Controversies Around the Concept of Death Instinct and Envy*

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This part is not intended to go deeply about the controversies of the concept of destructiveness but more intended to give a short sketch of the different way of thinking for the purpose of understanding following clinical material.

Freud initially began to explore the antithesis between ego instincts and sexual instincts directed to an object (Freud 1939). Then, with the introduction of the concept of narcissism—the discovery that the ego itself is cathected with libido—he had to revise his first theory, and so went on to postulate a libidinal component to ego instincts. However, he firmly believed that apart from this libidinal component there must exist a primary, non-libidinal component. He then went on to say that aggressive trends could be ascribed to a libidinal component of the ego instinct, and that hate should be regarded as a non-libidinal reaction of the ego. Finally he came to the conclusion that these aggressive trends should no longer be regarded as primary attributes of the ego instincts but as independent instincts of aggression and destruction existing side by side with sexual instincts in the vital strata of the mind. Thus ego instincts ceased to be independent entities and were seen to be derived partly from libidinal and partly from aggressive instincts (Bibring 1941). Freud wrote that, alongside an instinct to preserve living substance and to join it into ever larger units, there must also exist another, contrary instinct seeking to dissolve these and bring them back to their primeval, inorganic state. In other words, as well as Eros there had to be a death instinct.

So now the existence of these primal instincts of life and death was postulated, and their characteristics could be described[] the death instinct operates silently within the organism, working towards its dissolution. The two instincts seldom appear in isolation from one another, but are mutually alloyed in varying and different proportions in such a way as to make them unrecognisable (Freud 1939). Freud later further elaborated this concept to explain the evolution of our civilization, presenting the struggle between Eros and Thanatos, between the instinct for life and the instinct for destruction (Freud 1939). Although he emphasized the ubiquitous nature of this conflict, with its fusion of the life and death instincts, as an essential ingredient in the interpretation of our lives, he warned us that assuming the existence of an instinct of death or destruction would meet with resistance, even in analytic circles (Freud 1939), because “Little children do not like it, when there is talk of the human inclination to badness to aggressiveness and destructiveness, and so to cruelty as well. God has made them in the image of his own perfection[] nobody wants to be reminded how hard it is to reconcile the undeniable existence of evil” (Freud 1939).

From then on the concept of a death instinct has encountered many objections and criticism from analysts. This is partly because Freud failed to extensively develop its manifestations and management in clinical practice, and partly because his reasons for introducing the concept had not been based on fresh psychological material but rather in order to solve theoretical problems which had been raised by previous hypotheses (Bibling 1941). They are to be seen as biological instincts whose existence is necessary to satisfy such hypotheses. Moreover, some have observed that analytic theory has treated the two instincts in an unusually prejudiced manner, as if the libido is the first-born and privileged child, and the destructive instinct is the late-comer, the
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stepchild (Heimann 1943). It appears that this reluctance lies in our inherent pain at acknowledging destructiveness, because the superego judges as unacceptable such pernicious attacks on good human nature. Therefore the debate about which is first-the primary destructiveness of the baby or the frustrating mother-environment-continues, although it is very clear that one can never meet the constitutional component unmodified by environment, since love and hate occur and develop in relationship with object (Spillias 1993). Winnicott, for example, is on the other side of the argument in, seeing the operation of the innate death instinct as resulting from the failure of the holding environment. When the mother fails to provide the child with a reason to be angry, it experiences particular difficulty in fusing aggression with loving (Winnicott 1972). Aggression is seen rather as evidence of life and, under favorable conditions, fusion of the two roots of instinctual impulses (aggressive and erotic) occurs in infant development.

Heimann and Isaacs, in a controversial discussion, pointed out that we are rarely confronted with pure instinctual impulses but rather mixtures in varying proportions of the two groups of instincts. It was inferred that it may well be that one of the functions of the libido is to bind the destructive instincts, in order to drain the sources of destructive impulses and thus to master them (Heimann & Isaacs 1943). This statement contains an important technical point and I will come back to this later in my discussion of technical issues.

In North America Hartmann et al. (1949) suggested that aggression bears the same relation to pleasure and to unpleasure as does libido. In other words discharge of aggression, generally speaking, give rise to pleasure and accumulation and lack of discharge, generally speaking, give rise to unpleasure. This change brought important theoretical and practical consequences (Brenner 1971). For example with Freud’s formulation the compulsion to repeat is associated with the concept that aggression is beyond the pleasure principle, a derivative of a universal death drive (Freud 1920). But with Hartmann’s formulation one doesn’t need to assume the universality of death drive. The childhood wishes which are ungratified as the result of anxiety and conflict about them seek the gratification and for this gratification the child may repeat self-punishment or symptom formation (Brenner 1971). In other words frustrated childhood wishes to discharge aggression seeks for satisfaction later in life by destructive attacks of oneself and/or others. The question is then has this process an end? If the infantile wishes to discharge aggression is satisfied, can he really love himself and object?

Along this line of thought Greenacre, Spitz, Gillespie believed that aggressive drive has an inherent trend that is nondestructive in character. Aggression joins with aspect of the libido which serves the ego in its task of adaptation, of self-preservation. Therefore some aspects of both libido and aggression inherently lend themselves to the ego’s tasks which later led to postulate inherently nondestructive ego-syntonic aggressive current and inherently destructive aggressive current (Parens 1973).

On the other hand Waelder thought while most aggression can be explained without postulating a primary destructive-ness, essential destructiveness could not be refuted, because severe disorders (psychosis) have shown events of immense and incomprehensible destructiveness that can only be explained on a primary destructiveness basis (Parens 1973). Unpleasure plays a large part in the arousal of the destructive aspect of aggression. It would appear that in unpleasure—in infancy, somato psychic tension—there is a redisposition, an inherent tendency within the soma, to discharge a destructive impulse. In this sense, the first destructive impulses are anaclitic as are the first libidinal impulses i.e. in infancy, the destructive impulse requires the condition of unpleasure for it’s emergence (Freud 1914). Without the postulation of primary destructiveness, certain psychic phenomena cannot be explained (Waelder 1956, 1960) i.e. we can not explain rage in infancy (Parens 1973).

On the other theoretical point of view, Klein in her paper “criminal tendencies in normal children (1927)” explained that crimes comes from the guilt because of unmodified superego which deals with the conflict between superego and id. She glimpsed in this early paper later her interest in a different conflict, the conflict between love and hate (Klein 1937). She seemed to be convinced innate capacity for love and wrote” I do not believe in the existence of a child in whom it is impossible to obtain this transference, or in whom the capacitias for love cannot be brought out. In case of my little criminal he was apparently utterly devoid of any capacity for love, but analysis proved that this was not so” (Klein 1927).

Later she accepted Freud’s theory of the life and death instinct as a fundamental principle, and understood sadism in the interaction between love and hate (Klein 1937). Klein (1937) wrote when the baby is hungry, frustrated, in bodily pain or discomfort, hatred and aggressive feelings are aroused. Then he is dominated by the impulses to destroy...
the very person, who in his mind is linked up with every
good and bad experiences. She continued” In the baby
hated and aggressive feelings give rise … to most painful
states, such as choking, breathlessness and other sensations
of the kind, which are felt to be destructive to his own
body thus aggression, unhappiness and fears are again
increased”. Here she pointed out how initial psychological
frustration can lead not only to be aggressive to the object
but also attack his own bodily functions. This then lead to
form automatic vicious cycle. It seems the question is not so
much what was the initial frustrating situation but more to
do with the separate secondary process following, which
acquire its own dynamic process. I think this remark give us
some clues to understand why some people react to what
looked like an ordinary frustration with violent aggression. It
also help us to understand why we experience with some of
the very deprived patients the feeling that they are caught up
in the intractible destructive cycle.

She further postulated the concept of primitive envy through
her clinical observation of chronic resistance to the
analytic process, which she saw as a direct derivative of
the death instinct. She saw envy appearing as a hostile, life-
destroying force in the relation of the infant to its mother,
once which was particularly directed against the good feeding
mother, because she is not needed by the infant but rather is
envied for containing everything which the infant himself
wants to possess. In the transference this manifests itself in
the patient’s need to devalue analytic work which he has
found helpful.

More recently Kleinian analysts have discovered a further
deeper understanding of aggressive clinical phenomena in
the mental life of some patients, believing that the death
instinct cannot be observed in its original form but that
it always will become manifest as a destructive process
directed against objects and the self (Rosenfeld 1971). In
particular, manifestations of destructiveness in certain narcis-
sistic personality structures have been extensively studied.
Rosenfeld explains that, through the pathological fusion of
libidinal and destructive impulses, the power of the destruc-
tive impulses is greatly strengthened, thereby forming the
idealized destructive narcissistic part, which overpowers the
whole self, leading to suicide or to violent attacks on anything
which symbolizes life.

Along the similar line Segal (1997) mentioned about two
different forms of life and death instincts. In healthy deve-
lopment the fusion of life and death instincts is under the
aegis of life instinct and the deferred death instinct, aggre-
sion is at the service of life instinct. But in certain form of
fusion which often can be observed in perversion libido is at
the service of death instinct.

Spilius (1993) brought to our attention of the fact that
Klein herself stressed that the capacity both for love and for
destructive impulses is to some extent constitutional, but
interaction with external conditions can make the it’s strength
vary. Therefore she thought nobody can tell in the clinical
situation how much of a patient’s envy is constitutional and
how much is due to environmental failure or the result of the
process of interaction between the two. She emphasized
what we can observe is the feeling of envy that patient is
experiencing in here and now transference situation and how
this feeling is expressed or in what way it was defended
(Spillius 1993).

She made an important distinction between ego dystonic
envy versus ego syntonic envy. Ego dystonic envy is often
unconscious and involves painful loss and guilt over destruc-
tiveness, and ego syntonic-impenitent envy is often conscious
and expressed as guiltless self-righteous grievances. In the
case of impenitent envy, defences are used not only maintain
and enhance the sense of grievance but also to evade ack-
nowledging the acute pain and sense of loss, and sometimes
a fear of the psychic collapse that would result from realizing
that one wants a good object but really feels that one does
not have or has not had it.

Feldman (2000) in his excellent work on the clinical mani-
festations of death instinct described particular kind of
destructive psychologica force in which meaning, specificity,
differences are attacked and any developmental processes
retaded or undermined. This kind of” anti-life” force aimed
at not literally to kill or to annihilate, but to maintain a
link with the object that often has a tormenting quality. He
thought this compulsive quality does not result from some
fusion with the life instinct, with the consequent libidini-
sation. On the contrary, the gratification patient gets froom
attacking and spoiling and undermining is an essential aspect
of such a destructive drive. He illustrated how the analyst’s
understanding and interpretation may bring these destructive
activities into the realm of thought and of language thereby
diminishing their silent destructiveness which make them
better contact with his liveliness expressed in his feelings of
anger as well as feelings of sadness and loss.

Although there are many controversies around the concept
of death instinct and envy, many analyst seemed to find it
useful at least to postulate psychological concept of death instinct. It is a vitally important theoretical framework to explain some clinical phenomena such as negative therapeutic reaction, chronic resistance to analysis and the aggressive aspects of narcissism. When these phenomena are better understood, this will enhance the power of the opposite force -the life instinct- which will help liberate the patient from the grip of his own destructiveness.

References

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