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Do you think humans have a death drive? What is it? Does Freud give a clear account of it?

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Arguably, the Freudian notion of the 'death drive' has attracted scholarly attention throughout psychoanalytic literature. Scholars have predominantly viewed the death drive as either a misguided biological claim or as a contentious psychological or metaphorical claim.**[1]** Albeit, psychoanalyst and critical theorist, Slavoj Žižek, has defined the death drive not as a biological fact but rather a 'notion indicating that the human psychic apparatus is subordinated to a blind automatism of repetition beyond pleasure'.**[2]**

Further, Sigmund Freud argues that man is "an animal sick unto death", an animal extorted by an insatiable parasite such as reason, logos and language'.**[3]** This dimension of radical negativity cannot be reduced to an expression of alienated social conditions. It defines *la condition humaine* as such that there is no solution and no escape from it.**[4]** This therefore leads psychoanalysts to the biological claim which Freud centred his theoretical argument on, stating in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* that "the aim of life is death" and looking backwards, that "inanimate things existed before living ones".**[5]**

This statement has provided considerable speculation concerning Freud's fundamental motivation for postulating the death drive, ranging from the combined influence of the First World War and his terminal illness to the need to clarify certain neurophysiologic points.**[6]** Conversely, when the death drive is reviewed as a psychological claim, there are an equal number of different interpretations which range from the manifestation of the unconscious guilt.**[7]** This concept though, removes the death drive away from its original formulation and restricts its meaning to denote the destructive forces within human nature.**[8]** Furthermore, Freud initially emphasised the biological nature of the death drive, which gradually gave way to placing more theoretical emphasis on the psychological nature of the drive together with its concomitant clinical manifestations.**[9]** These clinical manifestations were the 'compulsion to repeat' supported by an 'unconscious sense of guilt'.**[10]** According to academic Robyn Holden, Freud realised that both masochism and sadism played a crucial role in the operations of the death drive but the genesis of these influences remained obscure.**[11]**

The contemporary psychoanalytic community has understood the death drive in terms of it being either a biological, psychological or metaphorical claim. Therefore, in order to provide an analysis of what the death drive is and the purpose of its existence in psychoanalytic theory, this essay shall explore and examine the biological and psychological claims of the drive. It will first

provide a critical elaboration on the opinion that the death drive was originally intended to subsume all of these parameters, though in Freud's last writings, the psychological interpretation took precedence over the metaphorical and biological meaning he also ascribed it. This essay shall then provide an analysis on the death drive and death anxiety. In doing so, it will finally bring forth an examination of the unconscious guilt as an instrument in the development of the moral masochism and sadism within personality.

Critically, Freud drew a distinction between the instincts of animals and those of human beings, for the instincts of the latter incorporate elements of affect and cognition neither of which Freud would wish to attribute to animals.**[12]** According to Freud, an instinct (*Trieb*) is an impulse which is biologically based, such as 'hunger, thirst and sexuality'.**[13]** While hunger may represent an impulse 'governed by the self-preservative drives', sexuality represents the reproductive drive directed towards the preservation of the species.**[14]**

Since aggression lacked any obvious biological base, Freud considered it was under the influence of the ego-drives, which implies the employment of cognition governing its expression.**[15]** Psychoanalyst Mortimer Ostow argues that Freud initially advocated the existence of the death drive as an explanation for man's basic readiness to aggress against man and tendency for aggression to become an element of deviant sexual behaviour.**[16]** Albeit, this may be justifiable, psychiatrist Allan Compton conversely contends that it was Freud's recognition of the compulsion to repeat, 'operating in the clinical setting, that initially stimulated advancement of the death drive hypothesis.'**[17]** Compton goes on to state that Freud developed an argument in terms of speculative biology, 'to arrive at life and death forces existing at a cellular level'.**[18]** Therefore an association exists between the life drive, and sexuality or Eros, while the 'compulsion to repeat' is associated with the death drive.**[19]**

Further, Ostow goes on to identify regression as the visible manifestation of the death drive which may be stimulated by either 'frustration, attack, or guilt'.**[20]** According to Ostow, frustration of a thwarted desire incites an aggressive reaction which, in most cases is in direct proportion to the degree of frustration experienced.**[21]** However, once the aggressive reaction surpasses expectable limits, the 'unconscious factors are at play'.**[22]** Equally, attack provokes 'defensive retaliation' within acceptable limits but when such limits are exceeded, then the unconscious motivation of the retaliator can be called into question. Similarly, guilt may act as a motivation to unleash excessive aggression either against the self or, when the guilt is projected, against the perceived victim both of which imply the liberation of unconscious forces.**[23]** It may therefore be argued that these considerations support the direct analogy between animal and human instincts, and in this light, death instinct is nothing more than the human version of the predatory instinct.

In view of the psychological claim about the death drive,

academic D. E. Greenberg asserts that sex and aggression are manifestations of 'cosmic' forces inherent in every living thing and that these forces are striving to recapture the 'unity of inorganic matter' that was 'split apart' when life began.[24] Arguably, Greenberg's interpretation of Freud's initial articulation of both the life and death drives, which he refers to as an "overly radical biologism", is in terms of Eros, symbolising the drive to unit organisms, being opposed by Thanatos, symbolising the drive to split such unities apart.[25] Though, as Viennese psychoanalyst Kurt Eissler contends, "if the concept of a death drive is to be accepted at all, then the supposed link between the death drive and aggression would fall within the orbit of psychology".[26]

According to Holden though, it is this theoretical link which exists between the death drive and aggression which has largely contributed to the psychoanalytical community's rejection of this central psychoanalytical tenet, as a result of the perceived irreconcilability of masochism with the pleasure principle.[27] For Holden, the explanation that masochism is actually sadism turned against the self is unsatisfactory since such an occurrence must be motivated by "something" in the individual which directs this turn against the self".[28] This 'something' can only be masochistic impulses and therefore the explanation is embedded in circularity.

Moreover, psychoanalytic theorist, Jean Laplanche, argues that "the death drive is not a discovery but a reaffirmation, a deepening of the original and fundamental affirmation of psychoanalysis: sexuality; it is nothing other than the extreme of sexuality".[29] In stating this, he hopes to draw a distinction between the sexual drive and the sexual life-drive with the id being the seat of the former and the ego being the seat of the latter.[30] This speculation though, is, according to Holden, the opposite way around from that proposed by Freud who maintained the 'Eros resided within the realms of the id while the death drive remained a constituent of the ego'.[31] Further, Laplanche, in sympathy with Greenberg, considers *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* "the most fascinating and baffling text of the entire Freudian corpus".[32] This is as a result of Freud's lapse into biologism and partly due to the problems presented by the "paradox of masochism".[33] However, according to Holden, the form of masochism most securely tied to the death drive is that of moral masochism, or otherwise referred to as an unconscious sense of guilt, which does not concurrently imply taking pleasure in suffering.[34]

Holden states that even though the patient exhibits a 'need for punishment or the suffering, but rather, in order to appease the unconscious sense of guilt emanating from the superego'.[35] In stating this, one may accept that it is this unconscious sense of guilt that gives rise to the repetition compulsion which was originally introduced by Freud.[36] This, in turn, produces the Negative Therapeutic Reaction. One may therefore argue that understanding the concept of the death drive in its entirety, therefore warrants understanding Freud's concept of moral masochism or unconscious guilt. However, this has also generated heated controversy and psychoanalytic discourse.

Certain psychoanalysts such as Eissler and Ostow have interpreted Freud's statement "the aim of life is death", as meaning the motivation of life is death.[37] This however, may be considered as only partly true. For although Freud did retain

this biological meaning of the death drive throughout his corpus, as witnessed in the *Outline* when he reiterated that "the final aim [of the death drive] is to lead what is living into an inorganic state", the death drive assumes both a psychological and metaphorical meaning as well.[38] Therefore, while some analysts have viewed the death drive in a purely biological context and rejected the theory accordingly, 'others have rejected it on the grounds that there can be no unconscious representation of death'.[39] Holden therefore asserts that in the absence of an unconscious representation of death, there can be no death related drive in the unconscious, which consequently renders the death drive theoretically untenable.[40] However, Holden goes on to state that certain flaws lie in this interpretation since it was, in part, due to man's cognitive apprehension of the meaning of death and the 'death drive was assigned to the realm of the ego where concepts such as hatred, death and destruction' can be consciously understood.[41] This therefore leads one to state that the perceived relationship between the 'fear of death and castration anxiety is like the fear of conscience', as a development of the fear of castration.[42]

Critically, the main significance which the sense of guilt has in neuroses makes it conceivable that common neurotic anxiety is reinforced in severe cases by the generating of anxiety between the ego and the super-ego (fear of castration, of conscience, or death).[43] This dimension was reiterated in *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety*, where Freud further pursued the notion of death anxiety, stating that he was "inclined to adhere to the view that the fear of death should be regarded as analogous to the fear of castration and that the situation to which the ego is reacting is one of being abandoned by the protecting super-ego - the powers of destiny - so that it has no longer any safeguard against all the dangers that surround it".[44]

Freud eventually extended his conceptual framework concerning the manifestation and nature of anxiety to incorporate the notion of 'object-loss where he contends that since castration represents an object-loss *par excellence*', one would believe it is reasonable to subsume other object-losses under the rubric of anxiety provoking conditions.[45] Arguably, this reinforces the cognitive nature of anxiety which, of necessity, must arise in the conscious ego. Further, Freud goes on to state that in order to be anxious in response to something other than a direct danger, there must be some awareness of the actual, impeding, or threatened loss. It therefore seems that the "fear of death" or "death anxiety" features prominently in the formation of clinical psychopathology, and to that extent the death drive also features prominently in the formation of clinical psychopathology.[46]

Freud's writing *The economic problem of masochism*, provides the opinion that Freud was much less convinced with the pleasure principle serving the death instinct, and instead argued that the Nirvana principle expressed the trend of the death instinct;[47] 'the pleasure principle represents the demands of the libido, and modification of the latter principle, the reality principle, represents the influence of the external world'.[48] Freud goes on to identify three forms of masochism; the first being erotogenic which refers to the erotic experience of deriving pleasure from pain, made possible from the fusion of the life and death drives.[49]

This phenomenon represents the 'bed-rock of the other two forms of masochism, feminine and moral masochism'.[50] By

feminine masochism, Freud refers to masochistic phantasies of males in which the standard feminine sexual position is adopted, while oral masochism refers to a sense of unconscious guilt that underlines much psychopathology.[51] However, one element common to erotogenic and moral masochism is that of “self-caused suffering” both of which operate in conjunction with sadism.[52] Therefore, it is not that the masochist is motivated by self-caused suffering though instead, that self-caused suffering is the result of his sadistic drive exemplified in either ‘explicit sexual behaviour or through a sadistic, guilt inducing superego’.[53]

On this account, sadism mediates between masochism and the forces of the death drive. The libido is then set the task of “taming” the death drive which is achieved by externalising a portion of the drive outwards ‘towards objects in the external world’.[54] Once the death drive has shifted its ground from an internal to an external orientation, Freud then refers to it as “a destructive instinct, the instinct for mastery, or the will to power”.[55] In such circumstances, the movement of the death drive outwards to the external world forms the basis of wilful aggression, while the portion of the death drive directed inwards forms the basis of erotogenic and moral masochism. Evidently, it is on the basis of these observations that Freud came to realise that dealing with the life or death drives in their pure and unadulterated form was relatively rare. Freud then asserted that the death drive corresponds to or is identical with masochism which takes the self as an object.[56]

Concluding, it is evident that the concept of the death drive is present in the humanistic conscious. However, it’s interpretation is vague and elusive, and psychoanalysts have differing views in a variety of dimensions, such as the biological, psychology and metaphorical dimension. Critically, when the death drive is considered in terms of the ideas advanced by Freud, ‘Thanatos’ assumes greater clinical and theoretical relevance. As a result, an expanded concept of the death drive has been defended as an indispensable theoretical construct that makes sense of what is otherwise unintelligible clinical material, and most particularly, that of self-caused suffering.

Freud identified the phenomenon of self-caused suffering as masochism, a term refined to moral masochism, and as demonstrated in this essay, this idea became the pivot around which the death drive was constructed. Further, Freud attributed the phenomenon of self-caused suffering to an unconscious sense of guilt, which gave rise to the compulsion to repeat the negative therapeutic reaction. Arguably, this essay has provided psychoanalytic and theoretical precedence of the meaning of the death drive and it’s presence in contemporary psychoanalytic literature. One may therefore come to the conclusion that even though interpretations of the death drive are vague, it may be said that “the conflict in our soul between Eros and Thanatos can bring forth the worst and the very best in our thoughts and actions...As long as there is life we can keep Eros victorious over Thanatos”.[57]

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