

AGGRESSION AND INSTINCT THEORY

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When asked at rather short notice to write a paper on aggression for the forthcoming Congress I felt at first reluctant to undertake the task; but a vague feeling that there was something I wanted to say about the theory of aggression led me finally to accept. What later facilitated the expression of that unformulated feeling was a paper presented in July 1970 to the British Psycho-Analytical Society by Professor J. O. Wisdom (interested readers will find a general exposition in Wisdom (1969)); his theme was the important part played by *Weltanschauung* in scientific theories generally, and in the theories of psychoanalysis in particular. Freud stated more than once that psychoanalysis has no *Weltanschauung*; or alternatively that it simply shares that of science. Now one of Wisdom's main points is that there *is* no one scientific *Weltanschauung*, and that scientists deceive themselves if they believe that their theories are independent of an implicitly accepted *Weltanschauung*, which cannot be confirmed or refuted by any kind of testing, as can the other parts of their scientific theories. To cite one of Wisdom's examples, the two current and opposed astronomical theories of the origin of the universe appear to be espoused by their respective proponents in accordance with their belief or non-belief in God. The two psychoanalytic theories with which Wisdom mainly concerned himself were on the one hand Freud's libido theory, and on the other hand the theories which base themselves fundamentally on object-relationship, such as Fairbairn's, but, in Wisdom's view, Melanie Klein's theory as well.

Now our main subject at the coming Congress is aggression, not libido; but clearly neither can be considered in isolation from the other. The importance of aggression was, of course, implicit in Freud's earlier work, but his conclusion that he had much underestimated it seems to have taken shape during the years of the first world war that immediately preceded his writing of 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle' (Freud,

1920). No doubt psychoanalysts everywhere were deeply interested in Freud's new point of view and in his revised classification of instincts which gave equal status to aggression and libido, even if many found it difficult or impossible to follow Freud all the way in his concept of the death instinct. The new ideas were, I believe, adopted with more enthusiasm in some areas than in others. It was only when I came to London from Vienna in 1932 that I discovered what a transformation had affected psychoanalysis, especially perhaps in England. Crudely expressed, it seemed that the major emphasis was now on aggression and the analysis of the negative transference; libidinal impulses were on the whole good and could be left to look after themselves, provided 'the negative' was properly analysed. Civilization depended on the taming of aggression rather than on the sublimation of sexuality.

I have made the tentative suggestion, soon to be modified, that our greatly increased interest in aggression originated with the startling new ideas that Freud first communicated in 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle'. They were, of course, further elaborated, especially in 'The Ego and the Id' (Freud, 1923) and in 'Civilization and its Discontents' (Freud, 1930). These developments contained much else besides the recognition of the immense importance of aggression in human life. From the point of view of theory, I would pick out especially the principle that instincts serve the tendency to reinstate a former condition—a principle with which we have become familiar in two other guises: the principle of homeostasis, and the theory of cybernetics and feedback mechanisms. This, I suppose, is the essence of what Freud described as being beyond or more fundamental than the pleasure principle. It was Freud's bold generalization of this new principle that seemed to justify his introduction of the death instinct, since it was based on the assumption that all organic life originated from inorganic matter. Unfortu-

nately he confused the issue by invoking the second law of thermodynamics; apart from various other considerations, this is irrelevant to the point at issue, since it applies only to a closed system, whereas it is one of the characteristics of a living system that it is precisely *not* closed.

Now I am well aware that all this is very familiar to my readers and has often been argued before. I want to follow a somewhat different line by suggesting that the real beginning of the new development in Freud's thinking should be recognized not in 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle' but in his introduction of the concept of narcissism between 1910 and 1914, and especially in the paper he devoted to this subject (Freud, 1914). The discovery that the ego is cathected with libido (i.e. is taken as, or instead of, an object of love) to Freud's mind evidently nullified his previous classification of instincts under the two headings of ego instincts and sexual ones. It seems almost certain that his concern about the need for a modification of his instinct theory was much influenced by the pressure being exerted on him during the years we are considering by Jung in favour of an all-embracing libido synonymous with mental energy in general. At the same time Freud had to make it clear that he disagreed fundamentally with Adler's ego-orientated views, based as these were on a theory of social motivation rather than on narcissism. Had not Freud been harassed in this way on two fronts, might not he have felt able to maintain the distinction between ego instincts and libidinal ones, recognizing merely that *part* of the ego's activity derives its energy from libidinal sources? It seems to have been left to Heinz Hartmann from 1937 onwards (Hartmann, 1939) to re-endow the ego with its own energies by establishing the concept of an autonomous ego with a conflict-free zone. Perhaps the refinement of Hartmann's formulations has tended to conceal the fact that his startlingly new ideas of 1937 were in a sense a return of what Freud had 'repressed'; and some of the resistance they have aroused perhaps needs to be understood in the light of this fact. If this is correct, then it may be important to get this unconsciously motivated resistance out of the way before we can criticize Hartmann's theory purely on its merits.

Just now, however, I wish to return to the development of Freud's last instinct theory and its crucial importance in relation to aggression. I have expressed the view that at the time it was

germinating, between 1910 and 1914, Freud was under pressure from two sides. But we have his own statements to convince us that one of the weighty considerations for him was his conviction of an essential bipolarity in mental life (Freud, 1920, p. 53), a bipolarity which he felt sure must be reflected in the nature of instincts, so that these must belong to two great classes in mutual conflict and opposition. True, he justified this view clinically by stressing the universality of conflict in mental life; but it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that his conviction of essential bipolarity (which is not a necessary deduction from conflict) contains an important element of what Wisdom would, I think, characterize as *Weltanschauung*, namely an implicit assumption which is not clinically testable. Indeed, this notion seems to be derived from conscious and unconscious human thinking and feeling, as revealed in myth and religion, and having nearly always an evaluative overtone—in such opposites, for example, as light and darkness, good and bad, God and Devil. But if we look at the first example it becomes evident that in this case the bipolarity is spurious (objectively, that is); for darkness is not really the polar opposite of light, but is simply the relative or absolute *absence* of light, in other words merely one end of a scale of lightness. This idea may be applicable in a number of other areas of apparent bipolarity.

Perhaps more important in determining Freud's conviction of instinctual bipolarity was the manifest existence of bipolarity in the sexual area—male versus female, active versus passive, etc. Indeed there is an unmistakable family resemblance between Freud's concept of an essential bisexuality of the individual (that is, a fusion of male and female, not merely of masculine and feminine) and his other great concept of the fusion of libido and aggression. If such bipolarity was for Freud a self-evident truth then, quite apart from the problems presented by Jung and Adler, it was essential to find an adequate instinctual counterweight and adversary to the libido. During the ten years from 1910 to 1920 aggression and finally the death instinct became more and more firmly consolidated in this role. Of course, even if my suggestion is correct that in reaching his conclusion Freud was strongly influenced by an untestable *Weltanschauung*, this would by no means prove that his conclusion was mistaken, though perhaps it should cause us to scrutinize it with more than average caution.

Clearly two independent hypotheses are contained in Freud's last instinct theory: first, that aggression is an instinct, equal and opposite to the sexual instinct; and second, that aggression originally takes the form of a self-directed death instinct derived ultimately, on the homeostatic principle, from the fact that living organisms developed out of inorganic matter. Most analysts, I believe, have long since accepted the first proposition, and possibly somewhat too uncritically if it is assumed that ultimately all mental activity expresses either Eros or Thanatos, and nearly always a fusion of both. But Hartmann has argued cogently for the existence of other forces in the mind, forces which would probably at one time have been described as ego instincts.

No doubt some of the difficulty arises from the instinct concept itself. However useful it may be to ethologists, perhaps it is beginning to be less so for analysts. Indeed when we try to apply Freud's (1915) views on instinct as developed in 'Instincts and Their Vicissitudes' to the postulated aggressive instinct we get into trouble. For example, what 'somatic process' in which 'part or organ' is its source? The musculature was once suggested, but clearly that is merely the instrument, not the source.

Curiously enough, when we proceed to the second hypothesis, that of the death instinct, these difficulties diminish, provided we are prepared to follow Freud in assuming that all living matter is clamouring to lose its organic status and return to the inorganic. In that case, there *is* a somatic need for death and the source of the death instinct is indeed the entire body; it then becomes possible to imagine that this source should give rise to some kind of 'demand made upon the mind for work' (Freud, 1915). The piece of mental work might well include the effort to reconcile the demand for death coming from the soma with the conflicting demand, namely to avoid death until the appropriate moment; and this mental task might readily be combined with and achieved by externalization of the aggression, as suggested by Freud. Perhaps another piece of the work that is demanded is concerned with the need to reconcile the demands of the death instinct with the libidinal ones. Thus, in what may seem a paradoxical way, the apparently so unbiological death instinct theory seems to be more easily reconciled with Freud's original, biologically orientated, libido theory than is the theory of primary aggressive instinct. It may well have become

apparent to Freud that in this way he could retain his biological framework by altering biology through the introduction of a new principle, namely a death instinct pervading the whole biological universe. This grandiose concept is undoubtedly attractive in some ways, and we know that Freud found it increasingly so and increasingly convincing. But it seems doubtful whether Freud considered that the life and death instinct theory had any *direct* clinical application. He may well have thought it too remote from ordinary life to lend itself to interpretative use. Such use would surely run the risk of a kind of short-circuiting operation, glossing over so many intermediate stages and neglecting so much mental content that its therapeutic effect, if any, would probably be on a suggestive basis.

As we have noted, most analysts have compromised with the death instinct by accepting the theory of a primary instinct of aggression, but rejecting or at least ignoring the self-directed death instinct theory. But this was by no means true of Melanie Klein. Although it is doubtful if Freud appreciated this fact, she was in this matter more royalist than the king, in that she took the death instinct as a vitally important fact in the psychology of the individual, rather than seeing it as a cosmological concept. Not only did she follow Freud in conceiving of manifest aggression as a turning outwards of the immediately life-threatening death instinct; she also conceived of the infant as feeling persecuted in consequence of the internal threat, and then in turn persecuted from outside, following the externalization of the death instinct. The use that she made in this connection of the adjectives 'good' and 'bad' is interesting; the 'bad' object, of course, is the one on to or into which the aggression has been projected. Seen from this point of view, the ultimate 'badness' is the death instinct which is an integral part of the infant himself—a sort of original sin. Of course, Klein was also perfectly well aware that the object experienced as good is the one that satisfies, and that the bad object is the frustrating one, which arouses an aggressive response, destructive fantasies, etc. But the explanatory use she makes of the death instinct theory inevitably gives the impression that ultimately it is this inherent 'bad' element in the infant that gives rise to trouble, rather than, for example, any failure in mothering. I think that for some analysts it is this acceptance of the death instinct and its clinical application as an explanatory concept which constitutes a very serious stum-

bling block, separating them from the Kleinian approach and making it difficult for them to profit from the very real and valuable contributions that have been made by many adherents of the Kleinian school. The fact that this aspect of Kleinian theory appears to be so literally derived from Freud's own post-1920 views makes the matter particularly confusing. This confusion, indeed, is my main justification for writing the present paper. Jones (1957, p. 287) in his biography of Freud says that of 50 or so papers devoted to the topic of the death instinct, half of those published during the first decade after 1920 supported Freud's view, in the second decade only a third, and in the third decade none at all—thus implying that it is dying a natural death. I do not know how many analysts have written on the subject since 1950, nor in what sense. But what Jones failed to mention is that virtually every publication of Klein and her followers has contained an explicit or implicit endorsement of the death instinct theory; so that it is by no means dead.

Leaving aside the death instinct at this point, let us turn our attention to aggression; for even if we feel justified in discarding the former, we must still come to terms theoretically with the latter. No one will deny that the study of aggression is vastly important in any effort to understand the problems of human behaviour and feeling—so vitally important that it is essential to avoid fundamental mistakes if we can. To elevate aggression to the status of one of the two primary instincts or driving forces in organic life may not, however, be the best way to take account of this importance, particularly when this is combined with Freud's idea that aggression and destructiveness is primarily directed against the self (a view contrary, of course, to his earlier one). In a sense it is highly explanatory, but does it not explain too much and too facilely, like the hypothesis of God and Devil? Yet this explanation seems to have been adopted by Melanie Klein and her followers. On this basis certain things are held to be primary (envy is a good example) which seem anything but primary to those who do not start off with the premiss of a primary self-directed death instinct.

The objection may be raised that up to this point my criticism has been essentially negative and unconstructive, and it may perhaps be thought that I am under an obligation to propose some kind of alternative theory. In the first place, however, this would be much too

vast an undertaking for the present occasion; and secondly (a far more cogent point) I am in no way equipped for the task. Nevertheless one or two suggestions of a more constructive kind may be attempted here.

The growth of cells, their division, multiplication and differentiation, the limitation of the growth of organs, and the later further development of these organs and of their functions by maturational processes—all of this is evidently built into the constitution of the fertilized ovum from the start by mechanisms which are becoming increasingly understood by biochemists and others, and these developments are hardly instinctual in Freud's sense. A point we must consider in connection with Freud's concept of instinct is this: when does anything we can consider mental begin to come into the developmental sequence? When is there for the first time a mental apparatus upon which the soma can make demands for work?

Let us assume a primary undifferentiated state at birth, dominated by primary-process functioning. The neonate certainly has a number of automatic homeostatic mechanisms; and some of them, such as crying, are adapted to bring about homeostasis through the intermediary of another person. Thus, crying when certain kinds of homeostatic balance are upset (as in hunger) may reasonably be regarded as an instinctual pattern of behaviour in Freud's sense. When the homeostasis is not achieved the crying will be intensified and will take on what we tend to interpret as an angry or aggressive quality. In the Kleinian view or terminology, the object has turned from good to bad; and in death instinct theory, whether Kleinian or Freudian, the upset balance of homeostasis threatens survival, because of the danger of annihilation from the baby's own death instinct; the customary defence against threats from within is brought into operation by projecting the threat and feeling it as coming from an external persecutor (Klein's bad breast) in relation to which the barrier against stimuli can be put in action (Freud). But is this formulation in terms of death instinct really necessary?

Suppose we agree to assume that all instincts (*Triebe*) are essentially homeostatic. The newborn baby will then be instinctually concerned to keep himself in the same state as before birth—not, be it carefully noted, in the same state as before conception, when he was *not* inorganic but was *non-existent* as an entity (an entirely different thing). His instinctual concern, then,

is to remain supplied with ample oxygen, with warmth, and with all the nutritive materials hitherto brought to him by the placental circulation.

Oxygen is taken care of more or less efficiently by the automatic homeostatic mechanism of breathing. But both warmth and nutrition have to be supplied by the mother, and if necessary she will be reminded of her duties by the baby's cries. The homeostatic character of instinct was implicit in Freud's (1915) original formulation that an instinct (*Trieb*) has a source, an aim, and an object. For clearly the source is an upset in the balance, a temporary failure of homeostasis; the aim is to redress the balance and achieve homeostasis, thereby substituting pleasure for unpleasure; and the object is that through which this aim may be achieved. From this point of view, unless we reject the above formulation of instinct, we must agree that all instincts are homeostatic. But should we necessarily accept Freud's formula as universal? It fits very well the paradigm hunger. But what of love? Or to put it more soberly, what of the sexual instinct? And what of aggression?

First, as regards the sexual impulse, I think that at the time of Freud's first formulations the source was guessed to be some sort of bodily tension, say in the seminal vesicles (but where, then, in the female?). Later, Freud considered chemical rather than physical sources and thus anticipated the discovery of sexual hormones. Nowadays the activity of hormones is certainly recognized as an important part of the mechanism, but not, I think, as the source of the impulse, in any simple sense. For example, Michael (1968) has shown that sexual activity in the *male* Rhesus monkey is dependent on the hormonal status of the *female* partner.

When we consider aggression the problem of a source becomes even more difficult. The discovery of 'centres' in the brain does not solve the problem, any more than we can implicate the musculature, for a centre is hardly a source, but rather a nodal point in the neural mechanism. And clearly if we cannot identify the

source we are in no position to specify the aim in accordance with Freud's formula.

One way out is to change the focus, and this is what Freud did in 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle'. He changed his microscope for a telescope and contemplated the living universe rather than the human individual; he envisaged it as a vast contest between life instinct and death instinct, and he then applied these ideas to the human individual, whose inner conflict he saw in terms of such a struggle.

But if we cannot accept this way out of the difficulty, what then? The most obvious alternative (and the one favoured by Fenichel (1945, p. 59)) is the view that aggression is a *way* of doing things rather than an activity in its own right—war as a continuation of policy, to use a familiar analogy. The policy may be ultimately sexual in origin, or may be egoistic. If 'egoistic' and 'narcissistic' must be equated, then perhaps we may have to accept a unitary instinct theory. Even though this was, as Jones puts it, anathema to Freud, if his feeling was due to his *Weltanschauung* instead of being based on tested empirical data, then surely we are entitled to take a different attitude. Perhaps the death instinct theory might reasonably be left to rest in peace had it not come, in certain quarters, to be applied clinically and to be used in support of clinical theories. The other fact to note in this connection is that the majority of analysts seem to have compromised with the theory, accepting primary aggression as an instinct but rejecting the death instinct. Is it not possible that this compromise acceptance is due to our reluctance to say that in this area Freud departed from the line of development which he himself had so brilliantly initiated and carried through, and the line that most of us have tried to follow?

The theoretical and practical problems posed by aggression are indeed formidable; my purpose in this contribution has been to suggest that a simple declaration that we are dealing with a fundamental, irreducible element in the human constitution may be in the nature of a pseudo-solution.

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