

# Myth of the Death Instinct. About an aberration of psychoanalysis

by Andreas Peglau<sup>1</sup>



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In 1932, Freud (1999c, p. 101) referred to "[t]he theory of drives" as "our mythology," drives as "mythical beings." In 1920, in *Jenseits des Lustprinzips* (Beyond the principle of pleasure, Freud 1999a, cf. May 2013), he had first publicly presented the most controversial of these "beings": the destructive or death drive, later named Thanatos, after the Greek god of death. Even today, the assumption of such an instinct has influence inside and outside psychoanalysis - although its remoteness from reality has long been proven.

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<sup>1</sup> Slightly modified translation of the original article published in 2018 ([https://andreas-peglau-psychoanalyse.de/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Mythos-Todestrieb-pid\\_2018\\_02\\_Peglau.pdf](https://andreas-peglau-psychoanalyse.de/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Mythos-Todestrieb-pid_2018_02_Peglau.pdf))

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**Please note:** My English skills are not very good. Therefore, I first translated the text with [DeepL](#) and then corrected it. I expect that there are still translation errors - and ask those who discover such errors to send a message to [info@andreas-peglau-psychoanalyse.de](mailto:info@andreas-peglau-psychoanalyse.de)

## The eternal evil

Initially offered as speculation, the thanatosis idea soon gained, via Freud (1999b, p. 478f.), "such power [...] that I can no longer think otherwise." Hans-Jürgen Wirth (1989, pp. 86f.) points to the horrors of World War I as an influencing factor and judges Freud's construct as an "attempt [...] to make the misery and banality of his own illness, his own death, and the death of people he loved more bearable through scientific pathos and myth-making."

In 1930, in *Das Unbehagen in der Kultur*, Freud wrote that the life instinct "Eros" shares "world domination" with the death instinct. Through the "self-destructive instinct" operating in all living things, there is a "primary hostility of human beings toward one another," an "innate 'inclination [...] to 'evil,' to aggression, destruction, and [...] cruelty" (Freud 1999b, pp. 471, 479, 481, 506). In Franz Alexander (1938, p. 69) it then read like this:

"At birth the child is not in the least adapted to the demands of social life; it is [...] an antisocial being. [...] This truth was anticipated by Diderot in his assertion that the very young child would be the most destructive criminal if it only had the power to carry out its aggressions."

This added to the Freudian doctrine a rationale for oppression, murder, war and terror as well as for childish aberrations and neuroses, which spared the need to think compellingly about social causes, personal responsibility and fundamental possibilities for change.

This reinforced tendencies to devalue social contexts in favor of inner-psychic conflicts, also in therapy (Cremerius 1995, pp. 29-34). In 1937 Ernst Simmel (1993, pp. 168, 175) wrote "[t]he treatment of the death drive becomes a problem for psychoanalytic psychohygiene," "Eros and the destructive drive are the powers that are to be strengthened or weakened in the individual patient."

There was little in Freud on how this was to be done concretely. He described how he envisioned the detour of destructive energy into strengthening the "superego," that is, into increased self-suppression, and thought that the "mixing" of the life and death drives would reduce the effect of the latter (Freud 1999b, pp. 481-493).

Moreover, the idea that thanatos, too, could be "sublimated" in socially approved actions - as in the "surgeon who dips his knife into the blood of his patients for the blessing of suffering humanity" - was obvious. This comparison was drawn by Felix Schottländer in 1931 in the journal *Die Psychoanalytische Bewegung* (issue 5, p. 405), which was devoted to the theme "Psychoanalysis and Politics."

There Schottländer and several of his colleagues demonstrated the conclusions one could reach if one took the death drive at face value. Thus, on the cause of wars, they said: "The id" - as the supposed home of Thanatos - "gives the ego the order to build cannons and then lights the fuses without asking the ego". "Bonding and peace" only come about if an opponent exists "against whom common hatred may be discharged". Peace is also "murderous" because of the death instinct: "a continuation of war, only with different means. More meaningful than military disarmament, therefore, was to offer Thanatos substitute satisfactions, e.g. public executions (ibid., pp. 402, 405, 434f., 450ff.).

György Gerö may also have referred to these pronouncements when he attested to the analytical mainstream in 1935 "systematic suppression of reality" and "imbezille confusion of world events with treatment hours" (Fenichel 1989, p. 115).

## Internal dissenting voices

Since its emergence, the death drive myth has admittedly been contradicted within psychoanalysis as well. For the period from 1920 to 1940, 17 fundamental rejections were evidenced in 48 analytic publications on the subject (Bohleber 2001, p. 884).

The most consequential rejection was published by Wilhelm Reich in 1932 in the *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* under the title *Der masochistische Charakter. Eine sexualökonomische Widerlegung des Todestriebes und des Wiederholungszwanges* (A Sexual Economic Refutation of the Death Drive and the Repetition Compulsion). This article played an essential role in Reich's expulsion from the Deutsche Psychoanalytische Gesellschaft (DPG) and International Psychoanalytic Association (IPA) in 1933, and thus in the sustained cold-setting of "left-wing" socially critical analysts (Peglau 2017a, pp. 149-157). By means of a detailed case presentation, Reich showed here how masochistic needs-which Freud now also considered "primary" and death drive-related-arise in childhood. The later, "masochistic" self-punishment tendency, according to Reich, was originally based on a behavior by means of which an expected, even worse torment was averted. Therefore, this behavior was fear-reducing and was retained - not because of a biologically anchored "repetition compulsion".

Even later, there were analysts who clearly dissociated themselves from the death drive mythology, such as Helmut Thomä and Horst Kächele (1996, pp. 153-166) in their textbook of psychoanalytic therapy or the U.S. Henri Parens (2017, p. 43), who put forward an alternative theory of aggression.

## Thanatos in the 21st century

Meanwhile, many analysts refrain from taking a position at all vis-à-vis Freud's drive theory (Yorke 2002, p. 7). However, already because Melanie Klein "took over the death drive concept from Freud without any special theoretical effort [...]" (Bohleber 2001, p. 901) and the "Kleinians" rose to the most powerful factions of psychoanalysis, the thanatos myth is more widespread today than in Freud's time (cf. *ibid.*, pp. 865-868.) Moreover, Jacques Lacan's school relies on the existence of a death drive, albeit interpreted in its own way.<sup>2</sup> Also, as a "focal point" for "psychoanalytic political psychology," Alfred Krowoza named in 2006 in the *Freud Handbook* that the death drive seeks to gain "supremacy over Eros" (Lohmann/Pfeiffer 2006, p. 428). In 2012, "[t]he psychoanalyst [...] Rainer Krause" spoke at a conference "about the 'joy of murder' that is inherent in all of us" (Schon 2012). The neuroscientist and psychotherapist Joachim Bauer (2011, p. 16) therefore formulates quite rightly in the present tense: the death or aggression drive is "the big flop of psychoanalysis."

That Bauer conflates the two drive terms is conclusive. In fact, psychoanalysis often defers to the idea that there is at least an aggression drive, similar to the views of the behaviorist Konrad Lorenz (Fromm 1973, pp. 13-19, 71-78). Freud (1999b, p. 481) already considered the "aggression instinct" to be the "descendant and main representative" of the death instinct, and thus did not make any real delimitation. Probably for this reason, many of his colleagues also did not bother to distinguish between the two, so for example Felix Schottländer in the already mentioned issue 5 of *Die Psychoanalytische Bewegung* 1931, p. 402. At the end of the 1970s, Peter Ziese (1982, p. 341) stated: "If one disregards the frustration theory, the existence of an aggression drive is no longer disputed in the analytic literature."

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<sup>2</sup> <http://lacan-entziffern.de/todestrieb/lacans-konzept-des-todestriebs-im-seminar-ueber-die-ethik-der-psychoanalyse/>

Even in this view, man remains dangerous in a libidinal way, since he would - if he gave in to his "nature" - provoke, attack and injure quarrels regularly and without external cause: a time bomb in need of permanent control or suppression.

## Need for clarification

Myths may have a rational core, but to stop at their mere propagation is not science. The latter is defined, among other things, by the fact that it formulates decidable hypotheses and tests their truth content. The Thanatos construct can also be subjected to this examination. Since something, which is imprinted on all life, would have to work in all life phases of all living beings at all times, the following questions offer themselves for this:

- Does the behavior of animals show that humans could have "inherited" a death instinct from them?
- Does the science of history substantiate that humans always attacked each other like "wild beasts"?
- Do ethnological studies prove that there were and are no life-affirming societies?
- Are babies marked by a death instinct?
- Do biographies of criminals indicate that they have been destructive since birth?
- Does analytical psychotherapy leave this supposedly ineradicable drive in effect?

Neither my own research nor inquiries of others concerned with the history of psychoanalysis yielded any evidence that these questions have been pursued in the mainstream of psychoanalysis through systematic research or scientifically documented investigations. One exception might be the long-term study of infants and young children - not available to me - published by Henri Parens in 1979. However, Parens (2017, p. 83) writes about this that he "did not prove that the aggression theory based on the death drive is wrong," only that he found "no evidence whatsoever for this concept." Several analysts at times searched for a physical basis for Freud's drive theory, most intensively Siegfried Bernfeld in cooperation with the engineer Sergei Feitelberg. They reported on their experiments with a "libido measuring device" undertaken from 1929 to 1935, among other things, in the 1930 *Imago* article *Der Entropiesatz und der Todestrieb* (see Peglau 2017a, pp. 299ff.).

The fact that otherwise nothing substantial can be found within psychoanalysis on the above questions may be due to the fact that they all have to be answered in the negative.

## Anatomy of human destructiveness

The latter statement can be made so categorically because the relevant research is nevertheless available - and has been since 1973, the year in which Erich Fromm, psychoanalyst and social psychologist, published *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness* (German: Fromm 1974). On the basis of numerous evidences from psychoanalysis, (social) psychology, paleontology, anthropology, neurophysiology, animal psychology, and historical science, he proved how unrealistic death and aggression drive myths are. To pick out just a few points from his work:

- Aggression in itself, derived from the Latin "aggrederere" = to go towards someone or something, is not only nothing bad, but a vital, healthy component of our repertoire of actions. Only with its help is demarcation, assertion, self-assertion and self-defense possible. The ability to be aggressive in this sense is possessed by both animals and humans. It is always linked to threatening situations or challenges and is not the result of a drive.

- Humans are able to mentally anticipate real - but also unreal, merely suggested - vital threats. This, too, can trigger in them biologically based aggression or destruction serving the preservation of the species or of the self (ibid., pp. 163-294). This is often used by power elites to generate readiness for war in masses.

- In animals, violence that goes beyond self- and species-preservation increases when their habitat is restricted, their social structure is disturbed, or they live under unnatural conditions in a zoo. In individual animal species, markedly destructive behavior also occurs in their natural environment - but it is situational and not drive-related.

- Sadistic, purposefully hostile to life or necrophilous - that is: feeling passionately attracted to everything dead or inanimate - animals, on the other hand, never behave (ibid., pp. 92-110), but exclusively humans. Fromm understandably derives the fact that the latter do this from a socialization that massively hinders or thwarts the healthy striving to realize one's own life possibilities (cf. Peglau 2017b). Even Adolf Hitler - the most prominent case presented by Fromm - did not come into the world maliciously, but only gradually became destructive (ibid., pp. 335-397).

- Historical science and archaeology offer a multitude of findings and findings that prove a more peaceful and life-affirming coexistence of people in primarily matrilineal ethnic groups. It was only with patriarchy, a good 6,000 years ago, that the emotionally suppressive-authoritarian socialization emerged that still exists today. More life-affirming, nature-, child-, woman- and sex-friendly cultures were nevertheless discovered and described by ethnologists until the 20th century (ibid., pp. 111-162).<sup>3</sup>

- Meaningful living and profound psychotherapy can help alleviate or heal effects of socialization leading to destructiveness (Fromm 1989).

Meanwhile, modern neurobiology and neuropsychology have also debunked the notion of a destructive instinct and instead demonstrated an innate capacity for prosocial behavior (Solms/Turnbull 2004, pp. 138ff., 148; Tomasello 2010; Bauer 2011.).

Taken as a whole, the research results listed here should ensure that the death drive myth finally gets its deserved place: in the museum of popular misconceptions.

Yet the mainstream of psychoanalysis continues to elude clear positioning in this regard. This is also illustrated by the 2001 *Psyche* special issue "On the Psychoanalysis of Human Destructiveness" and the 2011 *Jahrbuch der Psychoanalyse* with its "Focus on Death Drive and Repetition Compulsion Today."

In both publications, Fromm and the questions he raises make almost no appearance. Instead, the death drive myth is treated there - and mostly approvingly or merely relativizingly - as if its more than 400-page dismantling by Fromm had never existed.

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<sup>3</sup> That there were and are numerous matrilineal ethnic groups - where descent is recorded in the maternal line - as also described by Reich (1932b; 2020, pp. 95-96) is undisputed: "In 1998, the Ethnographic Atlas recorded 160 purely matrilineal indigenous peoples and ethnic groups, or about 13% of the 1267 ethnic groups recorded worldwide" (<https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Matriarchat>). An early, consistently matriarchal phase of human history cannot be proven archaeologically, a patriarchal one, however, just as little (Röder et al. 2001, pp. 112-366). The latter is also proven by Graeber and Wengrow (2022). However, Fromm's and Reich's (2020, pp. 93-95) assumptions that there were non-oppressive, egalitarian, "ur-communist" societies are supported, among other things, by archaeological findings in Anatolian Catal Hüyük (or Çatalhöyük) (Hodder 2004; Brosius 2004; Brosius 2015, but see also Hahn 2012).

When Johannes Cremerius (1995, p. 47) commented that even "in the center of psychoanalytic theorizing" one comes across "generalizing ideas," "private philosophies," things never clarified (cf. Peglau 2014), this must be supplemented by: One also encounters what has long been outdated, which continues to be taught unflinchingly.

## A glaring Freudian failure

Incidentally, Freud's sentence, often used as an authority proof for the existence of innate malignity, is based on the blatant misinterpretation of a quotation.

In 1930, Freud (1999b, p. 471) used the phrase "Homo homini lupus" to support his claim that man is "a wild beast to whom the protection of his own kind is alien". He continued, "[W]ho, after all the experiences of life and history, has the courage to dispute this proposition?" He was apparently not troubled by the fact that the English philosopher Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679), from whom he borrowed this Latin aphorism-as Freud biographer Peter Gay (2006, p. 614) also points out-had linked this to an entirely different message:

"Now both sentences are certainly true: Man is a god for man, and: Man is a wolf for man; the former if one compares citizens among themselves, the latter if one compares states among themselves.

There, through justice, love and all the virtues of peace, one approaches the likeness of God; here, because of the depravity of the bad, even the good have to resort to the warlike virtues, violence and cunning, that is, the rapacity of wild beasts".<sup>4</sup>

On the one hand, Hobbes thus referred with the wolf metaphor only to the dealings of states with each other. On the other hand, he saw human interaction as characterized "through justice, love and all the virtues of peace" in a decidedly positive way - and thus diametrically opposed to Freud.

Moreover, wolves are not suitable as incarnations of "evil." For them, avoiding unnecessary confrontations is just as typical as "sparing one's own kind." Humans could learn a lot from their distinctly social coexistence based in freedom on natural authority.<sup>5</sup>

But Freud's sentence we encounter again and again until today - and most of the time without critical reflection of its source. He is especially popular when it comes to justifying a pessimistic view of man and the reactionary conclusions derived from it.

The historian Jörg Baberowski, whose credo is, "Only clear power relations that conform to rules and can be enforced by force if necessary can protect us [...] from unbridled violence" (Baberowski 2016, back cover), also refers to Freud several times. Baberowski writes:

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<sup>4</sup> [https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Homo\\_homini\\_lupus](https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Homo_homini_lupus). More detailed on the sentences of Hobbes: the philosopher Lutz Geldsetzer ([https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lutz\\_Geldsetzer](https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lutz_Geldsetzer)).

The Roman comedy poet Plautus wrote: "Lupus est homo homini, non homo, quom qualis sit, non novit": "For man is a wolf to man, not a man. This is true at least as long as we do not know each other."

(<http://gutenberg.spiegel.de/buch/asinaria-1786/4>). Also here: no fundamental demonization.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. <https://www.nabu.de/tiere-und-pflanzen/saeugetiere/wolf/wissen/18742.html>

"For where the freedom of the perpetrators is boundless, there is also no limit to their lust for murder. [...] 'Homo homini lupus; who, after all the experiences of life and history, has the courage to dispute this sentence?' asked Sigmund Freud. [...] Only by deterrence are people deterred from doing what they think" (ibid., p. 148).

## Conclusion

Psychoanalysis is not only a method of therapy, but also an instrument of knowledge and, consistently applied, a critical social science. The myth of the death or aggression instinct hindered Freud's teaching in all these aspects. Although Erich Fromm comprehensively proved in 1973 that this construct lacks a factual basis, it pervades large parts of psychoanalysis to this day.

Therapists who believe that the main point is to come to terms with destructive drive structures are likely to give the treated and themselves far too little chance of healing and change. And, of course, the effectiveness of psychotherapeutic treatments suffers considerably if they are based on a view of man that is far removed from reality and if decisive factors in society that cause and maintain neurosis are underestimated.

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