

The Death Drive's Discontents: On Freud's Political Theory

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Sigmund Freud, known for his work in psychoanalysis, highlighted the drives as a key feature of his studies. One of his aims was to make the unconscious conscious and bridge the gaps between feeling and existing in civilization to generate pleasure despite having to live within the reality principle. Thus, to effectively address the death drives impacts on civilization, the life instinct, repression, and civilization will be further defined. Freud interprets the death drive to undermine the individual's ability to reconcile with civilization but not completely ruin the individual's chance of reconciling with it.

Defining the Death Drive and Its Impacts

Repression is the removal of an experience, thought, or impulse, from conscious awareness. These then manifest as desires in the unconscious which can be threatening to one's understanding of themselves and how others perceive them; the superego participates in this interaction as the ego ideal. However, repression must occur to assist in fulfilling the projects of civilization. Civilization has the aspiration for all to live together in peace. Thus, true reconciliation with civilization will never actualize for Freud because there will always be repression, sublimation, and inhibition associated with

living among others or in relation to the projects of a society that may not always create the most pleasure. Civilization comes with a cost of discontentment because it "demands other sacrifices besides that of sexual satisfaction."¹ Sexual satisfaction, among other renunciations, is rooted in drives and impulses of a human, making them inherently violent, individualistic, sexual, and aimed exclusively at fulfilling desire. A drive is equivalent to an urge pushing one way or another, rooted in the body. However, it is not the body purely that feels or controls a drive. Rather, it is a stimulus accessed within the body and developed in the mind. Freud describes there to be two types of drives. "According to E. Hering's theory, two kinds of processes are constantly at work in living substance, operating in contrary directions one constructive and the other destructive."² The first Freud settles on calling Eros. The life instinct is characterized as a love for the self and others, with a focus on preserving the living organism one embodies which is often done through joining larger units, or civilization. The other is the death drive. Thanatos is often characterized in opposition to Eros. However, the "two kinds of instinct seldom—perhaps never—appear in isolation from each other but are alloyed with each other in varying and very

different proportions and so become unrecognizable to our judgement.”³

The death drive is best described as the seeking of dissolving living units and pulling or placing them back into their inorganic or inanimate state. “The phenomena of life could be explained from the concurrent or mutually opposing action of these two instincts.”⁴ The drives are better expressed as being in constant tension with one another, looking to overtake the organism un-sublimated or uninhibited one way or another, with the pleasure principle even serving the death drive at times.⁵ However, this constant tension between the Eros and the death drive can undermine social cohesion and create conflict. “The [death] instinct is diverted towards the external world and comes to light as an instinct of aggressiveness and destructiveness. In this way, the [death] instinct itself could be pressed into the service of Eros, in that the organism was destroying some other thing, whether animate or inanimate, instead of destroying its own self.”⁶ It can feel better, perhaps pleasurable, to let out frustration, anger, and pain on other people. Some anger is characterized as necessary if a person has done something wrong for Freud. However, these means of release inadvertently link the death drive to aggression because aggressive behaviour is the most common way it is experienced by the individual and others. Thus, if aggression cannot be expressed outwardly towards civilization or groups, it can express itself in other ways such as internalized and repressed shame, guilt, need for punishment, self-sabotage,

repetitive action or thought, as well as an interest in reverting back to the inorganic.⁷

Since renunciation is necessary for civilization’s success it can make an individual’s ego weak and over-emphasize the interests of the superego. This can leave individuals or groups living in states of illusion rooted in the interests of Thanatos as opposed to the sublimated efforts of Eros, which undermines civilization’s projects and the human’s chance at attempting to reconcile. Civilization often asks of its people stability, innovation, and social cohesion through Eros, which the death drive notoriously devalues. These conflicting impulses and interests make it difficult to ‘love thy neighbour’ from Freud’s perspective because of an inherent interest in avoiding relationships.⁸ “A man descends several rungs in a ladder of civilization. Isolated, he may be a cultivated individual; in a crowd, he is a barbarian.”⁹ This is because “a group is impulsive, changeable, and irritable. It is lead almost exclusively by the unconscious.”¹⁰ Neighbours and group members alike are often an individual’s closest competitors. To expect an individual not to act aggressively towards these people, because it would undermine the project of civilization to act otherwise, creates an internalized need to release these impulses. Here, the death drive aligns most with Eros to make attempts at self-punishment or self-pleasure, which can be difficult to differentiate.¹¹

Undermining and Reconciling with Civilization

Ruining suggests that one is left with no opportunity to resolve the issue at hand. Alternatively, undermining suggests there to be a force working against the resolution of an issue, with chances of ruining such a project, but can still be rebelled against or repaired. A person's gratification depends largely on civilization and its social culture, meaning one must submit to the reality principle. This can contribute to the undermining of reconciliation if one mistakes the negative aspects of the death drive as the mere effects of reality. However, Freud would claim that both Eros and Thanatos must be repressed or subject to the reality principle for an individual to live in alignment with civilizations projects rather than just the death drive. Further, civilization is a process all instincts undergo, but Thanatos attempts to resist. Freud claims that "civilization is a process in the services of Eros, whose purpose is to combine single human individuals, and after that families, then races, peoples and nations, into one great unity, the unity of mankind."¹² Freud expresses that there is no clear-cut way of describing what contributes to Eros and Thanatos and what they too cause a person to do. It is clear they intermix, and civilization is better reconciled with Eros than Thanatos. This is because civilizations projects often run counter to Eros and Thanatos, but Eros is better expressed and can be more easily sublimated. One must rely on their ego to keep themselves in check to ensure they are effectively contributing to civilization for the betterment of the broader project even if this requires a renunciation of gratification, also known as upholding the reality principle. To best

reconcile with civilization, one must ensure their reality principle and ego are strong to not tip the balance of overemphasizing Eros, Thanatos, or an illusion of one of them.

It is libido that most clearly separates Eros and Thanatos, enabling Thanatos to further break down groups based on who is not like an individual and who is. This is because the death drive can contribute to the fulfillment of pleasure in negative ways that severely undermine reconciliation unless effectively harnessed. Lower inhibitions are found in groups which can contribute to divides in civilization based on trivial matters, and the death drive can essentially feed on this. Allowing Thanatos to interact uninhibitedly with the world often leads to extreme and harmful division of groups, contributing to aggression over demographic differences as opposed to relevant differences.¹³ This can make people of an in-group feel superior, thus intermixing Eros with Thanatos in interest of group/self-love and out-group hate. Therefore, aspects of the death drive need to be renounced and recaptured under the reality principle to contribute to healthy, gratifying, and effective sublimation. However, the reality principle and the death drive can appear eerily similar. One must not conflate the reality principle with the death drive, though they too interact. Preparing for the worst, or reverting to an inorganic state, can seem realistic when it is consistently identified to a person that civilization and Eros do not align.

The fear of death is partially rooted in Eros and the anxiety of loss. This anxiety unfolds in the superego which makes the

death drive appear inherently pessimistic due to its interest in the inanimate state. However, Freud claims, “everything living dies for *internal* reasons—become inorganic once again—then we shall be compelled to say that ‘*the aim of all life is death*’ and, looking backwards, that ‘*inanimate things existed before living ones*’.”¹⁴ If more people thought about their own mortality with an essence of acceptance, they may be less likely to live in a state of illusion, which frequently involves resisting the reality of one’s own death. A sublimated death drive can assist in coming to terms with one’s own mortality—by entangling itself with Eros to create both a love for life as well as an understanding and acceptance that death is inevitable and may even be preferred to living depending on one’s circumstances. For example, having a chronic illness or pain that makes daily living excruciatingly unpleasurable often makes reverting to an inanimate state appealing. Though not popular during Freud’s time, Medical Assistance in Dying is a positive example of this in current models of civilization, allowing people to return to their inorganic state on their terms without undermining civilizations projects.

Just as there is tension between the interests of Eros and Thanatos, there is tension between an individual’s projects and civilization’s which is further problematized by the central, yet necessary, tension between the two drives. Yet, partial reconciliation is possible because of this tension, and thus one must use the reality principle to balance the urges of Eros and Thanatos. In balancing the tension between the projects, humans

are likely to avoid ‘hermitting’ or reverting in unhealthy manners. Since competition is a necessary element of civilization to spark progression and innovation, Eros can ensure people are collaborating as well as finding value and pleasure in competitive projects. On the other hand, the death drive can serve as an aim-inhibited reminder that said competitors are as such for a reason. A similar point can be made about groups. Avoiding the negative aspects of groups by finding value in being alone or having independent ideas that may cast you into the out-group could be linked to the death drive and its interest in feeling shame. A healthy amount of public and internal shame is better described as humility which can contribute to a critically thinking and developing agent. One can consistently find meaning, value, and love in life despite being unable to do so uninhibitedly. A full harmonious reconciliation is clearly not possible even if only Eros were present, but meaningful participation in civilizations project is attainable despite the pressure and doubt Thanatos places in the way of such a project. Thus, if the tension between both Eros and Thanatos are properly balanced, one may cultivate traits that align with humility and better reflect the reality principle so long as their thoughts and actions are effectively sublimated or aim-inhibited.

The Death Drive and the Family in Civilization

Freud sees value in the family as a faction, yet civilization created the imperative that one must love others that are not romantic

or familial, as described earlier. The death drive makes integration into civilization more difficult because family is implicitly related to the inorganic state of the individual. Thus, to a degree, the death drive seems to contribute to the strengthening of libidinal ties amongst family members despite libidinal projects overwhelmingly being a result of Eros. The need to revert or go back seemingly draws a person closer to their family because of the familial association with youth, birth, and existing inanimately (such as in the womb, at conception, and in a historical context before one's own existence). "Life instincts have so much more contact with our internal perception—emerging as breakers of the peace and constantly producing tensions whose release is felt as pleasure—while they death instincts seem to do their work unobtrusively. The pleasure principle seems to actually serve the death instincts."¹⁵ Thus, this project, overlaid as Eros, "imposes duties on me for whose fulfillment I must be ready to make sacrifices. If I love someone, he must deserve it in some way."¹⁶ Yet, this idea of deserving love is immediately overlooked with parents and siblings as there is already an intrinsic link to loving them rooted in the inanimate, preconscious state.

Family members are typically loved in a non-erotic manner significantly more than others simply for being related to the individual. The sublimated state of loving family based on the pre-animate can be characterized as the death drive and reality principle working in tandem to also contribute to the project of civilization positively—so long as one's love for their family is healthy and does not inhibit them

in searching for relationships of Eros with groups extending further out of one's circle, like co-workers and group members. Though a familial relationship can shift with age, there is often societal and internal pressure convincing one to help family, live near to family, keep in contact with family, and remain overwhelmingly close to the people that contributed to the 'life-giving' and life preserving aspects of oneself. This is further expressed as Freud claims, "he deserves it if he is so like me in important ways that I can love myself in him... [but] I have to love him if he is my friend's son."¹⁷ Friends fall into the requirement of having to do something to deserve love, but their offspring are exempt because of the familial relation, and less obtrusively, their association with the inanimate. The child may not have existed when two people became friends, but now that it is present, one must feel love for the child and may even feel obligated to assist in its preservation because of familial exemption. Freud describes a feeling of aggression or general unhappiness; one wishes to avoid if it were revealed that a person does not like their friend's child because it undermines the cultural project and negatively impacts social cohesion. I Thus, the death drive seems to inadvertently contribute to staying close with family out of repressed pining for the inorganic or dissolution based on 'the before' whilst also interacting with Eros and civilization to further develop and maintain healthy, loving relationships with 'deserving' people.

To cope, children may purposefully misplace their toys to release the anger they feel watching their parents leave without

them. They normalize and reinforce the feeling and experience, thus learning to better control it by actively repeating the For-Daa game.¹⁸ This can be transferred to adults attempting to repress their desires of the death drive. “The re-experiencing of something identical, is clearly in itself a source of pleasure...on the contrary, the compulsion to repeat events of his childhood in the transference evidently disregards the pleasure principle in every way.” A person may frequently visit their dysfunctional family because they ‘love’ their family. They put up with strange interactions with their family for the sake of social cohesion, simplicity, etc. However, the compulsion to repeat and ‘go back’ clearly stem from the death drive to create a sublimated sense of pleasure in visiting the family one has evaded. Thus, positively contributing to civilizations projects in the process by maintaining a relationship with

others despite Freud’s claim that humans are naturally individualistic.

Conclusion

Humans frequently fall short of who they are capable of being by refusing to be who they are. Recognizing and accepting that the death drive is pertinent to Freud’s theory is crucial to understanding his theory of civilization. To conflate Thanatos for anything besides what it is, would be misinterpreting Freud’s theory. It could also negatively impact the individual if the death drive were to be confused for the reality principle or be uninhibited in collaboration with the superego and a weak ego. Ultimately, Thanatos can be married with Eros and can work towards reconciliation in relation to the projects of civilization if sublimated properly and viewed with equal merit to Eros.

Endnotes

1. Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*, ed. and trans. by James Strachey, (W.W. Norton, 2010): 89.
2. Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, ed. and trans. by James Strachey, (The Hogarth Press, 1961): 43.
3. Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*, 106-07.
4. Ibid, 106.
5. Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 57.
6. Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*, 106.
7. Ibid, 137.
8. Ibid, 146.
9. Sigmund Freud, *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, ed. and trans. by James Strachey, (W.W. Norton, 1989): 12.
10. Ibid, 13.
11. Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 43.
12. Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*, 111.
13. Freud, *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, 39.
14. Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 32.
15. Ibid, 57.
16. Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*, 91.

17. Ibid.

18. Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 10.