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EROS - THANATOS: A MODIFICATION OF FREUDIAN INSTINCT THEORY IN THE LIGHT OF TORAH TEACHINGS

INTRODUCTION

When, in 1920, Sigmund Freud attempted to formulate an instinct theory in consonance with psychoanalytic doctrine, he thrust himself into an area whose character had theretofore been unknown to his scientific approach. Conceived as demands by the body upon the mind (Hartmann, 1948; Jones, 1957), the instincts were eventually grouped by Freud under two rubrics, life and death (Freud, 1964 a; Marcuse, 1955). The former he named, in the philosophic tradition, *Eros*, for the Greek god of love. Though he never formally gave a name to the death instinct, other writers have dubbed it *Thanatos*, for the Greek mythological personification of death (Jones, 1957).

An investigation of the concepts of Eros and Thanatos can and should entail extensive latitude in many directions. It is clear that Freud, though he brilliantly assimilated them into the systematic study of human behavior, was not the first to deal with the life and death instincts; men of philosophy and biology have shown concern with them. Further, many of Freud's psychoanalytic colleagues wrote of them, mainly in rebuttal. They have pointed to certain weaknesses in his formulation and offered alternatives.

However, there is yet another field of thought which has independently produced its own theory of the instincts. It is the purpose of this paper to show that Jewish tradition, as revealed in the Torah, the Talmud, the Midrash, the Zohar, and major

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commentators, espouses an instinct theory that answers the major objections to Freud's theory and provides a compelling cosmological approach to the life of man.

It is felt that the following explications of the positions of Freud and Jewish tradition respectively, will clarify them both and demonstrate how one illuminates the other. It seems particularly unfortunate that Freudian psychological theory, or psychoanalysis, has been so vehemently rejected by the religious community. This rejection is usually based upon ignorance of either Freud, or Torah, or both. An excellent example of the sort of unlettered approach commonly employed can be found in Amsel's *Judaism and Psychology* (1969). Mr. Amsel's indignant argument for a "Jewish psychology" is based upon what seems to be a rather inappropriate, literal, almost Talmudic exegesis of the writings of Jewish authorities and a thorough misrepresentation of Freudian theory.

In David Bakan's *Sigmund Freud and the Jewish Mystical Tradition* (1958), on the other hand, one may find a quite accurate portrayal of Freudian theory, but an alarmingly unscholarly approach to Jewish sources.

FREUDIAN INSTINCT THEORY

Freud conceived of Eros as that force which seeks to combine, integrate, embrace. He meant this in its most cosmological sense, as Plato meant it,

not merely an affection of the soul of man towards the fair or towards anything, but is to be found in the bodies of all animals and in productions of the earth, and I may say in all that is [1950, p. 27].

Love and lust can be seen as facets of this force but in no way its totality. The "whole available energy of Eros" Freud called *libido* (Freud, 1949, p. 22). It should be clear that Freud's use of the term *erotic* is very different from the common usage.

The death instinct, on the other hand, was visualized by Freud as propelling the individual toward the inorganic state Freud believed to be the origin of all organic life. This was

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seen by Freud as a striving for a *tensionless state*, “the state, whatever it may be, which a living thing has reached, gives rise to a tendency to re-establish that state as soon as it has been abandoned.” Thus, “we may suppose that the final aim of the destructive instinct is to reduce living things to an inorganic state. For this reason we also call it the *death* instinct [Freud, 1949, pp. 20-21; italics Freud’s].”

In addition to the obvious support Freud thus acquired from the Existentialists, he sought to bolster his formulation with a biochemical model based upon the metabolic processes, anabolism and catabolism.

After long doubts and vacillations we have decided to assume the existence of only two basic instincts, *Eros* and the *destructive* instinct . . . The aim of the first of these basic instincts is to establish ever greater unities and to preserve them thus — in short, to bind together; the aim of the second, on the contrary, is to undo connections and so to destroy things. Freud, 1949, p. 20; italics Freud’s.

But the biochemical model, while it provides an intriguing representation of Freud’s instinct theory, points up, at the same time, Freud’s vulnerability upon entering the sphere of metaphysics. While the metabolic processes engage in *cooperation*, Freud’s theory includes *cooperation and opposition*.

In addition, Freud seems to have received little support for his instinct theory among psychoanalysts. Jung, Fenichel, and Reich, to name only a few, have differed with Freud on this issue.

FREUD AND JEWISH TRADITION

David Bakan maintains in *Sigmund Freud and the Jewish Mystical Tradition* (1958) that, although Freud probably never read any Jewish mystical works, he was strongly influenced by them. Whether or not this was actually the case is unimportant, but it is interesting in this connection to note a passage from a letter written by Freud to Karl Abraham, a fellow psychoanalyst. In a comparison with Carl Jung, Freud wrote, “We Jews have an easier time, having no mystical element [Jones,

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1957, vol. 2, p. 49].”

Nothing, of course, could have been further from the truth. Indeed, Freud himself had dabbled in the Eastern religions (Jones, 1957).

In an effort to demonstrate his thesis, Bakan cites the Zohar, several aspects of which lend it to comparison with Freudian theory. First, it is cosmological in the most complete sense. All of existence, Divine and human, is dealt with through concepts and abstractions applied transcendently.

Second, the Zohar stresses very heavily the concept of man's bisexuality. Indeed, though it seems Freud thought Wilhelm Fliess, his colleague, to be the originator of the bisexual theory (Freud, 1954), it is simply not the case. Written down in the second century by Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai, who received its contents as a matter of Divine tradition originating at Sinai, the Zohar uses the sexual model as a means of understanding the forces of existence. Bisexuality is seen as a major focal point of being.

Observe this: God does not place his abode in any place where male and female are not found together, nor are blessings found save in such a place, as it is written, “and He blessed them and called their name Man on the day that they were created: note that it says *them* and *their* name, and not *him* and *his* name. The male is not even called Man till he is united with the female [Sperling, Simon and Levertoff, 1949, vol. 1, p. 177].”

It is important to note that interpretation of the Zohar is practically impossible at any but the most superficial level, due to the loss of the interpretive tradition which once accompanied it. However, there are a number of striking passages which, within the admission of speculation, should be noted for the evident bearing they have on Freud's theory.

The Zohar makes very clear that “male and female” *together* are an integral part of cosmic existence. Life is simply incomplete without the union of the two (Sperling et al., 1949). Quoting the Biblical passage (Genesis 1:27) “And God created man in his own image, in the image of God created He

him: male and female created He them." "From this we learn that every figure which does not comprise male and female elements is not a true and proper figure . . . [Sperling et al., vol. 1, p. 177]."

This particular Biblical verse has obvious similarities itself to Freud's theory of bisexuality. And while one must be wary of making undue connections from the Zohar's idea of "male and female", in whatever sense that phrase is meant, to Freud's biological conceptualization, explications of Biblical verses such as the above are not difficult to find. Rashi, following a Talmudic opinion to be later quoted, states that the verse speaks of the creation of male and female in one human being.

Another passage of interesting parallel, in a number of ways, is Genesis 2:7: "And God formed the man from the dust of the earth and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living soul."

Commenting on this passage, the Talmud (*Berakhot*, 61a) states that the use of a double letter (two yodin) in the Hebrew word *vayiytser* for "formed", where only a single one is normally used, has special meaning. One opinion holds that it implies the presence of two "faces" in the first human, later, the commentators say, to be split into man and woman. Further, on the same page, the Talmud explicates the Hebrew word *tseleh* (Genesis 2:21), usually translated "rib". One opinion quoted here translates the word as "face", the implication being that woman was not created from a part of man, but simply became an independent being, as did the male part of the first human. Based on this side of the Talmudic controversy over the creation of man, Rashi is of the opinion that the first human was both male and female and was separated into two separate beings, man and woman. Further, the eventual dominance of male over female, as seen throughout Jewish tradition, (cosmologically in the Zohar) finds its parallel in the masculinity of libido as expressed by Freud in *Three Essays on Sexuality* (quoted by Bakan, 1958).

The concept of Eros also has its counterpart in the Jewish literature. The Hebrew word translated "breath" in the phrase "breath of life" from Genesis 2:7 above is *nishmat* (the con-

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struct form of the word *neshamah*). With this in mind, it is interesting to examine the debate recorded in *Sanhedrin* (91b) between Antoninus, the Roman Emperor, and Rabbi Judah. The question posed by Antoninus is when the *neshamah* is placed in man.

As commonly used, *neshamah* refers to the soul. However, an examination of the rest of the debate and the fact that Rabbi Judah, in the end, concedes that the *neshamah* is invested at conception, force one to consider the translation "libido." This would further agree, then, with Genesis 2:7 and both usages would be considered in the context of Eros, the "*breath of life*."

The extent to which the concept of Eros may be seen to penetrate traditional Jewish thought is indicated by the position of what Plato considered the highest form of love. Freudian psychoanalysis posits that thought, as well as other functions, is supplied with sublimated energy; that is, it is *erotically* fueled. It is particularly noteworthy, then, that the Hebrew term for knowledge, *da'at*, should also be used Biblically for sexual union. Maimonides, a great admirer of Aristotle, visualized knowledge of God as the highest form of love, a position almost identical with that of Plato. Hence the erotic nature of thought — the *union* of man and knowledge, the meeting of minds, or, as Bakan (1958) has put it, the union of conscious and unconscious.

As for Thanatos, there is also lodging in Jewish tradition. Genesis 1:31 states, "And God saw all that He had made, and behold it was very good. And it was evening, and it was morning, the sixth day." The phrase "and behold it was very good" was of great mystery to traditional Jewish scholars. One reason was the superfluous *vov in Vehinei*, "and behold." Another was the word *meod* (very), which does not appear in this phrase as it is used on other days of creation. Among the many explanations of the phrase to be found is that of Rabbi Meir, one of the leading Talmudic sages of the second century. His very short explication is cryptically cited in Midrash Rabah (Genesis, section 9): "In the Torah of Rabbi Meir it was found written, 'and behold it was very good': and behold death

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the ego is still in process of formation or is still feeble. The id sends part of this libido out into erotic objects—cathexes [fixations of energy], whereupon the ego, now grown stronger, tries to get hold of this object-libido and to force itself on the id as a love-object [p. 63].

The appendix to this book offers an interesting discussion of Freud's indecision regarding the formulation of the narcissistic process herein described. But, regardless of whether Freud finally decided on the above explanation, the similarity of passages is compelling. This cogency is found, it is evident, throughout traditional Jewish literature.

A SUGGESTED MODIFICATION

Actually, Freud himself has supplied a good deal of evidence for the weakness of his instinct theory from his own works. When, for instance, he offers sharp elaboration of one side of the instinctual dichotomy, he forces one to ask where its compliment lies. "There can be no question," he writes, "that the libido has somatic sources, that it streams into the ego from various organs of the body [Freud, 1949, p. 24]." What, then, is the source of the non-libidinal death force? In the same work, he suggests that, if animate evolved from inanimate, the death instinct fits the formula that instincts tend toward a return toward an earlier state, as mentioned above. What, then, of Eros? This formula does not apply to it, says Freud. That would assume that everything was once whole and now tending toward re-union. But is that not what he himself writes concerning Plato's theory of disintegration of the "living substance (Freud, 1964)?" Does this feeling that Eros seeks a return to the original undifferentiated state, which existed *before* or *as* the "living substance" came to life, jibe with his theory of the evolution of Thanatos?

It is not difficult, then, to understand the consternation of psychologists regarding Freud's formulation of Thanatos. While Garma (1971) writes that from where or what the death instinct comes is simply not known, Gillespie (1971) frankly proffers,

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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 [p. 159]?

Indeed, this seems a definite possibility, in light of the sources reviewed. Marcuse (1955) writes, "The ultimate relation between Eros and Thanatos remains obscure [p. 25]." Obscure perhaps, but not out of reach.

Freud himself wrote that psychoanalysis has shown that the terrifying fantasy of being buried alive is actually a transformation of the *pleasurable* fantasy of intra-uterine existence, the desire, one may add, to return to the womb. The first question of the child, writes Freud (1938), is "Where do children come from?" It is, he says, the Riddle of the Sphinx. Behold Oedipus.

The Oedipus complex represents the primordial drive to return to the womb (Bakan, 1958). And, since the Oedipal situation is the paradigm for all future sexual relationships, it bears the mark of Eros. At the same time, its desire to recapture the Nirvana of the womb would label it Thanatos.

Jung, Reich, Fenichel, Sartre, and Jewish tradition insist it is *both*. Libido encompasses *all* psychic forces, says Jung. For Jewish thought, the Oedipal situation and the infusion of only Eros into the human zygote speak of one circular life force including the defining state of death. Love, writes Sartre (1956), is the conflict in which one seeks to possess the Other, which possession terminates one's own freedom to exist as an individual. Life and death unite in one tension-interaction.

Rabbi Epstein's cosmological approach points the way toward a circular model of existence, wherein life and death merge into an immortal, Divine plan. Here Eros and Thanatos can be viewed as a single cosmic force, at times distinguished through terrestrial occurrences, such as physical birth and death.

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The Oedipus complex thus partakes of the fundamental cosmology, for *both* instincts seek a return to the Womb, one through the sexual act, an effort to reenter the pre-natal state, and the other through death, an effort to get beyond life, beyond tension. By positing the circular model, the Mandala, if you will, one can equate pre-natal and post-mortem existence. "The attributes of life were at some time evoked in inanimate matter by the action of a force of whose nature we can form no conception," wrote Freud (1964a, p. 38).

For the Torah Jew, this conceptual difficulty is only one of degree. For, while he knows he can never do justice to the "nature" of *Mi-she'amar-vehaya-ha'olam*, he is well aware of the immortality that renders him a link in the cosmic chain, ever returning to the Divine Womb.

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