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Freud on the Death Drive as Existence without Tension

Brian O'Connor (University College Dublin, Belfield)

Abstract

Freud's notion of the death drive is complex and arguably ambiguous. This paper, however, proposes that Freud's thoughts on our organic dynamic towards tensionlessness provide us with a cohesive path through the diverse characteristics that are attributed to the death drive. The paper shows that Freud is interested in giving expression to a kind of disavowal of personhood that may present itself symptomatically. A tensionless state can be gained by a dynamic release of the individual from the pressures of the ego. This study critically sets out the line of analysis that brought Freud, in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, to introduce the notion of the death drive. The main work of the paper is to examine the meaning of the very idea of death as tensionlessness. A central contention will be that death has a figurative meaning when it is discussed in that context: it is the death of the ego. The idea of death as tensionlessness will be employed to explore a number of clinical interpretations of the relationship between the death drive and neurotic guilt and envy.

The various ways in which Freud explains his notion of the death drive tempt us to see that notion as one with systematic interconnections. Among the elements it seems to contain are destructive aggression, repetition compulsion, passive and active extinction (in the form of the Nirvana principle).¹ Furthermore, Freud insists that everything he attributes to the death drive must be understood within a dualistic theory. But the systematic approach, ultimately, does not seem quite right. The material is not, on closer analysis, geared towards that kind of reconstruction. It is hard not to respond to it as the philosopher Hyppolite did: "One gets the impression of something terribly enigmatic, one gets the impression that [Freud] cites heterogeneous phenomena which, quite simply, do not fit into the framework of the blueprint" (Lacan 1991: 66). The reason behind this complexity is well expressed by Kernberg who notes that the death drive "is, unfortunately, a practical and not merely a

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theoretical problem” (Kernberg 2009: 1010). Freud invokes the death drive in response to a number of clinical phenomena, helping him to understand the energy that leads to anti-life behaviors. That does not oblige him to offer an axiomatic conception of the death drive, one from which all anti-life symptoms emerge and thanks to which those symptoms are mutually related. Although Freud does tend to identify associations between some of those symptoms, he does not sacrifice the phenomena confronted in his psychoanalytic work to an explanatory theory that would obviate the need for clinical work.

But does all of this mean that we should see each one of the claims that Freud and others make regarding the death drive within a unique practical context only? There are losses involved in taking a purely non-reconstructive approach. The very idea of the death drive becomes a kind of equivocation that stands in wherever human destruction of whatever kind is to be understood. As it happens, we can in fact detect a common characteristic in many of those behaviors where the death drive is invoked as an element of the explanation. That characteristic can be teased out from a number of ideas Freud posits about our organic dynamic towards tensionless states. Much of what Freud associates with the death drive is really about the ways in which that dynamic sometimes manifests itself. This idea is not the “blueprint” but it is a fairly comprehensive line of conceptualization. What Freud actually helps us to think about are conditions in which the demands of the ego become unbearable, leading to a kind of wish to return to a life without experience and therefore without the pressures of society. This, it will be argued, is where the notion of the death drive emerges as a cohesive concept with clinical significance. Freud is interested in giving expression to a kind of disavowal of personhood that may present itself symptomatically. A tensionless state can be gained by a dynamic release of the individual from the pressures of the ego.² And, within the framework of psychoanalysis, it is this that Freud means by death.

Part 1 of this study will set out the line of analysis that brought Freud, in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), to introduce the notion of the death drive. Part 2 will develop some of the ideas encountered in the first part, giving specific attention to the very idea of tensionlessness. A central contention will be that death has a figurative meaning when it is discussed in that context: it is the death of the ego. The final part

will use the idea of death as tensionlessness to explore a number of clinical interpretations of the relationship between the death drive and neurotic guilt and envy. The term “drive” will be consistently used for *Trieb*, instead of the word “instinct” found in the *Standard Edition*.

The idea of “tension” guides the readings of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* offered below. Although many of the claims that will be highlighted are already well understood within psychoanalytic theory an emphasis on their relation to the overarching notion of tensionless may show them in a new and clinically useful light.

1. *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*

The primary objective of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* is to explore the phenomenon of war neurosis, a phenomenon that cannot be explained through the pleasure principle. Freud acknowledges that this objective represents a major revision of one of the defining claims of his previous work: namely, that the human organism specifically is motivated above all by the pleasure principle.

[Pleasure] Freud puts forward what he calls the economic theory that “unpleasure corresponds to an *increase* in the quantity of excitation and pleasure to a *diminution*” (SE XVIII: 8). It is economic in the sense that there is a kind of dynamic interaction in which the ascendancy of one – pleasure or excitation – comes at the expense of the other. Furthermore, the organism is not equipped with the capacity to absorb excitation: a cost must be paid in terms of unpleasure. It might look as though Freud is either placing matters the wrong way around or is emphasizing only one part of pleasure: namely, release from pain (a diminution of excitation). This helpfully alerts us, though, to a feature of Freud’s procedure in this enquiry: it is not a phenomenology of experience in which first person reports authorize any particular conclusions. Rather, Freud develops his account of pleasure and unpleasure primarily by reference to what he describes as a speculative theory involving quasi-scientific principles about biological organisms, of which human beings are one particular case.

Freud is led by and cites Fechner’s principle of constancy which states that pleasure is proportionate to its approximation to perfect stability and unpleasure is deviation from that ideal of stability.³ Freud endorses that principle in this way: “This latter

hypothesis is only another way of stating the pleasure principle; for if the work of the mental apparatus is directed towards keeping the quantity of excitation low, then anything that is calculated to increase that quantity is bound to be felt as adverse to the functioning of the apparatus, that is as unpleasurable. The pleasure principle follows from the principle of constancy” (SE XVIII: 9). It is arguable, as Laplanche and Pontalis have noted in their account of the pleasure principle, that Freud’s view of the relationship between the “quantity of excitation” and pleasure is potentially ambiguous: does pleasure involve keeping the level of energy low or keeping it constant? (Laplanche and Pontalis 1973: 343). This is a substantive question in that one answer will bring the aim of pleasure closer to the figurative phenomenon of death: the reduction of ego produced tension. Later we will explore what kinds of experiences might be entailed in death in this figurative sense.

[Reality] Freud endorses the standard view that organisms have evolved by responding to the contingent demands of their environments. Self-preservation is achieved by making the necessary adaptations. He uses this view to explain features of the emergence of distinctly human ways of existing, explaining it with focus on psychic adaptation. The human organism, like all others, seeks immediate gratification. The lack of gratification, we might infer, is the cause of unpleasurable tensions. Reality does not readily permit an immediate resolution of the tension. The organism must find some way of dealing with this frustration or be destroyed by a desire it cannot satisfy. Freud proposes that the organism reorganizes itself in such a way that its operational principle – immediate pleasure – ceases to be the primary action producing motivation of the organism. He writes, “[u]nder the influence of the ego’s instincts of self-preservation, the pleasure principle is replaced by the *reality principle*” (SE XVIII: 10).

The reality principle does not destroy the desire for pleasure. It enables the organism to negotiate its desires by postponing, not canceling, the satisfactions of its desire. That postponement does not mean that the need for pleasure is effectively side-lined. Pleasure continues to motivate the organism, but it becomes an objective which is to be achieved indirectly. In this way the reality principle enables toleration of unpleasure in the name of the eventual objective of gaining pleasure. Unpleasure is produced by the organism’s postponement of pleasure. (Freud elsewhere explores the

phenomenon of sublimation in which the ego diverts libidinal energy towards a purpose consistent with its ideals, that is, through activity which is socially validated.)

[War neurosis as the limits of the pleasure principle] Even though the organism has modified itself in such a way as to ensure that it generally avoids unpleasure it cannot consistently succeed in this aim. The circumstances of any given life do not always allow the organism to avoid the suffering that is produced by external forces. There is, however, a particular kind of unpleasure that Freud understands to be produced from within, that of “war neurosis.” It is not merely a postponement of pleasure, but a fixed kind of self-generated suffering. Freud understands this specific form of neurosis as one arising specifically from situations of “fright” (SE XVIII: 31). Fright is distinguished from anxiety and from fear. Whereas anxiety involves a state of anticipation of danger and fear has an object – something of which one is afraid – fright is what we experience in a complete and life-threatening surprise. The experience of fright – in this specific sense – occurs, then, when the subject is totally unprepared for a sudden violent event.

According to Freud, symptomatic of war neurosis is a compulsion to repeat, a compulsion which brings no pleasure with it. It is a repetition of the original fright that is characteristic of its sufferers. So here we encounter a phenomenon that differs from standard neurotic unpleasure. Neurotic unpleasure is present when libidinal-pleasure is negatively experienced by the ego seeking to maintain its unity. In war neurosis, however, the neurotic repetition of the experience of fright cannot be understood as pleasurable within any space of our psychic being. This becomes evident primarily in the dreams of the traumatized. Freud notes: this “would seem to be the place, then, at which to admit for the first time an exception to the proposition that dreams are fulfilments of wishes” (SE XVIII: 32). Nightmares may convey what we do not want to happen or what we dare not wish. Trauma dreams, by contrast, continually inflict the initial trauma. Freud takes this powerful tendency as evidence that there are human motivations “beyond the pleasure principle” (SE XVIII: 33). He argues that compulsion can be regarded as a drive because of what he identifies as a universal character of the drives: “*an urge inherent in organic life to restore an earlier state of things which the living entity has been obliged to abandon under the pressure of external disturbing forces*” (SE XVIII: 36). He identifies this urge with

compulsion and with death. The earlier state of things is, obviously enough, free of the tensions in which the ego is caught in an un-negotiable trauma. Significantly, though, it is the ego itself that persists with that negotiation.

The connection Freud is implying between what lies beyond the pleasure principle, organic restoration, death and the compulsion to repeat is not spelled out. The reader is left to guess at how that connection actually works.⁴ Lear argues that Freud makes an unwarranted move from the thesis that some dreams do not express wishes to the further thesis that such dreams are promoted by an underlying compulsion to repeat. He asks why Freud did not instead posit that the patient's mind has been damaged, and hence his or her destructive repetition of what is terrible (Lear 2005: 156). This objection, though, invokes its own mysterious notion of a "damaged mind" without explaining either that notion or why war trauma should produce just that damage.

An alternative question is whether the compulsion to repeat really sits in a space quite beyond the pleasure principle. Freud is maintaining that the repetition of the trauma in the dream is an effort to "master the stimulus retrospectively, by developing the anxiety whose omission was the cause of the traumatic neurosis" (SE XVIII: 32). The repetition of the experience may be dreadful as it occurs but does it not work towards some kind of restitution where the subject will return to a tensionless state? This suggestion is sympathetic to Freud's contention of just a few years later that psychotic symptoms, which are for the most part unpleasurable (e.g. paranoia, the delusion of accusatory voices), are nevertheless an attempt at recovery or restoration. Recovery in this sense, as Freud argued in "Neurosis and Psychosis" (1924), is a desire for coherent and integrated experience. The gaps left by the unacceptable event are filled by delusory beliefs. The psychotic does not, in fact, recover simply by devising the world in this way. But it is interesting that Freud did not characterize the psychotic's repeated delusions and shifting confabulations as prompted by some space outside the pleasure principle.

Because the regressive urge to repeat is stimulated by the distinctive drive of death Freud maintains that we must no longer regard drives solely as stimulating the development of the organism, that is, as life drives. Rather, Freud states, that what he will identify as the death drive is "an expression of the *conservative* nature of living

substance” (SE XVIII: 36). In the context of political theory the word “conservative” captures two quite different kinds of commitments: a preference for no change and a desire to return to what has been lost in the face of a disappointing or threatening present. Freud’s discussion of the drives actually maintains both perspectives, though it is the reactionary connotation that seems more evident in his discussion. For example: “all instincts tend towards the restoration of an earlier state of things” (SE XVIII: 37); “an *old* state of things, an initial state from which the living entity has at one time or other departed and to which it is striving to return by the circuitous paths along which its development leads” (SE XVIII: 38). The reactionary quality of the death drive will become apparent when we see its dynamic at work in the destruction of the ego.

Freud, at first, however, takes us through a biological rather than psychological account of the role of death in the constitution of the organism. That all organisms pass through various phases of a development that ends with death is construed by him as a culmination, rather than a simple cessation: “*the aim of all life is death*” (SE XVIII: 38), he writes. The organism strives to maintain itself so that it can pass through its developmental phases towards death and “die only in its own fashion” (SE XVIII: 39). We can see what Freud describes as the self-destruction of the ego, perhaps, as one way in which the human organism dies in its own fashion, though we can hardly see it as inevitable (in contrast to biological degeneration).⁵ Progress in gaining some sense of Freud’s conception of “the function of death in psychic reality” (Mills 2006: 375) might be made by setting aside those biological – potentially and uncharacteristically reductive – speculations.

[Dualism] The dualism of the drives to which Freud is committed (by the time of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*) consists in the opposition between life drives and death drives. Whereas the death drive aims at dissolution, the life drive both preserves the entity and seeks to augment and strengthen it. The life and death drives are not to be reduced, as Jung had attempted, to a single drive. Yet the attribute of seeking *restoration*, which, as we have seen, stands in common between all of the instincts, is strikingly substantial. This attribute, arguably, allows us to conceive the relationship of life and death drives in a different way. It would seem to follow, as a matter of

inference, that this urge is present in the sexual and life drives (since it is an attribute of all drives).⁶

If restoration is a basic dynamic of the drives then it may become possible to differentiate them not dualistically but circumstantially. That is, the human organism seeks different ways of restoring itself to an “earlier state of things”. Sometimes that effort will manifest itself in sexual experience, in self-destruction, or in a reactionary withdrawal. Significantly, this list of possibilities does not *seem* homogeneous: the respective behavioral manifestations could hardly be more different. But what these possibilities might all be said to share is that each of them involves some kind of receding from a certain kind of developmental phase: namely, the ego’s successful implementation of the reality principle through which it secures its own self-preservation.⁷

We can lend some weight to the circumstantial non-dualist reading of the drives by enlisting Freud’s own notions of *function* and *tendency*. The *function* of all drives, he holds, is “to free the mental apparatus entirely from excitation or to keep the amount of excitation in it constant or to keep it as low as possible” (SE XVIII: 62). And the various ways in which that is achieved might be characterized as the *tendency*: for instance, pleasure is one tendency, psychoanalytic resistance might be another (and so too the Nirvana principle which we shall see below).

2. Tensionless Existence

In this section a particular line of thought will be developed that builds on and in some respects move tentatively beyond what we have just seen in Freud’s text. The focus is not on the general biological notion of a death drive but on the manifestation of that drive in the psyche. The death drive, it will be suggested, is primarily a threat to the ego. We must be careful to distinguish the different kinds of similar looking threat to the ego that are presented by pleasure and the death drive respectively.

[Pleasure and the place of the ego] With regards to pleasure Freud observes that the human organism is not so disciplined that the compromises of the reality principle are ever fully acceptable to it: a desire for unregulated sexual gratification in particular continues to make itself felt and sometimes breaks through, as Freud writes, “to the

detriment of the organism as a whole” (SE XVIII: 10). Postponement is not good enough. However, in what Freud goes on to explain, it is not actually the organism *as a whole* that suffers. More precisely *the ego* experiences unpleasure when the “instincts” that are incompatible with its “unity” seek to satisfy themselves (SE XVIII: 11). The unity of the ego might be understood as the set of commitments and dispositions that the ego experiences as its identity: its constitution. The integrity of this unity would be threatened were something the ego is unable to control or deny to foreground itself. This involves an increase in tension. Perhaps the ego would have to lose itself to a libidinal demand to resolve that tension. Such a loss is strikingly evident in “the sexual act”, which “is associated with a momentary extinction of a highly intensified excitation” (SE XVIII: 62).

We can find the basis of this claim in sharp outline in “The Ego and the Id”, published by Freud just three years after *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. There Freud writes: “It is easy to see that the ego is that part of the id which has been modified by the direct influence of the external world through the medium of the *Pcpt.-Cs.*” (SE XIX: 25). Furthermore, once the ego emerges with this kind of autonomy it seems then to operate against that from which it originally emerged: we are given “the coherent ego and the repressed which is split off from it” (SE XIX: 17). The ego tries to make the id conform to reality. More exactly, it attempts to control those moments of its experience that it sees not as “I” but as “it”, as moments that it cannot encompass within its own unity. What is experienced as “it” is the demand for satisfactions that “I” does not want to accommodate.

One implication of this is that the id opposes the work of the ego: it does not want the ego to maintain its realistic withholding of pleasure, a withholding of the organism’s preferred tensionless state. In one sense this is the traditional picture of the ego as master, but Freud adds to that by claiming that the ego does not set the agenda: it may seek to control the id, but it may also act out the “id’s will... as if it were its own” (SE XIX: 25). This is because what the id wills belongs to the organism, and it may be that the ego mistakenly takes what it wills as motivated purely by its own perceptions or judgments.

If libidinal demands are, as Freud thinks of it, denied expression by the ego that denial is prompted by the reality principle. Those demands are subject to what Freud describes as primary repression. It seems that tension is low when those demands do not become invasive: the ego's unity is not threatened. Does this mean that there is pleasure – of that form – when the ego can dominate the pleasure demanding drives? And its corollary: is unpleasure the ego's experience of the transgression of the drives? If this is a warranted way of reading Freud's claims it looks as though he is effectively committed to what we might call – borrowing his labeling device – a “topology” of pleasure. Pleasure has, in effect, two locations. There is (a) the pleasure demanded by the libidinal drive, the pleasure that must be postponed by the reality principle (let us call this libido-pleasure). And there is also (b) the pleasure the ego experiences in tensionless states, states in which the libidinal drives are comfortably controlled (let us call this ego-pleasure).

Ascribing this topological view to Freud actually helps to address what he himself regarded as the difficulty of explaining how “repression turns a possibility of pleasure into a source of unpleasure” (SE XVIII: 11). We can rephrase that question as one of how libidinal-pleasure becomes ego-unpleasure. Very simply, the pleasure of the libidinal drives denies the ego its integrity. And this explanation can clarify what might otherwise look like a paradoxical formulation: “neurotic unpleasure is... pleasure that cannot be felt as such” (SE XVIII: 11). The ego's negative symptomatic behavior is the intimation of the pleasure of the libidinal drives. The ego, Freud writes, “seeks to avoid the unpleasure which would be produced by the liberation of the repressed” (SE XVIII: 20). Why would that liberation produce unpleasure? Because, again, it threatens the unity the ego has established for itself.

[Death and the Nirvana principle] Not all tensions are produced by libidinal demands the ego does not want to accept. There are demands the ego places on itself. A different kind of “unpleasure” is effective in that case and the achievement of tensionlessness is quite a different process from that in which libidinal demands prevail. It is that process that the Nirvana principle tries to capture, a process in which the death drive annihilates the ego. The tensionless that is achieved here is the elimination of the organism's source of suffering, namely, the ego's desiring.

Earlier in the text Freud had referred to Schopenhauer's views on the place of death in life as complementary to his own position. More interesting, perhaps, is the connection between their ideas of Nirvana. Schopenhauer invokes this Buddhist notion as a solution to the existential problem of the will. According to Schopenhauer, the source of suffering is our individuation. We will our happiness, but the world is not essentially disappointing. The self that wills its own happiness is, however, an illusion, at least when understood from some elevated philosophical perspective. If we can begin to appreciate that truth on an existential level it may just be that we can overcome the conditions which generate suffering itself. This state, however, is a state of nothingness: "we freely acknowledge that what remains after the complete abolition of the will is, for all who are still full of the will, assuredly nothing" (Schopenhauer 1969: 411-2). It is this overcoming that Schopenhauer means by Nirvana: a death of the individuated self, not of the organism. It is death in this figurative sense that does much of the work in Freud's conception of the death instinct. That is why it should be no surprise that he provides very little consideration throughout his work of the concept of suicide, the destruction of our organic being. (Briggs (2006), however, maintains that the concept of suicide is implicit in some of the pivotal texts in Freud's development.) Freud's focus is on the self-destruction of the self.

However, Freud's account of the Nirvana principle is initially confusing as he does not draw a sufficiently strong distinction between the tensionlessness gained through the death of the ego and the tensionlessness of pleasure. He writes:

The dominating tendency of mental life, and perhaps of nervous life in general, is the effort to reduce, to keep constant or to remove internal tension due to stimuli (the "Nirvana principle", to borrow a term from Barbara Low) – a tendency which finds expression in the pleasure principle; and our recognition of that fact is one of our strongest reasons for believing in the existence of death instincts. (SE XVIII: 55-6)

The problem with the passage just cited is that pleasure and death become conceptually synonymous, contrary to their evident characteristics. In "The Economic Problem of Masochism" (1924) Freud goes on to correct the view that the pleasure-

unpleasure principle can be identified with the Nirvana principle. To redress the earlier view he allocates his three main principles – Nirvana, pleasure and reality – distinctive roles: “The *Nirvana* principle expresses the trend of the death instinct; the *pleasure* principle represents the demands of the libido; and the modification of the latter principle, the *reality* principle, represents the influence of the external world” (SE XIX: 160). These distinctive roles provide the shared interest of the first two with different ways – tendencies – of achieving tensionlessness. They are now *qualitatively* distinguished whereas the purely *quantitative* description of the earlier passage tended to conflate them. To be more specific about this qualitative difference: the Nirvana principle refers to the destruction of the ego, whereas the achievement of pleasure, by contrast, is a challenge to the ego’s commitment to reality and its unity without bringing about the destruction of the ego. No doubt the integrity of the ego may suffer (perhaps through neurosis), as Freud has said, when the ego fails to control the id’s demand for pleasure, but it remains a functioning ego.

When in the later *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis* (1933) Freud asks “[b]ut how can this conservative characteristic of instincts help us to understand our self-destructiveness? What earlier state of things does an instinct such as this want to restore?” (SE XXII: 107) we can suggest that he has already delineated an answer in the 1920 work. The self-destructiveness is a desire for the experience of an earlier state, once in which we have no *experience* of tension. The *New Introductory Lectures* suggest that it is a desire for a return to an organic state. But that state must, again, be figurative since its literal sense would leave it entirely without life.⁸ Death in the organic sense is not a return to an earlier state: it is a cessation of all states. The very reality of existing gives us burdensome needs (Segal 1993: 55). Those needs may sometimes be unreachable. This produces painful tension. When the Nirvana principle is dominant that tension is resolved by the destruction of the ego. This is because the ego is the locus of unattainable needs. However, where those needs are comfortably met – another the reduction of tension – there is pleasure. (We might suggest that in drug addiction the ego has been largely defeated as the allure of oblivion takes hold.)

We have seen that Freud reaches “beyond the pleasure principle” when explaining the compulsive repetition of war neurosis. But what has emerged as another line of thought is, in effect, what lies “beneath the pleasure principle”. The urge for

restoration understood as tensionlessness lies beneath the pleasure principle. And it explains other tendencies – self-destruction – however, that do not aim at pleasure.

3. Self-destruction – clinical experiences

In the following sample of reported clinically influenced conclusions we can see how the interpretation of the death drive as a desire for tensionless existence might be helpful. It allows us to focus on what seems to be central to the patient's experience. The death drive is called upon in diverse ways to explain certain kinds of self-destructive behaviors, but not all of these are comfortably accommodated within the central thesis that has emerged from an analysis of Freud's position. That thesis is that the death drive aims at the destruction of the ego. In this section the phenomena briefly considered will be guilt, envy, with some mention of the withdrawal by the patient of a subjective position. What follows involves, among other things, some moderation of a particular kind of clinical use for the death drive.

[Guilt and self-destruction] In the "Ego and the Id" Freud sets out his understanding of the experience of guilt. He argues that children acquire a capacity for "moral censorship" (SE XIX: 37) first through the injunctions of the father and then through education. An ego ideal is developed through this formation. But there is inevitably, what Freud describes as, a tension between "the demands of conscience", stemming from the ego ideal, and "the actual performances of the ego" (SE XIX: 37). This ego ideal, according to Freud, provides the individual with a constitutive point of commonality with others in his/her community. The individual shares with those others a normative perspective that partly makes him/her the kind of person s/he both is and wants to be. Guilt arises from transgression against that normativity – present to the individual as the ego ideal – and produces an unpleasant sense of de-socialization. Guilt, in other words, alienates the ego from the conditions that constitute it. Where an ego ideal is strong the ego's failures to resist the demands of "the libido – the force that introduces disturbances into the process of life" (SE XIX: 46-7) will be painful. In those instances the ego ideal in the form of a "super-ego" may act with, what Freud calls, "harshness and severity towards the ego" (SE XIX: 33) when the ego fails to fend off the libidinal drives. The death drive appears under a different aspect in this situation. Freud writes: "What is now holding sway in the super-ego is, as it were, a pure culture of the death instinct, and in fact it often enough

succeeds in driving the ego into death...” (SE XIX: 33). Death in this sense is the brutal resolution of the tension: the ego is lost to the super-ego, the individual is lost to guilt. Freud develops this idea on the basis of his clinical experience with certain kinds of neurotic symptoms which can be explained only as attempts to negotiate guilt. That it is guilt, however, is unknown to the patient who has repressed memory of the guilt causing event.

In a paper on the death drive in the clinical context Segal offers what looks like an opposing conceptualization of guilt. We have just seen that for Freud the event which has given rise to guilt is repressed and the patient is left with a mysterious sense of being unwell, not of guilt: a neurosis. Citing cases from her own practice, Segal claims that the suffering of guilt associated with the death drive is, in fact, the suffering of the libidinal ego threatened by death. The question she emphasizes provides her clinical enquires with a particular interest. She asks: “if the death instinct aims at not perceiving, not feeling, refusing the joys and the pain of living, why is the operation of the death instinct associated with so much pain?” (Segal 1993: 57). Segal, in fact, is reluctant to endorse the notion that the death drive can be fully explicated in terms of the “Nirvana principle”. She sees it, contrary to the pain that is for her central to the death drive, as “an implicit idealisation of death” (Segal 1993: 55). It is an almost easeful state.

Segal presents the case of Mrs. A as an example of the kind of “tormenting persecutory guilt” which was really underpinned by the powerful death force within. Her guilt, in short, was a kind of projection. She was haunted by some wrong she felt she had done but in fact those feelings were projections of the more fundamental wish “for total annihilation of the world and herself” (Segal 1993: 57). Individuals misunderstand the source of their suffering and instead project it on to “the dread and pain of persecution and guilt” (Segal 1993: 59). Guilt, in other words, is in the foreground of their experiences. Freud, though, maintains that the experience of the neurotic is one of illness (guilty feelings are repressed). Analysis is typically resisted by those who have developed a guilt neurosis because they cannot identify the source of the very guilt that inflicted such tremendous pressures on the ego. Segal’s position, as we saw from her opening question, is based on a quite realistic conception of death, as a fearful prospect. In that light the death drive is seen as a kind of energy that wants

to kill us. It is a raw indeterminate force whose terrifying intimations may lead us to defensive projections, such as guilt. The notion of a figurative death – the death of the ego – however, gives us a different orientation. It gives us the question: *what* is the tension that is being resolved here, and *why* does that resolution take the form of what Freud captures with the Nirvana principle?

[Envy and self-destruction] In “Analysis Terminable and Interminable” (1937) Freud concluded:

No stronger impression arises from the resistances during the work of analysis than of there being a force which is defending itself by every possible means against recovery and which is absolutely resolved to hold on to illness and suffering. (SE XXIII: 242)

Feldman offers a reading of this claim which, based on his own clinical evidence, confirms the existence of a “destructive psychological force”, which we can call the death drive (Feldman 2000: 53). He specifies what it is that this force sets out to destroy. He maintains that the destructive force is not aimed at “the perceiving and experiencing self” (Feldman 2000: 54). Rather, annihilation can be witnessed in the way in which “certain patients... attack and distort their capacities for perception and judgement, incorporating their distorted perceptions into ways of structuring their experience that gratify deep destructive impulses” (Feldman 2000: 56). Even though Feldman states that the target of the death drive is not the experiencing self the process he is actually describing is effectively the death drive consuming the ego in which the suffering is located. And he contends that a “precondition for the gratification of this drive is the survival of both the patient and his object, but severely reduced and undermined. The aim seems to be largely, but not entirely, to eliminate anything that gives rise to admiration, dependence, rivalry, and particularly envy” (Feldman 2000: 56).⁹ This process, we might suggest, is best captured under by Nirvana principle. Death is the tensionlessness that is achieved when the ego no longer cares about what it is supposed to be, do, have or be perceived as. It abandons itself.

Viewed in this light we might suggest that Klein's alignment of envy with the self-destructiveness of the death drive departs strikingly from Freud's thinking. She holds that envy is geared towards "spoiling" of everything that that is "valuable or connected to life" (Waska 2001: 24). This seems to de-emphasize the state of tensionlessness that is an objective of the death drive: envy is surely a highly agitated state. Perhaps, aggression against the objects of envy is an effort to restore tensionlessness. Given that the object is not, however, the cause of envy but an occasion for it aggression/destruction would be strangely misdirected in those instances. Destroying the object, in short, does not destroy the envy. Whereas the death drive seems to threaten the ego aggression might be seen as supportive of the ego. As Gordon puts it, "the function and purpose of much aggression is to divide and separate; and this, it seems to me, makes aggression relevant, and in fact vital and necessary, to the development of the ego, and also to its preservation" (Gordon 1961: 129).

Feldman's position, by contrast, emphasizes that the ego, the agent of envy, destroys itself. Self-destruction means annihilating those forms of commitment which give the ego its particular self. This may include relationships that are constitutive of a life. Lacan expresses that idea in this way: death in this sense is the loss of "human experience, human interchange, intersubjectivity" (Lacan 1981: 80). The form of destruction is contextual and specific to what the ego has taken itself to be. In this context overwhelming envy is addressed through the destruction of the envious ego.

Feldman makes a further proposal about the experience of envy that in some respects works against the insight just explored. He believes there is a commitment to suffering in which there is some satisfaction in maintaining "a link with the object that often has a tormenting quality" (Feldman 2000). But is that consistent with the Nirvana principle his main insight appears so well to agree with? What he described there seemed to be a form of experience in which disappointment or frustration will no longer be experienced.

Conclusion

Through an analysis of the central objective of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* we have seen that the death drive emerges from Freud's effort to make sense of the

essentially unpleasurable phenomenon of “war neurosis”. The difficulty in Freud’s inference of the existence of a death drive from the symptomatic suffering of the war neurotic was noted. A core part of the analysis involved exploration of Freud’s “economic” theory of pleasure and the tensions that exist between the organism’s ongoing demands for pleasure and the compromises of the reality principle. But the thesis that was emphasized when examining Freud’s idea of war neurosis was the essential urge of all drives to restore the organism to an earlier state. That thesis is central to the interpretation developed in this study.

The urge to restore was interpreted as an effort to achieve tensionlessness by a kind of reactionary dynamic. And it was proposed that this urge, as a common feature of all the drives, weakened the dualistic dimension of Freud’s theory of the life and death drives. They share an urge for tensionlessness, and in fact Freud’s own terminology of “function” and “tendency” allowed us to think about the structure of the dualism in a different way.

In the second section of this study the notion of tensionlessness was given further analysis and the material was supplemented by some of Freud’s texts from the early 1920s. The main question that came into view was that of how tensionlessness might be defended as the work of the death drive against the ego. To justify this interpretation the intricate set of relationships involving the ego, the id and their specific forms of pleasure and unpleasure was examined. This work enabled us to see the real significance of the Nirvana principle, that it is the death of the ego, a figurative rather than biological extinction.

With the interpretation of the death drive as the urge for tensionless existence in view this study concluded with some reported clinical employments of the death drive. The efforts of psychoanalysts to explain the self-destructive behavior characteristic of guilt and envy was assessed with that interpretation of the death drive in mind. A tentative conclusion of that assessment was that envy understood as an aggressive position towards object is an act of the ego. It is only therefore problematically an act motivated by the death drive.

The general conclusion of the research behind this study, then, is that an effective way through Freud's complex material on the death drive is to focus on its interest in tensionlessness. This is the psychoanalytically relevant sense of death. The realization of a tensionless state becomes evident in a range of experiences where individuals find the needs of the ego – of its socialized self-constitution – to be unbearable. It is this self-destruction that is captured in the very idea of Nirvana. What Freud's theory allows us to understand is the mechanism of this form of annihilation, of restoration to a state without experience. In times of an existence made intolerable by the ego itself the energy of the death drive sweeps away ego centered experience.

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Notes

¹ Land (2001) provides a detailed map of the landscape and interpretative options.

² What is offered here is sympathetic to the proposal of Ikonen and Rechart (2010: 29): "Death is only one particular form of a state of peace and destruction only one particular means of striving toward a state of peace. The central and predominant intention of Thanatos, its aim and purpose, is precisely peace in one form or another, attained in some way or other."

³ It has been claimed that Freud is guided by the idea of entropy. Viewed in these terms the pleasure principle in "its function of avoiding pain and achieving pleasure and in its modified development as the reality principle it accomplishes the lowering of the potential in accordance with the law of entropy" (Bernfeld and Feitelberg 1931: 70).

⁴ One might suggest that the repetition of the initial shock is evidence of an urge to return to an earlier state of things, and that dynamic return is attributable to the death drive. The neatness of this line of exposition, though, is complicated by the exceptionally heightened tension in which the sufferer lives.

⁵ Gordon (1961: 123) cites the work of Eissler who points out that the fear of death recedes if and when human beings fall into dementia. The thought here is that with the loss of the ego the individual can no longer take up a position with regards to death.

⁶ The following view therefore seems sympathetic: "But possibly this difference between the two schools is merely a question of arguing from different levels of abstraction and interpretation. In *Two Essays on Analytical Psychology*, when discussing Freud's theory of the death instinct, Jung remarks that "What Freud probably means is the essential fact that every process is a phenomenon of energy, and that all energy can only proceed from the tension of opposites" (Gordon 1961: 131).

⁷ Perhaps this is how we might read a gnomic remark that appears towards the end of the book: "The pleasure principle seems actually to serve the death instincts" (SE XVIII: 63). The pleasure principle urges the immediate reduction of tension, a restoration of equilibrium, a withdrawal from realistic life. The various phenomena just noted might be said to deny the reality principle in so far as that principle works towards the preservation of the ego.

⁸ Lacan outlines the preposterousness of taking Freud to be speaking of death literally, that is, as the extinction of the organism: "Indeed one can consider that with death, all tensions are reduced, from the point of view of the living being, to zero. But one can just as well take into consideration the processes of decomposition which follow death. One then ends up defining the aim of the pleasure principle as the concrete dissolution of the corpse. That is something which one cannot but see as excessive" (Lacan 1991: 80).

⁹ A dimension of this is the behaviour of the unhelpful patient towards the analyst. As Kernberg writes: "It may become particularly important to explore the pleasure in the patient's aggression against the self and others. In this regard, we might say that the death drive is not inconsistent with the pleasure principle, as evidenced by the triumphant pleasure these patients get in defeating all efforts to help them" (Kernberg 2009: 1020).