



## Love as transcendence of death viewed as destructiveness

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Psychoanalysis, unlike other approaches of modern psychotherapy, is not only a clinical technique and a theory of technique applied to psychopathology. It is also a view of man (anthropology) and implies a view of life and of the world. This makes it important both on the cultural and on the scientific level, with advantages and disadvantages. This is why it influenced mores and cultural trends, moving beyond psychology and affecting wider areas such as cinema, art and literature.

This foreword enables us, as psychoanalysts, to venture into an issue, such as death, which is not only psychological, but also philosophical, universal and radical. Death is the end of life. It is therefore man's greatest anxiety, a catastrophic and unavoidable event. Anyone who, directly or not, has experienced a hopeless diagnosis such as cancer, feels the pain of a terribly dramatic event. Everything loses importance, our perspective changes and what is left is the drama of a dead-end situation.

Religion has always tried to provide people with hope in confronting death. Christianity, in particular, made the victory over death its central message. However, people have no certainties in life but the fact that sooner or later they will die, and society irrationally tries to deny what is obvious. Psychoanalysis claimed that no one really believes in his own death and that, unconsciously, everyone is convinced of his own immortality (Freud, 1915). When witnessing the death of a dear friend, we

consider the event as something which does not concern us directly, although we feel the dramatic impact it has on us. On the other hand, events such as the loss of a child make us plunge into despair and feel completely powerless. We should remember the crude and ambivalent vision of death Freud has in his *Thoughts for the Times on War and Death* (1915), where he goes so far as to say that death has “always been something humanity longed for.” “Like primeval men,” he says, “we are a gang of murderers.” Then he adds: “our unconscious pictures itself death in the same way it did in primeval times, it feels the same pleasure for a stranger's death and is still torn when it is a beloved one to die.” This leads us to a very controversial and ambivalent concept of death. However, my paper is not the right place to deal with the adult approach (mature and responsible) to death, the subject of boundaries, and the alleged illusion of religion when confronted with death. My paper aims at discussing the reductive view of death as a purely organic process. This discussion draws on psychoanalysis and on our common experience. “The human species can be defined both in physical and psychic terms”, as Fromm said. The fact that death involves a psychic dimension means that death is an inner process before being an organic one.

I will briefly venture into the theme of destructiveness and love to make my point clearer. As we all know, in *Beyond the Pleasure*



*Principle* (1923) Freud talks of a death (self-destructive) drive in the human psyche which coexists with our libido, and states that love and hate (Eros and Thanatos) are two forces which cannot live one without the other. Freud clearly states this theory in his answer to Albert Einstein, who had asked him whether mankind could ever bring war to a halt.

“According to our hypothesis, human instincts are of only two kinds: those which seek to preserve and unite—which we call ‘erotic’, exactly in the sense in which Plato uses the word ‘Eros’ in his *Symposium*, or ‘sexual’, with a deliberate extension of the popular conception of ‘sexuality’—and those which seek to destroy and kill and which we group together as the aggressive or destructive instinct. As you see, this is in fact no more than a theoretical clarification of the universally familiar opposition between Love and Hate which may perhaps have some fundamental relation to the polarity of attraction and repulsion which plays a part in your own field of knowledge. (...) Thus, it quite seriously deserves to be called a death instinct, while the erotic instinct represent the efforts to live. (...) You will notice that it is by no means a trivial matter if this process is carried too far; it is positively unhealthy.”  
(Freud, 1933)

The correspondence with the Protestant minister and psychologist Pfister is very interesting in this regard. Freud once again states that love and hate are mixed together and stresses that people are generally scum. Those who dwell on love put themselves in a vulnerable situation. As Bori (1990) says, “we lay ourselves open to suffering only when we love.”

Fromm discusses Freud’s research on human aggressiveness. If destructiveness is based on the death drive, he considers this drive nothing but a pathological expression of the life drive. According to Fromm, destructiveness and cruelty are rooted in human existence and are not instincts. He is not the only one to criticize this duality in Freud. Aggressiveness is not primary but reactive. The death instinct does not

exist as such (Fenichel, 1945). There is in man the urge to give life a meaning in terms of personal fulfilment. Human passions need to be viewed in accordance with their function in the vital process. As stated by Fromm: “People committed suicide because they were unable to fulfil their desire for love, power and vengeance, while no one ever killed himself out of sexual dissatisfaction” (1973). He thus distances himself from Freud. He describes aggressiveness as an end in itself, as necrophilia (1964). There is a conflict between two types of passions, destructiveness and love (“all that we mean by Eros”). Fromm stresses that human aggressiveness and destructiveness depend on the environment in which a person develops and on the social system. This leads to two potential consequences. The first is the syndrome of growth. When this has been alienated, the second answer is destructive. The individual regresses to a lower form of existence and turns to necrophilia, which leads to the syndrome of decay.

I will not go deeper into an analysis of Freud’s concepts of love and hate, which I partly share, nor will I discuss the irreverent view of religion which he expresses in *The Future of an Illusion*. I have written elsewhere of Freud’s discussion of religion (Franchini, 2004). Fromm’s concept of destructiveness as a pathological diversion from the life drive introduces a very important difference from Freud’s thought. Fromm has a developmental view of love, which is learned as any other art. *One needs to become a master of love to practice the art, and he needs to consider it a task which will take up his entire life. He has to be always available to build new relationships, in which ‘giving’ is the drive which achieves the freedom mankind cannot live without* (Fromm, 1956).

Freud is still caught up in the archaeological dimension of mankind. This leads to look for primary causes and does not consider the teleological dimension, which is the reason behind the first disagreements within the early psychoanalytic movement. Ricoeur, for instance, stresses the archaeological and teleological



dimension of symbolic and overdetermined language (1965). According to Fromm, by virtue of its constructive power, love can move beyond narcissism and destructiveness. “It is crucial to distinguish between the capacity for love toward self and others - the normal situation - and narcissism - always a pathological development. Fromm’s concept of self-love can be viewed as an important contribution to an alternative framework for the psychoanalytic understanding of narcissism” (Bacciagaluppi, 1993).

‘Giving’ becomes the highest expression of power. It gives rise to a vital movement which can change human reality by working on social and human relationships. Man is impelled to move beyond isolation and egocentrism, typical of the ‘having’ and not of the ‘being’ mode. The title of my paper refers to love as the transcendence of death, viewed as destructiveness. This means that, next to physical death, there is also psychic death, based on narcissism and destructiveness. This, of course, implies moving beyond death as a mere physical process and life as an archaeological one.

Eros extends itself in what we tried to accomplish and allows us to move beyond destructiveness, which is inexorable death. Freud reminds us that *si vis vitam, para mortem* (If you want to endure life, prepare yourself for death), even if physical death is a dramatic event which we constantly tend to deny (Freud, 1915). Death is not a desperate event for those who feel their existence is aimed at planning and building something which will last in time (Heidegger, 1945). They know their lives have not been lived in vain. The despair when facing death is due to our failures and our destructiveness. Death becomes a conclusion, not an end, when we are aware that we have finished our journey and that we continue to live in the people we

loved. Far from me to give an exhaustive explanation of evil, in order not to give a reductionistic meaning to death (Ricoeur, 1965). Love makes it possible to move beyond death viewed as destructiveness.

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