Born to be Bad:
Is Freud's Death Drive the Source of Human Evilness?

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In 1933 Sigmund Freud and Albert Einstein, both Jews and the greatest living intellectuals of their time, were invited to exchange letters on the question 'why war?'. Freud's letter reveals a surprising view: not only is it understandably bleak, given the political circumstances, but it seems as though he actually justifies the existence of violence and cruelty through an instinctual-biological hypothesis of innate aggression, which he named the death drive. These are his remarks in the closing pages of *Why War?*:

> This [the death drive] would serve as a biological justification for all the ugly and dangerous impulses against which we are struggling. It must be admitted that they stand nearer to Nature than does our resistance to them for which an explanation also needs to be found… there is no use in trying to get rid of men's aggressive inclinations. [1]

In order to understand why Freud took this view, and moreover why he regarded the death drive as a necessary component of the human mind, we must step back to examine his model of the psyche. Freud saw the mind as composed of two oppositional forces, the life drives, Eros, and the death drives, Thanatos, whose conflicting aims and processes create the inner dynamic of the mind. Whereas Eros aims to promote unity and cohesiveness, procreation and creativity, Thanatos aims to destruct and destroy. The tension between the two drives is the source of ambivalence, duality and strife, which permeate human behaviour through and through. By structuring the psyche as containing these two forces, Freud brings conflict and frustration closer than ever to the human mind. So close, in fact, that they are now internalised, a part of the psyche. Not only are conflict and frustration part of the psyche,

[1] *The Standard Edition of Sigmund Freud's Complete Works*, translated under the general editorship of James Strachey, London, 1953-1974, vol. 22:211; *Freud Studienausgabe*, S. Fischer Verlag, Frankfurt am Main, 1972, vol. IX:282-283 (hereafter SE and FS, followed by volume and page numbers).

they actually structure and motivate psychic processes, inundating the psyche with violence and discontent.

On a more general level, Freud endorses a pluralistic model of the psyche, which constructs it as containing different agencies - id, ego and superego - that are opposing in aim and action. Freud describes the ego as serving three masters, desperately trying to mediate between the greedy demands of the id, the severe criticism of the superego and the cruel lack and insufficiency of reality. This makes conflict inherent and internal to human existence, which is based on frustration and discontent. This pessimistic view of psychic reality as structurally bound by conflict and frustration leads Freud to suggest that evilness, the tendency to aggression and destruction, is first and foremost innate and as such finds its source in the death drive.

How does the death drive function? As the source of negativity and destructiveness it performs its dark task in two ways. It can be turned outwards, externalised as sadistic aggression, or it can be masochistically internalised, as aggression directed towards the ego. These two paths of cathexis form a zero sum system, so any unused portions of the death drive must be externalised in order to protect the organism from its own destructiveness. “The organism preserves its own life, so to say, by destroying an extraneous one”.[2] Directing aggression outwards is essential to the survival of the organism, otherwise this same aggression would be directed against the organism itself as self-destruction. So it is in the interest of each organism to behave in a sadistic way, and try to rid itself from as much aggression as possible. In this Freud seems to be saying that aggression, as a given and inherent tendency, must be, even on a survivalist level, expressed as sadism. This grim assumption certainly establishes the existence of aggression, and moreover provides an explanation to sadistic behaviour. It might even be used to justify aggression, since according to Freud's view, if it's not expended outwards, it will be turned against

the ego itself. He then goes on to say: "Some portion of the death instinct, however, remains operative *within* the organism", and is expressed in "a number of normal and pathological phenomena".[3] This normalises not only sadism, but also masochism. Repetition of painful situations, self-destructiveness, death wishes and self-inflicted suffering are all expressions of the internally directed death drive. In this Freud achieves a double erasure of distinctions: by positing the death drive as a general constituent of the psyche Freud normalises aggression, and erases, or at least weakens, the distinction between normal and pathological. We all contain the kernel of destructiveness in us, whether categorised as healthy or sick, as normal or perverse. The second erasure is that of the sadism/ masochism distinction. Aggression is aggression, pure and simple, whether directed inwards or outwards.

Freud's first conclusion is that whether directed inwards or outwards, aggression is a fundamental phenomenon that effects our thoughts, actions and emotions to a considerable extent. As Laplanche and Pontalis note:

> …Indeed there is no kind of behaviour that may not have an aggressive function… Psychoanalysis had gradually come to give great importance to aggressiveness, showing it to be at work in the early stage of the subject's development and bringing out the complicated ebb and flow of its fusion with and diffusion from, sexuality. The culmination of this increasing stress on aggressiveness is the attempt to find a single and basic instinctual underpinning for it in the idea of the death instinct.[4]

This theory of the death drive has been conceived as the height of Freud's pessimism, as admitting that we are indeed born evil. But is this the only ethical position that can be deduced from the death drive? This same death drive, I claim, can actually offer a solution to the problem of innate aggression. The way out lies in the fact that aggression is a force whose objects can be changed and direction reversed. This flexibility in direction and aim means that aggression is not necessarily harmful, nor inherently evil.

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[2] SE 22:211; FS IX:282.
[3] ibid.
[4] Jean Laplanche and JB Pontalis, *The Language of Psychoanalysis*, trans. D. Nicholson-Smith, W.W. Norton, New York, 1973, p.17.

Aggression can also be conceptualised as neutral energy, as a resource that can be implemented to ethically diverse aims. The death drive is an inherent tendency, which cannot be eliminated, but can be diverted or sublimated. So although "there is no question of getting rid entirely of human aggressive impulses", we can control aggression via sublimation and a strengthening of the superego, resulting in a tame but unhappy social order.[5] In *Civilisation and its Discontents* Freud ties the dualistic model of the life and death drives to the question of war and civilisation in order to explain civilisation as a process of sublimation and intellectual control over instinctual life. Civilisation is an evolutionary process that develops through the action of Eros, striving to unite people, families and nations into one human unity. Against this synthetic drive stands the opposite destructive force, attempting to disintegrate biological, psychological, and social unities. Human development evolved out of this struggle between Eros and destruction, between affirmation and negation:

> And now, I think, the meaning of the evolution of civilization is no longer obscure to us. It must present the struggle between Eros and Death, between the instinct of life and the instinct of destruction as it works itself out in the human species. This struggle is what all life essentially consists of… [6]

But the civilisatory process does not go hand in hand with the promotion of happiness. Freud has already concluded that violence and aggression cannot be extirpated from human existence. The idea that people can be totally satisfied and thus released from the need for violence is for Freud a naive illusion. So human aggression is innate, but nonetheless not uncontrollable. The first step is to acknowledge its presence in life, in human behaviour and psychic processes. Freud's initial step is to try and overcome the resistance to acknowledging the fact that we contain aggressive tendencies. The interpretation of this assumption is what will actually give content to Freud's claims, as the question of how to handle our aggression is the one that has practical implications, both on a clinical level and on a social and political level.

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[5] SE 22:212; FS IX:283.

In this sense the ethical question is not whether aggression can be abolished from the human psyche, but rather how this aggression can be channelled to non-destructive activities and turned into a positive energy source, a will to power. We can conclude that the thesis of inherent aggression does not necessarily lead to ethical determinism. Aggression can be regarded as neutral energy, which can be used for various purposes. This idea is reinforced by abandoning the dualistic model, so the death drive is no longer a destructive force whose antidote is Eros, but rather a fundamental human force.

So far we have looked at the death drive as the impulse of destruction and aggression. I would now like to focus on another aspect of the death drive - regarding it as the harbinger of death, decay and finitude, as the kernel of mortality. Regarding the death drive as the source of aggression raises the question of the normative implications of this claim: how should we treat the death drive? What could be possible ways of re-directing the urge to destroy? These are some of the questions that come up in this context. Seeing the death drive as the cradle of decay and finitude brings us to regard it as a manifestation of the presence of death in life and of understanding ourselves as finite, limited creatures. How should we live as finite creatures? How is finitude manifested in life? These are some of the questions that belong to this aspect of the death drive in a normative discussion. I would now like to turn to the ethical dimension of both readings of the death drive, in order to formulate an ethics of finitude, an ethics that takes into account death and limitation, and examines what these mean from an ethical point of view.

The Ethics of Finitude

Given that the death drive is a destructive force, I would like to re-interpret Freud's famous pessimism as a **realistic** position, offering an encouraging insight on how we can lessen destruction and suffering. This requires that we establish the ethical place of the death drive, or of finitude. This ethics of finitude has to

[6] SE 21:122; FS IX:249.

be framed within a psychoanalytic context, so we must first determine what the ethics of psychoanalysis are. If there is an ethical point to the psychoanalytic conception of the human being, it cannot be dictated by any particular ethical system. As psychoanalysis aims to describe the structure and function of the psyche, this description cannot be subordinate to any particular set of ethical claims. Freud focuses on the various forms human suffering and self-understanding take on, not on judging ethical positions. This does not mean psychoanalysis has no ethics, but rather the ethical position of psychoanalysis is centred around suffering and therapy as a way of lessening suffering, and which first and foremost acknowledges that ethical conceptions can be the **source** of suffering. The super-ego uses ethical judgements to produce guilt, by accusing the ego of being weak and evil. The pangs of conscience and self-accusations of being 'bad' or 'immoral' are the weapons of the super-ego in its battle against the ego. In this sense the super-ego is a delegate of society within the psyche, and as such it internalises ethics, turning it into an integral part of the psyche. But from a psychoanalytic point of view what matters is the mechanism that creates the suffering, rather than the specific moral accusations. So it seems that the only psychoanalytic ethical criterion has to do with minimising suffering and enhancing self-understanding. The psychoanalytic project is not interested in Truth or Ethics as aims in themselves, but only in so far as they can remove a symptom, or reduce unhappiness.

In this sense the ethical claims of psychoanalysis are quite modest. The aim of psychoanalysis is to analyse, diagnose and try to relieve suffering. This aim is not without an ethics of its own, the ethics of acceptance, responsibility and faithfulness to oneself. With this general context of the ethics of psychoanalysis in mind, I would now like to return to the ethics of the death drive, or the ethics of finitude.[7] As stated earlier, the death drive does not have to be seen as the ultimate source of evilness. An alternative ethical reading of the death drive can be seen in Freud's attempt to articulate through death

[7] For more on the ethics of psychoanalysis see Simon Critchley's essay "Comedy and Finitude: Displacing the Tragic-Heroic Paradigm in Philosophy and Psychoanalysis", in *Ethics, Politics, Subjectivity*, Verso, London, 1999, pp.217-238.

an ethical imperative.[8] Freud does not try to posit life and death as opposing forces, but rather to subject life to death. Regarding life as a finite process gives it a specific, concrete meaning, which should be understood through death. Freud's ethical imperative, as stated in the 1915 essay *Thoughts for the Times on War and Death* is: "If you want to endure life, prepare yourself for death".[9] This is the imperative to prepare for the possibility of loss and mourning, for disappointment and failure. For Freud the death drive is not only the final fact of finitude, our ceasing to exist, but the many forms of loss and transience experienced *within* life. Through the death drive Freud expresses a sentiment both sober and deeply sympathetic to the hardship of enduring modern life that is disenchanted and free from the idols of permanence and eternity. We must acknowledge that everything we achieve will be lost, everything gained will be taken away or gone. In our refusal to acknowledge this we are, as Freud says, "living psychologically beyond our means", i.e. demanding more out of life than it could possibly offer.[10] Understanding life as transient and fallible is not necessarily pessimistic, nor does it have to stop at that. Rather, says Freud, acknowledging finitude can actually have a positive function on life by making life more bearable, and "to tolerate life remains, after all, the first duty of all living beings".[11] Tolerance should not be understood as a marginal survivalist notion of bare endurance, but should be read in a more generous way. Tolerance is the art of adjusting, of affirming the total complexity of life, of accepting the easy and the pleasant with the difficult and the dark. The ethical imperative inscribed in the death drive is one of tolerance, patience, and acceptance. These are not to be confused with resignation, cynicism or despair. The ethical imperative is to learn the lesson of ambivalence, that life is made out of good and bad, fulfilment and disappointment, and moreover, that the two are inseparably intertwined. In this sense there is no point in striving towards absolute happiness, as it is not achievable within this

[8] Jean Laplanche, *Life and Death in Psychoanalysis*, trans. J. Mehlman, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1976, p.6.
[9] SE 14:300; FS IX:60.
[10] FS IX:59; FPL 89.
[11] FS IX:60; FPL 89.

ambivalent worldview. On the other hand, it is not about resignation or giving up the idea of happiness. It is only a delimitation of what is achievable within human life.

Thus, according to Freud, once we grasp ourselves as biological creatures bound by death and transience, we can release ourselves from the all-embracing fantasy of permanent bliss and of radical, total control over life. And once we make room for death, loss and contingency as part of our lives, we can start shaping our lives from a realistic, modest, achievable starting point. If we give up the ideals we measure our failures against, if we give up on the idea of absolute, perfect happiness, or eternal bliss, we can stop being constant and necessary failures. What we cannot help but live with – mortality, suffering, death, can be a point of departure for a self-conception that is not *a priori* burdened with guilt, shame and sin. Letting go of the ideal of perfection opens up a creative space for human attempts and errors, for play and imagination, for quaint forms of satisfaction, and therefore gives us hope. Exchanging our perfectionist ideals for ideas of attainability means pursuing life in a way that is no less hopeful.

To conclude, the notion of the death drive, which is usually read as an affirmation of the innate evil thesis, can, I believe, be read not as a simple message of despair, but rather as a new-found way to reformulate the ethics of finitude. Rather than taking death to be a limitation and a barrier, we can productively use it to understand life as a source of limitation but also of joy. Freud saw how love and hate, life and death, Eros and Thanatos, link together in a way that opens up the possibility of understanding love, joy and beauty, as containing finitude and transience within them. As such these positive emotions can be seen as intimating mortality, revealing a truth about life that is a truth about death. The superego, or conscience, is an internalised death drive, resulting in guilt and self-persecution (masochism) on the one hand, but serving as the source of ethics on the other:

> Ethics is thus to be regarded as a therapeutic attempt - as an endeavour to achieve, by means of a command of the super-ego, something which has so far not been achieved by any other cultural activities.[12]

Ethics, according to this quote, is an attempt to conquer human destructiveness and aggression by attaining command of the super-ego. This turns ethics into a work of sublimation and self-control, but moreover into a therapeutic attempt to heal humanity from one form of suffering. It seems that once we understand the death drive as creating and enabling such an ethical dimension of human existence, and not just as crippling and limiting existence, we can begin to see it as the link between desire and restraint, instinct and reason, nature and moral law.

[12] PFL, 336; FS IX:267.