

REFLECTIONS ON THE DEATH DRIVE: COMMENTARY ON 'THE SO-CALLED DEATH DRIVE' BY JEAN LAPLANCHE

David Bell

The concept of the death drive remains controversial. Some have tended to account for what they regard as a peculiar diversion in Freud's thinking, a diversion which lacks credibility, by recourse to the context in which the paper was written – the horrors of the Great War, with its wanton and senseless destruction, Freud's cancer, his awareness of his own death, as if this can provide an excuse for this 'bizarre' departure. Others see this paper as not really a departure but the final explicit statement of something that had been implicit almost from the beginning. The issues at stake go beyond psychoanalysis and trench upon the conception of human nature within which it embeds itself. It is the difference between man as the 'noble savage', a creature made destructive by experience, particularly the experience of frustration, and the model perhaps expressed in the idea of 'original sin' which holds that we enter the world with the will to destroy already beating in our breasts, creating a pervasive tendency which culture can only to a limited extent mitigate. Given that frustration is an ever-present phenomenon from the beginning of life, it is not likely that there can be any empirical way of deciding this matter.

British analysts, and particularly Kleinians, when discussing the death drive, make ample use of clinical material. The material serves not to prove or disprove the existence of the death drive, which of course it cannot do, as clinical material is always interpretable, but more serves to illustrate how the model functions in the analyst's work. (This is achieved, in my view, to great effect in the contributions of Segal (1997), Rosenfeld (1971) and Joseph (1982).) Laplanche's paper, coming as it does from a different tradition, causes me some difficulty as from my perspective it would be helpful to understand the way his theoretical formulations inform the

DAVID BELL is a training and supervising psychoanalyst at the British Psychoanalytical Society. He is also Consultant Psychiatrist at the Tavistock Clinic. He has published and lectured widely on Freud scholarship, psychoanalysis and culture, the psychoanalytic understanding of psychosis, and the work of Bion. He is the author of *Paranoia* (Icon Books, 2003) and a contributing editor of *Psychoanalysis and Culture: A Kleinian Perspective* and *Reason and Passion* (both being reprinted by Karnac, 2004). Address for correspondence: Flat 4, Mullion Court, 112 Finchley Road, London NW3 5JH. [email: dbell@tavi-port.nhs.uk]

clinical work. But, and here I am in agreement with the thrust of Laplanche's work in this area, a psychoanalytic concept such as the death drive has also to show its value through the *theoretical work* it is able to do.

Beyond the Pleasure Principle is a complex paper which functions on a number of different levels. I understand some of its central themes as arising from two nodal points in the development of Freud's thinking. I am referring firstly to the paper on narcissism (Freud 1914), which introduced the model of ego and object instincts, and also to the early work of the Project which introduced the model of mental functioning that has its fullest development in the chapter 7 of *The Interpretation of Dreams* (Freud 1900). Taking first the narcissism paper. Here, in his attempt to deal with certain theoretical and clinical problems,¹ Freud introduced a new concept, that of primary narcissism, which brought in its wake a deep conceptual difficulty – it threatened the duality on which much of Freud's theorizing depended. The philosopher Richard Wollheim put it as follows: 'Remove the duality and the whole theory of the psychoneurosis would surely crumble. And it was precisely this duality that the discovery of primary narcissism appeared to threaten' (Wollheim 1971, p. 179).

This difficulty remains as a tension that is not resolved until the introduction of the death drive in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (Freud 1920) which restores a fundamental duality (that between the life and death drives) that dominates mental life. This gives the model a particular value, at least if one accepts that such a duality is necessary to our model of the mind.

Turning now to Freud's earlier writings. It is characteristic of Freud's work that it has a certain 'doubling back on itself' quality – namely pre-occupations that were there right from the beginning, which have continued to influence his thinking, suddenly reappear almost as if they are new discoveries. *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* provides a perfect example of this for here Freud returns to one of his earliest psychoanalytic pre-occupations (see Freud 1950) that is, the mind's tendency to divest itself of energy, a kind of psychic entropy, which he now brings to the centre, once more viewing this process as constitutive of a force in the mind driving towards death.

It is evident that Freud calls upon his concept of the death drive to do work for phenomena which, at least at a manifest level, appear to be very different. On the one hand there is a something that is noisy in its destructiveness, aimed outwards and also towards the self. On the other, the silent pull, ever present as a tendency, towards a state of mind that approximates to absence of tension, inertia, mindlessness. The latter, *not the former*, is discussed in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* referred to as the 'Nirvana' principle. The idea of the death drive as unbound violence, full of passion, comes later particularly in *Civilization and Its Discontents* (Freud 1930)

where Freud describes the Destructive Drive '(whose) final aim is to undo connections and so destroy things'.

Although Freud appears to believe that he came upon the importance of aggression in a tardy way, I am in agreement with Laplanche that here he misconceives his own work – awareness of violence is there from the beginning. Yet I think it is true that subsequent to his formulation of the 'Todestrieb' destructiveness gains a firmer foothold in his metapsychology.

These two different phenomenologies of the death drive retain their place in contemporary Kleinian thinking. The passionate death drive tends to be conceived of as a hatred of otherness or a kind of primal envy that arises from awareness of the object's goodness and separateness. The more deadening qualities find their place in the conceptual understanding of states of mindlessness. Whether these two phenomenal forms of the death drive are related to each other in some fundamental way remains an interesting and important question.

In his highly condensed paper 'Negation' Freud (1925) describes two kinds of negation. On the one hand there is that type of negation which is a way of 'taking cognisance of what is repressed'. An example would be of a patient who says 'You ask who this person in the dream can be. It is *not* my mother'. In other words the person has had the thought 'It *is* my mother' but the continuance of repression is denoted by the addition of the negation sign to the thought. Such a process one might regard as a kind of half-way house – the negation is a thinking-judging activity. On the other hand there is something *qualitatively quite different* – which Freud terms 'the negativism which is displayed by some psychotics' which he links to 'the instinct of destruction'.

Bion in what might be described as an English 'return to Freud' makes explicit what is, I believe, implicit in Freud's account. He centres his attention on the mental function that he terms 'thinking' which is closely allied to, though not identical with, Freud's 'judging'. Thinking involves the bringing together of objects in the mind, links ideas with emotion, and so gives them significance.

Thinking in Bion's sense is an expression of the epistemophilic drive of Freud and Klein. He described a Mephistophelian principle that opposes thought – it separates thought from feeling, strips ideas of significance, and attacks all meaning. He called this principle -K and it is this process, I am suggesting, which underlies the more malignant type of negation referred to in Freud's paper. For Freud, Klein and Bion this process is a manifestation of the most destructive mental processes. Negation under the aegis of this principle is *not* a first step toward judgement but an attack on the function that makes any judgements possible. What is attacked is not a particular desired object but the feeling of desire itself, wiping it out and replacing it with a world either of no desire or, which amounts to the same thing (given that it is in the nature of what desire *is* that it is ineluctably unfulfillable), a world in which all desire is fulfilled.

There is a link here I think to *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. What is beyond the pleasure principle is not beyond it, in that it is not to do with pleasure, but it *is* beyond it in the sense that it is not to do with *any particular pleasure*. It is not the pleasure derived from the satisfaction of any particular desire, but pleasure that derives from the negation of all desire.

A patient of mine brought the following dream:

There had been a nuclear explosion. The dust, fallout, fell all over me. It was pleasant and peaceful.

It is important to note, and I think this is typical of such situations, that this dream *refers* to something that is very violent which, however, is not witnessed. The violent act is communicated in the passive voice 'there *had been* a nuclear explosion'.

A question naturally arises as to whether hatred of thought is a kind of irreducible datum, or is a manifestation of a deeper process. It seems to me that at a very fundamental level the ego has a hatred of anything that presents itself to it as an obstruction. The world, including the world of other minds, imposes exactly this kind of obstruction. But this only becomes a truly *psychological* problem when there is *awareness* of these features of the world, which includes awareness of the loss of the object and the unfulfillability of desire. This awareness is basic to thought. Thinking at some level therefore always presents itself to the mind as an obstruction both because it is thought (and not action) *and* because such thinking brings to the mind the awareness of the features of reality just described. It is for this reason that thought is hated.

In a sense it is a case of shooting the messenger (awareness of reality) because the message (the limitations and obstructions imposed by the world) cannot be borne.

I suggested above that the death drive manifests itself in two phenomenal forms. One noisy and manifestly destructive seeks to tear asunder what Eros binds; it derives from, as Freud put it, the 'ego's primordial repudiation of anything external'. The other works away more quietly seducing the ego into oblivion. However these phenomena, on closer inspection, turn out to be intimately related and this was well demonstrated by my patient's dream of the nuclear explosion.

Returning to my patient's dream, destruction of the capacity to think is clearly a violent process. This is the *active* element of Thanatos; the world that ensues, the pure pleasure to be derived from meaninglessness (the nuclear fallout), its passive manifestation.

Having sketched out the way I conceive of the death drive I will return to Laplanche's contribution. In the account given above I have said little about Eros and it seems to me that it is here that a real problem arises in the Freudian account, and this is one of the problematics that Laplanche's model addresses. In early Freud the sexual instinct is passionate,

polymorphously perverse and disrupts order – however, in late Freud Eros, which is bound up with the sexual, is represented as worryingly reasonable. Eros unites, binds things together in ever more complex units and represents order. So now it is *not* the sexual drive that tears things asunder, but the death drive (in its passionate noisy form). Eros in early Freud is Dionysiac, in late Freud Apollonian.

I think that in their work analysts know that this is far too simplistic. The wish to tear things asunder is often a sign not of death but of life and this has to be distinguished from more deadly activities. It is this problem which I think Laplanche addresses in his formulation of the ‘sexual life and the sexual death instincts’. And this formulation clearly has the advantage of retaining the sexual as a violent and passionate force. I am unsure, however, whether or not this model allows a place for the kind of deadening mental anti-life processes I have referred to above.

There is a further difficulty I would like to raise and it concerns what we mean by the adjective ‘sexual’. It is clear that Freud’s spectacular extension of the sexual in mental life is one of his lasting achievements. Yet whenever one tries to pin down exactly what we mean by sexual the term becomes, at least in my experience, elusive. Laplanche’s terms ‘sexual life drive’ and ‘sexual death drive’ could run the risk of viewing *everything* as sexual, so undermining the fundamental duality some think of as essential to the psychoanalytic model.

I would now like to turn to the question of masochism discussed at length by Laplanche (1976) in his book *Life and Death in Psychoanalysis*, and which clearly has a bearing on any consideration of the death drive. Laplanche has pointed out that we cannot evade the problem of masochism by using a kind of theoretical escape route – locating the pleasure *elsewhere*. I refer here to the suggestion that the masochist obtains his pleasure, not directly, but as a result of a split in himself that allows him to obtain pleasure not from the masochism *per se* but through identification with the sadistic attack. Here pain is suffered as a kind of ‘tax’ at one site, as Laplanche puts it, in order to obtain pleasure elsewhere. If this were so there would be no ‘economic problem of masochism’ for the problem arises because, as Laplanche puts it, ‘... the subject is masochistic only insofar as he derives enjoyment *precisely there where* he suffers’ (p. 104).

I think a similar issue arises in contemporary psychoanalytic thinking as to how we think about human destructiveness. This was brought out most clearly in a conference that took place in 1998 to honour Hanna Segal. It was clear that there the death drive was conceived of according to two different models, which are however not mutually exclusive. One model gives emphasis to a pure pleasure in annihilation whilst the other gives emphasis to a process, continuous rather than episodic, quiet rather than noisy, which brings about a deadening and paralysis of development, associated with sadistic pleasure. This process, far from destroying the

object, requires that it remain alive in order that it can continue to be treated in this way. Feldman gave emphasis to this process (see Feldman 2000).

In both these models destructiveness is associated with pleasure. Some have tried to account for the pleasure in destruction as arising from a fusion of instincts. This in my view amounts to no more than a tautology. But if we unhook pleasure from Eros, we can then allow a place for pleasure in destructiveness, which might be close to Laplanche's 'sexual death instinct'.

The noisy death drive tends, I think, to present itself as a tyranny. The patient requires satisfaction from the analyst, demands that the analyst/the world fits in with him, in order to sustain the illusion that he, so to speak, created the breast in his own image. The countertransference experience here is of foreboding, dread, and fear of disturbing the patient, often accompanied by the temptation to act out, as a way of the analyst asserting his identity. We all have our valencies for coping with this situation. However, the advantage here is that the difficulty is, in its very noisiness, manifest.

Another type of difficulty arises when the processes are more quiet and subtle. This can occur with patients who endeavour to fit in with the analyst, becoming a baby that fulfils all mother's desires. Here the analyst sees agreement but agreement which lacks depth and which serves not development but stasis and which can provoke deep feelings of despair. Betty Joseph has made the study of such difficulties central to her work.

Conclusion

In conclusion I would like to say that for me the engagement with Laplanche's work is exciting and provocative. As a contemporary Kleinian I approach the questions he raises with a particular frame of reference but I am acutely aware of what Laplanche calls the problem of 'translation'. He refers here to the way the message received from the 'other' is managed in such a way as to delete certain aspects of its meaning. I think I am faced with exactly this problem in considering Laplanche's work. It seems to me that there is some real confluence of ideas between my way of thinking about the death drive and that of Laplanche – in particular, his notion of a sexual death instinct and his exploration of masochism (the pleasure in pain) approach important problematics that I share. Like him, most contemporary Kleinians wish to free the idea of the death drive from the biological baggage which Freud used to introduce it and view it as a problem in human psychology.

However, I am also aware that in approaching his work I am necessarily deleting certain aspects, as Laplanche's work is inscribed within a model which also has important differences from the theoretical world which I occupy. In particular he, as I understand it, thinks of the unconscious as coming into existence in order to cope with the enigmatic message deriving

from the existence or, more properly, the awareness of existence, of the other. Although I would agree that the way the mind deals with this problem is crucial for development – and I share here with Laplanche the emphasis on the need to sustain in the mind the awareness of the ‘otherness’ of the other,² I do not think of the coming into being of the unconscious itself in this way.

Further, I am unsure as to where he would locate within his framework the kind of quiet deadly anti-thought processes I have discussed.

I do hope that there is real room for discussion here and not an ‘incommensurability of paradigms’ arising from my perhaps rather magpie-like taking from Laplanche’s work only those aspects which resonate with my own.

Notes

1. See Segal and Bell (1991) where Freud’s paper on narcissism is discussed at length.
2. This awareness entails preserving the sense of the unknown, rather than it becoming ‘saturated’, to borrow Bion’s term.

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