of unconscious teleology, what could be more pleasurable than death, than non-being? Death is a tensionless state, unadulterated peace. But Freud’s teleology is not strictly Aristotelean: Although the unconscious mind aims toward death, it has the capacity to choose its own path toward self-destruction. It is only under this condition of determinate freedom that the psyche can bring about its own end, which makes death-work inherent in the life enhancing processes that at once repudiate the will toward self-destruction while embracing it. Here we may observe two opposing forces operative within the single purpose of the pleasure principle: Death and

⁷ It is interesting that Whitehead’s (1929) entire cosmology of process explains how each “actual entity” that comprises the universe is oriented toward seizing upon its inherent freedom to actualize its potential possibilities and actions that are ultimately destined toward “perishing” into the next events that constitute ongoing process. Hence, the *telos* of all living entities or “occasions” is death. This is compatible with many contemporary theoretical physicists who postulate an inherent entropy to the cosmos.

life are ontologically conjoined yet differentiated from one another. It is here that Freud's dual classification of the drives is solidified.

Recall that for Freud (1920/1955b), death is the "original drive" or urge in the embryonic psyche, only to be transformed by the life forces that emerge from it and then combat it, hence a doubling of the negative. Freud is clear in telling us that death and its derivatives or representatives such as aggression and destruction, as well as Eros and its manifestations of libido or the life enhancing processes that promote self-preservation and advance, are "struggling with each other from the very first" (fn.1, p. 61). Harnessing and diverting the internal powers of death, the destructive principle must be deflected outward, and here this serves the libidinal progression of the psyche in its ascendance toward self-development. The sexual or libidinal impulses thus become defined and refined in opposition to competing forces that seek to bring about their demise or premature decay. Here the life force is at odds with its destructive antithesis, both conjoined in conflict yet punctuated by oscillating moments of self-manifestation. Despite their dual forms of appearance, Freud could not bifurcate Eros from death, for he observed that each always interpenetrates the other, therefore they are not ontologically separated.

Freud vacillated, even waffled, on his tendency toward a dualistic view of the drives versus a monistic developmental ontology, and in this way he remained a thorough dialectician in conceiving the mind as "an original bipolarity in its own nature" (1930/1961a, p. 119). Klein continued this tradition of juxtaposing oppositions but gave the death drive an even more exalted status: death became the meridian of mental organization. In Klein's (1932) first book, *The Psycho-Analysis of Children*, she makes her first reference to the death drive, which she takes over wholeheartedly from Freud. Under the influence of Abraham's views on orality, Klein becomes interested in the phenomena of infantile sadism, which she attributes to the tension between the polarity of the life and death instincts. It is specifically in the context of the early development of the origin of the superego where Klein annexes the death drive and makes it a key catalyst in the emerging process of the infant's mental functioning. Klein sees the fusion of the dual drives to occur at birth, the destructive forces further emanating from within the infant and in response to unsatisfied libido, thus culminating in anxiety and rage, which only strengthens the sadistic impulses. Here Klein sees the source of anxiety as directly flowing from the destructive principle directed toward the organism, thus reactively alerting the ego to danger and helplessness in the face of annihilation. As Klein states: "anxiety would originate from aggression" (p. 126). Not only does the infant experience anxiety in response to its own self-destructive urges, but it also fears external objects that are the locus of its sadism, now acquiring a secondary source of danger. Here Klein introduces the splitting of the ego as a defensive attempt to deny and repress the acknowledgment of its internal sources of anxiety fueled by the death drive: objects of frustration, hate, rage, and sadism are now seen as the exclusive source of danger, thus diverting the dual nature of anxiety by transposing internality onto externality. This is the earliest maneuver of splitting, projection, and paranoia that transpires in the ego, which "seeks to defend itself by destroying the object" (p. 128).

Klein radicalizes the presence of the death drive and anxiety in the embryonic mind. Death creates anxiety, thus leading to the developmental processes of schizoid, paranoid, and depressive positions, later recaptured in awakening Oedipal tendencies, but first originating within the organism itself that are defensively deflected onto external objects. This process thereby becomes the andeleuvian cycle of projective identification: the entire architectonic function of psychic maturation is predicated on the instantiation and transformation of death.

Death-work suffuses the ontology of subjectivity instantiated through its experiential unfolding, what Hegel attributes to the dialectic of mind in both its maturation and decay. Death permeates being, from its archaic nether-regions to the triumph *Geist* enjoys in vanquishing earlier moments of experience, itself the result of annulment and supersession, only to devolve back into darkness—the abyss.⁸ Freud (1925/1959a) tells us that death largely works “in silence” (p. 57), a position that he was later to recast. Yet for Klein, there is nothing silent about death: It screams violently upon the initial inception of the psyche, an intrinsic predetermined barrage of negation, onslaught, and desolation—an inferno besieged by its own flames. Here Freud is radicalized: Mind becomes apocalyptic. Active at the moment of birth, death lends structure to the embryonic mind, a facticity that saturates all aspects of early ego development. In Klein, death finds its pinnacle as the fountainhead of psychic life.

Even if critics find the death drive theoretically untenable, I still believe it is a useful clinical heuristic that guides therapeutic practice. What we as analysts face everyday is the inherent self-destructiveness of patients who can neither find amity nor reprieve from psychic conflict and the repetitions that fuel their suffering. These inherent capacities for self-destruction are not merely located from external sources, for they are both interiorized and internalized, thus becoming the organizing death-principles at work on myriad levels of unconscious experience. Inherent capacities for self-destruction take many circuitous and compromised paths, what the modern conflict theorists would ascribe to symptom formation, addictions, self-victimization, pernicious patterns of recurrence, and harmful behaviors that hasten physical deterioration or health. All of these tragedies may be further compounded by external trauma and affliction—what Freud first identified in his trauma model of hysteria, but it does not necessarily negate the presence of internally derived aggressions deleteriously turned on the self. We see it everyday in the consulting room. From oppressive guilt, disabling shame, explosive rage, contagious hate, self-loathing, and unbearable symptomatic agony, there is a perverse appeal to suffering, to embrace our masochistic *jouissance*—our ecstasy in pain; whether this be an addict’s craving for a bottle or a drag off a cigarette, there is an inherent destructiveness imbued in the very act of the pursuit of pleasure. All aspects of the progression of civilization and its decay are the determinate teleological fulfillment of death-work.

⁸ The reader may refer to my extensive treatment of Hegel’s notion of the unconscious abyss where the inherent negativity within his dialectic becomes an indissoluble aspect of his entire philosophy (see Mills, 2002).

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