

The Freud-Einstein Correspondence of 1932: Theories of War

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Theme: [History](#)

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At the end of 1931 the International Institute of Intellectual Cooperation [IIIC], a League of Nations agency, invited Albert Einstein to initiate an exchange of letters with a fellow 'leader of intellectual thought' on a subject 'calculated to serve the common interest of the League of Nations and of intellectual life'.[1] Einstein selected Sigmund Freud as his correspondent and the question he wished to explore with him was, simply and ambitiously, 'is there any way of delivering mankind from the scourge of war?'.[2]

Although occupying dominant positions in their respective fields, the two had had little to do with each other up to that time and such previous contact as there was had hardly amounted to a meeting of great minds. At a brief meeting a few years before, Freud had found Einstein personally agreeable but lacking in any real knowledge of psychology.[3] Later, a short correspondence took place from which, according to Freud, Einstein's 'complete lack of understanding for psychoanalysis became evident'.[4] Yet despite what he felt to be his would-be collaborator's limitations, Freud agreed to be involved in the project. Though Freud would later dismiss the undertaking as 'tedious and sterile'[5], the prospect of reaching a wider audience for psychoanalysis than had hitherto been available may well have persuaded him to participate.

The tone of the letter he wrote to the IIIC Secretary, Leon Stenig, accepting the invitation was perhaps less than enthusiastic but it does not suggest any serious misgivings: 'I have indulged in as much enthusiasm as I am able to muster at my age [76] and in my state of disillusionment ... your hopes and those of Einstein for a future role of psychoanalysis in the life of individuals and nations ring true and of course give me great pleasure ... Thus practical and idealistic considerations induce me to put myself and all that remains of my energies at [your] disposal'.[6] Accordingly, Einstein initiated the correspondence at the end of July 1932 and Freud replied two months later. The letters were published by the League of Nations the following March simultaneously in English, French and German under the title [Why War?](#) In Germany however, where Hitler had come to power two months previously, circulation of *Warum Krieg?* was banned.

Fortuitously, the project coincided with that later period in Freud's life when his interests were widening into new areas of philosophical and sociological speculation. By the end of the 1920s he had, as he put it, returned to the 'cultural problems' which had concerned him in his youth.[7] In 1930 he had published his major statement on psychoanalysis and society, the 30,000 word essay *Civilization and its Discontents*. The ideas put forward in this – on the process of civilization and its repressive effect on the instinctual drives – form the basis of the [Why War?](#) correspondence and represented Freud's final position on civilization,

aggression and conflict.

Einstein's own letter betrays something of the liberal dilemma of the period as the 'idealist' position on international relations, widespread among progressive thinkers in the 1920s, began to lose ground to the 'realism' which would dominate the coming decades. The decisive challenges to collective security as a peacekeeping mechanism – in Abyssinia and Central Europe – remained in the future but the recent Japanese invasion of Manchuria and the absence of any effective collective response to it had been a clear pointer to the limitations of security through international organization. For Einstein the 'ill-success, despite their obvious sincerity, of all the efforts made during the last decade to reach this goal [of collective security], leaves us no room to doubt that strong psychological factors are at work which paralyse these efforts'.^[8] In his view, which was a fairly typical one on the liberal left at the time, the immediate problem was the baleful symbiosis between the arms manufacturers and power-hungry politicians. This 'ruling class [had] the schools and press, usually the Church as well, under its thumb'. But still this did not provide a complete explanation for the periodic explosions of international conflict:

How is it that these devices succeed so well in rousing men to such wild enthusiasm, even to sacrifice their lives? Only one answer is possible. Because man has within him a lust for hatred and destruction. In normal times this passion exists in a latent state, it emerges only in unusual circumstances; but it is a comparatively easy task to call it into play and raise it to the power of a collective psychosis. Here lies, perhaps, the crux of all the complex of factors we are considering, an enigma that only the expert in the lore of human instincts can resolve.^[9]

The question he wished Freud to address was whether psychoanalysis could offer any hope that the individual might become proof against these destructive urges.

Freud's reply consisted of an exploration of two basic psychoanalytic themes: civilization as a process which progressively repressed the instinctual drives biologically present in the human organism; and aggression as a product [though an indirect and partially controlled one] of these instinctual drives. The prospects for a future free of war would depend on the outcome of this elemental struggle between the process of civilization and the innate instinctual impulses.

Basic Premises: Civilization and Instinct

In outlining to Einstein his view of civilization as repressor of the instincts, Freud was reiterating a theme which had its origins in the earliest stages of psychoanalytic thinking. In May 1897 in a letter to his friend Wilhelm Fliess, Freud had observed that 'civilization consists in progressive renunciation'.^[10] Twelve years later he remarked, in the context of a paper by Alfred Adler on the psychology of Marxism, that 'our civilization consists in an ever-increasing subjection of our instincts to repression'.^[11] Freud's conjectures on the origins of civilization were first outlined in *Totem and Taboo* published in 1913 in which he asserts that civilization began when the young males of the 'primal horde' rebelled against the dominant, female-monopolising patriarch. The rebellion was possible only by collective action and this could not be achieved without the relinquishment of instinctual gratification by those involved.

The new 'civilization' which then came into being was, therefore, built on the repression of

hitherto untrammelled instincts and conditioned by the collective guilt over the parricide involved in its creation. It consolidated itself by the introduction of prohibitions [or taboos] which further suppressed the instinctual drives, one of the first and most significant being an insistence on exogamy which protected the community against any repetition of the original oedipal revolt.[12] In his letter to Einstein, Freud follows the development of civilization through to the emergence of the concepts of 'law' and 'right'. Right, he suggests, 'is the might of the community. It is still violence ready to be directed against any individual who resists it ...'.[13] In this way the anger of the primal horde, disciplined through the renunciation of instinctual gratification and sharpened by guilt, had evolved into the sanctions of society against those who flout its rules.

The degree of control which civilization could exert over the instincts was, however, open to question. The process operated through the agency of the intellect and the instinctual drives, surging up from the unconscious, could only be suppressed by continuous struggle. Freud had considered this problem in the early part of the First World War when many of the comforting assumptions held by Europeans about both human and political behaviour which had developed in the relative peace of the preceding decades were being overturned. Despite his own initial enthusiasm for the Austro-German cause [which in fact was in marked contrast to the anti-war position of Einstein][14] he took a characteristically pessimistic view of the psychological origins of the conflict. In a letter written in December 1914 to a former colleague from his period in Paris, the Dutch non-analytical psychologist Frederic Van Eeden, Freud argued that the war confirmed two theses of psychoanalysis. Firstly, destructive impulses are kept in check by the intellect but constantly seek opportunities to express themselves and, secondly, the intellect is a weak guardian, easily overcome by the emotions which open the way for the revolt of the instincts:

Psychoanalysis has concluded from the dreams and parapraxes [mental slips] of healthy people, as well as from the symptoms of neurotics, that the primitive, savage and evil impulses of mankind have not vanished in any of its individual members, but persist, although in a repressed state, in the unconscious ... and lie in wait for opportunities of becoming active once more. It has further taught us that our intellect is a feeble and dependent thing, a plaything and tool of our instincts and affects ... If you will now observe what is happening in this wartime, all the cruelties and injustices for which the most civilized nations are responsible, the different way in which they judge their own lies and wrongdoings, and those of their enemies, at the general lack of insight which prevails – you will have to admit that psychoanalysis has been right in both its theses.[15]

This theme was pursued the following year in an article Freud wrote for the psychoanalytic journal *Imago*. In 'Thoughts for the Time on War and Death' he exhibits the disillusion of his *Weltanschauung*:

We had expected the great world-dominating nations of the white race upon whom the leadership of the human species has fallen, who were known to have world-wide interests as their concern, to whose creative powers were due not only our technical advances towards the control of nature but the artistic and scientific standards of civilization – we had expected these peoples to have succeeded in discovering another way of settling misunderstandings and conflicts of interest [that they] would have acquired so much comprehension of what they had in common, and so much tolerance for their differences, that 'foreigner' and 'enemy' could no longer be merged ... into a single

concept.[16]

But, he insists, in the psychoanalytic view people 'have not sunk so low as we feared because they had never risen so high as we believed'. They were in fact merely withdrawing 'for a while from the constant pressure of civilization ... to grant a temporary satisfaction to the instincts which they had been holding in check'.[17] His colleague Karl Abraham, on reading the proofs of the article, pointed to the similarities between war and certain totemic orgies in which behaviour is sanctioned by the community which at other times would be regarded as intolerable.[18] Freud agreed with the observation and indeed the article contains one quite suggestive passage in this respect in which he speculates that 'the state has forbidden to the individual the practice of wrongdoing, not because it desires to abolish it, but because it desires to monopolize it ...'.[19] An interesting question arises here of the relationship between 'civilization', 'community' and 'the state'. In the *Imago* essay he implies that the state and civilization are antipathetic to each other as the former is ready to exploit for its own purposes the instinctual drives which the latter is attempting to repress. It will be recalled, however, that in his theory of the origins of society outlined in *Totem and Taboo* and later in [Why War?](#) itself, he suggests that society is the *product* of civilization [through renunciation of the instincts] and, implicitly, that the modern state has developed from the early rule-making collective. This evident contradiction remains unresolved in his later writings.[20]

In his letter to Einstein, Freud's conclusion on the relationship between the process of civilization and the phenomenon of war is boldly stated: 'whatever fosters the growth of civilization works at the same time against war'. The two most important psychological characteristics of the process were 'a strengthening of the intellect, which is beginning to govern instinctual life, and an internalization of the aggressive impulses'.[21] Ultimately, however, 'civilized' people are not pacific by intellectual conviction but because they 'are obliged to be for organic reasons'.[22] The repressive process of civilization has, in his view, brought about a phylogenetic change in those subjected to it. The 'civilized' human is, in short, biologically different from the 'uncivilized'.

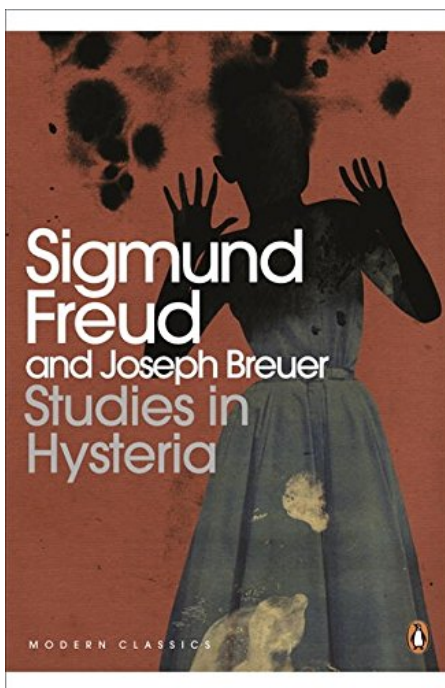
There can be detected here a fundamental change in Freud's position from the time of the First World War. A central thesis of both the Van Eeden letter and the *Imago* article was that the intellect was an ineffectual brake on the instincts when once the emotions were brought into play. Civilization was a fragile construction subject to recurrent collapse through wars unleashed by the freeing of instinctive impulses. By the time of the Einstein letter, however, civilization has become a biological process whose subjects are not merely armed against instinctual impulses but *constitutionally invulnerable* to them.

The key to this revision is to be found in 1920 when Freud produced an entirely new theory of instincts replacing that which had governed psychoanalytic thought hitherto. Prior to this date the structure of the instincts was seen as a duality between, on the one side, the libidinal impulses of sexuality and on the other that of the drive for self-preservation. From 1920, however, a new bipolarity was postulated with the *life instinct* [or 'eros'] opposed by a *death instinct*. This revised structure had far-reaching consequences both for clinical practice and for sociological speculation. At this point therefore it is necessary to shift attention from Freud's views on civilization as an anti-instinctual process and look more closely at the nature of the instincts in question. Most importantly, Freud's views on the relationship between these instincts and human aggressiveness must be examined. This, it will be recalled, was the second dominant theme of the *Why War?* correspondence.

The 'Final' Theory: Aggression and the Death Instinct

If the generality of Freud's views on civilization and its repressive effect on instinctual impulses have a somewhat commonplace sound to late twentieth century ears, it is in part because of the impact that psychoanalytic thinking has had on the collective intellect. The more thoroughly yesterday's insights become integrated in today's systems of thought then the less startling they appear in reiteration. The second, related, theme in Freud's letter to Einstein – that of aggression as a product of an inherent death instinct – is much less familiar. Partly this is due to its relative complexity but it is also because of its failure to find favour with either subsequent psychological theorists or the broader public.[23]

Although Freud's ideas on aggression underwent a number of fundamental changes, one constant feature was that at no time did he see it as a primary instinct in its own right. Aggression was always viewed as either a component or an affect of another dominating drive. In 1909, when Alfred Adler began to explain anxiety as the product of suppressed primary aggression, Freud could not 'bring [himself] to assume the existence of a special aggressive instinct alongside of the familiar instincts of self-preservation and sex, and on an equal footing with them'.[24] At this time Freud was still in the first of three more or less distinct phases of his thinking on aggression and the instincts. The first two of these belong to the period in which the duality of sex and self-preservation held sway. The third, on which [his Why War? letter](#) was based, belongs to the post-1920 period when the duality was redrawn as one between the life and death instincts.



In 1895 in their early presentation of psychoanalytic theory, *Studies on Hysteria*, Freud and his collaborator Josef Breuer saw aggression simply as a natural adjunct to male sexuality.[25] Ten Years later in *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* Freud expanded on this by suggesting that male sexuality *requires* an element of aggression in order to overcome resistance from the sex object. Aggressiveness therefore was a 'component instinct' of the primary sexual one.[26] In this phase then aggression was placed firmly on the sex side of the polarity and, in a dialectical process, its expression was opposed by the self-preservative instinct. The 'pleasure principle' – which sought the reduction [through satisfaction] of the psychic tension [or 'unpleasure'] generated by the sex instinct – was

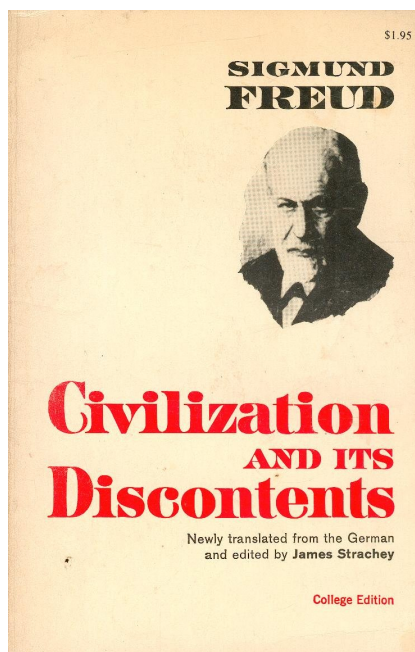
modified by the 'reality principle' which was associated with the drive for self-preservation. In 1915 the second phase began. Although the same instinctual duality was maintained, aggression had now passed across from the libidinal instinct to become an affect of the self-preservative one. In *Instincts and their Vicissitudes* Freud argued that aggression was an early ego-reaction to the inflow of unwelcome stimuli. The ego, according to this latest view, protected the psyche by adopting an aggressive posture towards what it interpreted as the hostile encroachments of the outside world during the process of infantile development.[27]

The major watershed in Freud's thinking on the relationship between the instincts and aggression, however, came with the publication of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* in 1920. Sex and self-preservation were now no longer opposed to each other but united on one side of a new duality as the component parts of eros or the life instinct. This was opposed by a new postulation – that of a primary death instinct. The existence of the death instinct was posited on the basis of the already familiar principle of tension reduction which had hitherto explained the drives of the independent sex instinct. The tension reduction theory was neither new nor exclusively psychoanalytic.

Freud, though, now forced it to a new extreme. The return to 'constancy' which was the underlying aim of tension-reduction must ultimately, he argued, involve a return to the 'pre-living' condition. After the emergence of living matter on earth 'the tension which then arose in what had hitherto been an inanimate substance endeavoured to cancel itself out. In this way the first instinct came into being: the instinct to return to the inanimate state'.[28] The 'pleasure principle' then could be said to have given way to the 'nirvana principle'. And, what was more, the new primary instincts were not merely behavioural constructs but *physically present* within each living cell.[29] If civilization was itself a biological process, as suggested in *Why War?*, then the instincts which it was its function to repress must accordingly provide an organic focus for its activity.

At this point, of course, an obvious objection arises: if such a death instinct does indeed occupy all living matter then all life must be bent on self-destruction and suicide would be the ultimate instinctual achievement. According to Freud, however, the death instinct is confronted by its antithesis, eros. The erotic instinct acts to divert it from its self-destructive purpose by a process of 'externalization'. Therefore, outwardly directed aggression 'is the derivative and the main representative of the death instinct'.[30] The hypothesis was outlined for Einstein in these terms:

As the result of a little speculation, we have come to suppose that this instinct is at work in every living creature and is striving to bring it to ruin and to reduce life to its original condition of inanimate matter. Thus it quite seriously deserves to be called a death instinct, while the erotic instincts [*sic*] represent the effort to live. The death instinct turns into the destructive instinct when, with the help of special organs, it is directed outwards onto objects. The organism preserves its own life, so to say, by destroying an extraneous one. ... If these forces are turned to destruction in the external world, the organism will be relieved and the effect must be beneficial. This would serve as a biological justification for all the ugly and dangerous impulses against which we are struggling. It must be admitted that they stand nearer to Nature than does our resistance to them.[31]



If, though, the self-destructive aspect of the death instinct is neutralized by externalization in the form of aggression, the question must be posed: why is conflict not perpetual? How is peace achieved even in the intervals between wars? Freud offers an implicit answer to this in *Civilization and its Discontents* by returning to his characterization of civilization as repressor of the instincts. The outwardly directed destructiveness is partially *re-internalized* by the process of civilization: 'aggressiveness is introjected ... it is, in point of fact, sent back to where it came from – that is, it is directed towards [the] ego'. There it is taken over by the super-ego and 'is ready to put into action against the ego the same harsh aggressiveness that the ego would have liked to satisfy upon other, extraneous individuals'.^[32] In this way civilization appears to protect itself not merely by the long-term process of repression of the instincts but also by the more immediate expedient of distorting their primary expression.

In *Why War?* Freud appears not altogether to have abandoned the earlier phases of his thinking on aggressiveness and the instincts. He suggests, for example, that some of the externalized aggression is put to the service both of sexual acquisition and self-preservation [views expressed respectively, it will be recalled, in 1905 in *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* and in 1915 in *Instincts and their Vicissitudes*].^[33] In the new formulation, however, this is evidently seen as a marginal process in which eros, now combining the one-time opposing libidinal and self-preservative instincts, 'co-opts' some of the force of its antagonist which has already been redirected outwards.

Briefly then, Freud's 'mature' theory sees aggression as an outward directing of the death instinct effected, in the interests of self-preservation, by the life instinct. In turn, 'civilization' must cope with this released destructiveness and does so by introjecting it back into the individual [after the life instinct has expropriated a portion of it for its own uses]. On being re-internalized the aggression does not, however, return to its source in the unconscious – the *id* – to resume its primal drive towards inanimacy. Instead it becomes located in the super-ego [the seat of the 'conscience'] where it is used to punish the ego for any transgressions of the behavioural rules acquired in infancy. In this way civilization bends the individual's aggression to its own ends – and in so doing demonstrates its fundamental antipathy towards the free expression of the instinctual impulses.

Einstein's purpose in the *Why War?* correspondence was not merely to determine Freud's *interpretation* of the phenomenon of war; he wished also to elicit from psychoanalysis proposals for its elimination. In this, perhaps, lies one explanation of Freud's underlying distaste for the project. Neither psychoanalysis as a general theory nor Freud as its originator had ever demonstrated much capacity for social prescription. Freud, although never politically active, might loosely be described as on the 'Hobbesian right'.^[34] The anti-utopianism implicit in his work is frequently expressed as opposition to the currently most popular model, Soviet communism. In *Why War?* the communist view – that aggression derives from material deprivation and will become extinct once all such needs are satisfied – is dismissed as an illusion.^[35] Nevertheless, as the object of the exercise was to provide answers, Freud does his best with the fundamentally unpromising material provided by the psychoanalytic world-view. In places, the price even of this limited optimism is the contradiction of aspects of his previous writings.

According to Freudian theory, the death instinct operates through division and fragmentation while eros is concerned to unify into ever greater wholes. As he put it in *Civilization and its Discontents*, 'civilization is a process in the service of eros, whose purpose is to combine single human individuals, and after that families, then races, peoples and nations into one great unity'.^[36] Thus, he concludes in *Why War?*, 'anything that encourages the growth of emotional ties between men must operate against war'. 'Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself' is cited as a difficult but nevertheless necessary aspiration in this respect.^[37] As the process of civilization advances the instinctual urges will be further repressed. War as an expression of the externalized death instinct ought therefore to become both less frequent and less destructive.^[38] This argument was in fact presented in a more tentative form in 1915 in 'Thoughts for the Times on War and Death' when Freud, abhorring the obliteration of 'all moral acquisitions' in wartime, hoped that this might be changed by 'later stages of development'.^[39]

Here, however, we can detect a considerable inconsistency in Freud's hypothesis. If, as he maintains throughout his work, civilization continually strives to repress instinctual life as a whole, then both the death instinct *and* its opposite, eros, must be equally subject to the process. How then can eros act as the handmaiden of civilization as he suggests? Eros although the enemy of the death instinct is also the source of the sex drive and therefore ought properly to be subject to repression by the process of civilization as well. Indeed, one of Freud's concerns in *Why War?* is that part of the price of civilization was an impairment in the sexual functioning of its beneficiaries as the libidinal aspect of the life instinct was repressed. His fear was that this might 'perhaps be leading to the extinction of the human race [because] uncultivated races and backward strata of the population are already multiplying more rapidly than highly cultivated ones'. The biologically 'uncivilized' were numerically stronger than the 'civilized' as a result of their unrepressed life instinct. They were therefore in a better position to bring about the apocalypse through the exercise of their similarly unrepressed death instinct.^[40]

Despite this laboured and self-contradictory search for an acceptably optimistic prognosis, the more familiar Freudian pessimism prevails. Whatever the theoretical feasibility of his proposals, the march of history may well bring them to nothing. The struggle of civilization to repress the instincts which create aggression and war must be carried out within a certain timescale with annihilation as a constant and increasing risk. In Freud's view, the outcome of this struggle is far from predetermined: 'an unpleasant picture comes to mind of mills that grind so slowly that people may starve before they get their flour'.^[41]

The Limits of Speculation

We have already pointed up some immanent contradictions in Freud's position – such as the unresolved ambiguity between civilization, community and state and the inconsistencies in his thinking on the repressive action of civilization on the life instinct. The arguments outlined in *Why War?* have, however, been challenged at a more fundamental level from two separate directions. Firstly, the entire edifice of Freud's position is based on speculation unsupported [and indeed unsupportable] by empirical evidence. This is true both for his general theory of instincts and for his postulation of the death instinct in particular. Secondly, even if we are willing to accept these speculative hypotheses as providing a valid *aetiology* of human aggression, we are still faced with the problem of its eventual expression: literally, *why war?* This latter question of course is the crux of the matter as far as any possible Freudian contribution to International Relations theory is concerned. No explanation is offered for the manifestation of aggression in the specific form of conflict between states.

Throughout his writings Freud's view of instincts betrayed a typically Germanic partiality to the notion of dialectic dualism. Despite changes in the nature of the poles [sex *versus* self-preservation giving way to life *versus* death] the bipolar structure was maintained. But what grounds other than theoretical symmetry are there for accepting such a duality? Its existence is asserted purely by intellectual fiat. Freud's resistance to a polymorphic view of *multiple* primary instinctual drives comes in part from the intellectual tradition in which he developed. It was hardened, no doubt, by his characteristically fierce defensiveness in the face of the 'dissidence' of the early schismatics like Adler, Stekel and Jung who came to question his architecture of the instincts, its theoretical elegance notwithstanding. At no time does Freud provide any *evidential* case against, for example, the existence of a multiplicity of co-existing primary instincts.

Even if we accept Freud's bipartite *structure* of the instincts we are still confronted by the problem of their *nature*. The concept of the death instinct is one which has found little support from subsequent generations of psychoanalytic theorists. Even orthodox Freudians, who as a group are not remarkable for their willingness to diverge from the original writ, have tended to gloss the idea of a primary death instinct by reference to vaguer concepts such as 'the destructive drive' and are more ready to accept non-instinctual factors such as frustration in the generation of aggression.[42]

Among the less orthodox neo-Freudians only the 'right wing' British school associated with the theories of Melanie Klein has retained the concept in anything like its original form while it has been most vigorously rejected by the sociologically-oriented 'left wing' schemes such as those of Karen Horney and Erich Fromm.[43] For the latter the implications of a death instinct are reactionary and defeatist.[44] And, in common with other commentators from outside psychoanalysis, they argue that a major problem with the concept – even as speculation – is that the only indications of its existence are to be found in its *consequences*.[45] The reality of the construct is extrapolated from its secondary manifestations. Violence exists as a verifiable phenomenon, its instinctual base however does not.

The death instinct is presented by Freud as the ultimate expression of the principle of tension reduction, the inherent tendency of all psychic activity to aim at the relief of the 'unpleasure' of stress. The basic notion of tension reduction has, however, been convincingly challenged. It has been shown in animal studies, for example, that in certain

circumstances subjects will actively seek the stimulus of tension – and not merely as a contrived preliminary to its cathartic relief [the concept of ‘forepleasure’] as Freudians would suggest?[46] And, even if the tension reduction model is valid, does the postulation of a death instinct as its vehicle constitute a logical conclusion or merely a *reductio ad absurdum*? Prior to 1920 Freud’s ‘pleasure principle’ was based on the reduction of tension to ‘constancy’ resulting in a ‘stable degree of excitation’. The drive to inanimacy [the ‘nirvana principle’ on which the death instinct operates] has no more scientific legitimacy than the earlier formulation and considerably less support from contemporary psychology.[47]

Beyond these questions surrounding Freud’s theories on the *origins* of aggression, there are others to be raised concerning its *forms*. From objects to the failure to distinguish between the various manifestations of aggressiveness *whatever* its source. What determines why externally directed aggression should express itself in one type of behaviour rather than another? Sadism, destructiveness, mastery and the will-to-power are all different expressions of human aggression which, he suggests, must be considered separately. Even if they do derive from the same redirected death instinct, Freud provides no elaboration of the process of differentiation which occurs in the course of externalization.[48] In other words, there is no effective attempt to integrate instinctual behaviour with its social manifestations. Although Fromm’s concern here is with individual psychopathology, it hints at the problem of political expression touched on earlier. What is the connection between human aggression and international war and what determines that the former should be expressed in the form of the latter?

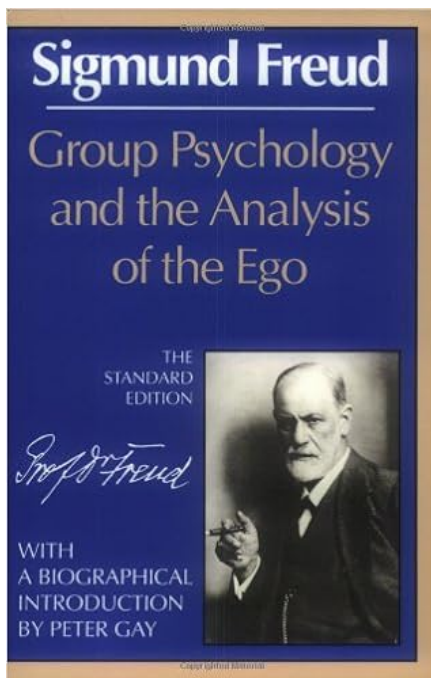
The Freudian scheme is supremely subjective; it is concerned wholly with the individual and the psychic origins of his or her behaviour. In contrast to some of his contemporary ‘depth’ psychologists and many of his subsequent revisers, Freud had no great interest in the teleology of behaviour – the social ends which it sought to achieve.[49] Consequently, orthodox psychoanalysis has had little to contribute to social psychology. Freud’s level of analysis was the individual, not the social system within which he or she interacted with others. This lacuna obstructs the making of connections between the instinctual theory of the *origins* of aggression and its political *expression* in war. As one writer has observed, ‘there is always the missing link in these fascinating speculations ... between the fundamental nature of man and the outbreak of war’.[50] It is the failure to provide this link in the letter to Einstein which makes *Why War?* a particularly inapt title for the published exchange.

Aggression and War: Inferring a Link

In various places in his writing, Freud does in fact touch on such ‘political’ subjects as group behaviour and the nature of leadership. While ‘social psychology’ in the sense of the operation of social ‘systemic’ pressures on the individual has no significant place in the Freudian scheme, the role of the individual in shaping the ‘system’ is given some consideration. Is there anything in this aspect of Freud’s work which might allow the connections between instinctual aggression and its manifestation in warfare to be made, so to speak, on his behalf?

In 1914 in his essay *On Narcissism* Freud wrote of the ‘ego-ideal’, which was the conceptual predecessor of the conscience-wielding super-ego. As well as its individual side it had social manifestations as ‘the common ideal of a family, a class or nation.’[51] Loyalty to [and by extension, one must suppose, violence on behalf of] the state was interpreted in terms of

the oedipal relationship formed between infant and father in early childhood development. In later life the nation might displace the father but it too exerts an unconscious influence over the individual.



This draws its force from two characteristics of the oedipus complex: fear of punishment and the need for approval. The theme was developed further in 1921 in *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*. Here Freud suggests that all groups in society are unconscious echos of the 'primal horde' first described in *Totem and Taboo*. And, the 'leader of the group is still the dreaded primal father [who] is the group ideal which governs the ego in the place of the ego-ideal'.[52] This basic structure is, however, adaptable in its social manifestations. The primal father might be represented not by a leader but by an ideology. Similarly, the love relationship with the ego-ideal might take a negative form and the group would then cohere through shared hatred of a particular object or belief.[53] Here, perhaps, a mechanism for the differentiation of aggressiveness suggests itself. A 'constructive' focus for the externalization of aggression may be provided for the *group* through this 'negative' ego-ideal.

Freud expanded on the political implications of group cohesion a few years later in his treatise on religion, *The Future of an Illusion*, where he referred to the 'narcissistic satisfaction' provided by a *cultural* ideal which had the effect of combatting intra-cultural conflict. Here he suggests that a positive ego-ideal in the form of 'national' identity can combine with its negative form – hatred of the outsider:

This satisfaction can be shared in not only by the favoured classes but also by the suppressed ones, since the right to despise the people outside it compensates them for the wrongs they suffer within their own unit. No doubt one is a wretched plebeian, harassed by debts and military service; but, to make up for it, one is a Roman citizen one has one's share in the task of ruling other nations and dictating their laws. This identification of the suppressed classes with the class who rules and exploits them is, however, only part of a larger whole. For, on the other hand, the suppressed classes can be emotionally attached to their masters; in spite of their hostility to them they may see in them their ideals; unless such relations of a fundamentally satisfying kind subsisted, it would be impossible to understand how a number

of civilizations have survived so long in spite of the justifiable hostility of large human masses.[54]

The ego-ideal in a cultural form therefore is seen as a force operating in the interests of political cohesion. It does so through the enhancement of group – or national – identity. The first stage is the displacement of the oedipal relationship from the father to the political unit. This is then reinforced through contrast with the ‘non-group’ [or non-national] outsider. Freud in fact refers to this tendency, although only tangentially, in *Why War?* when dismissing the utopian claims of Soviet communism; the Russians themselves, he observed, ‘are armed today with the most scrupulous care and not the least important of the methods by which they keep their supporters together is hatred of everyone beyond their frontiers’.[55]

Where might we locate the point of contact between the primary death instinct and this process of oedipal displacement? The death instinct, according to *Civilization and its Discontents*, is first externalized as aggression and then partly introjected back to the psyche where it is put at the disposal of the super-ego. The super-ego, it will be recalled, was originally characterized as the ego-ideal. Both concepts represent the displacement of the oedipal relationship from the father. Freud argued, as we have seen, that this displacement may take the form of national or ideological identification. Or, it may manifest itself in a negative form as a communal hate-object. In these circumstances, the introjected aggression commanded by the ego-ideal/super-ego might be said to undergo a process of externalization once more – this time expressed collectively; in short, as war. This secondary externalization which is socially legitimised might then be said to take command of that ‘natural’, unfocussed aggression which had not been introjected to the super-ego. The co-option of this ‘free-floating’ aggression by the super-ego might be explained by the Freudian concept of ‘cathexis’ – the concentration of psychic energies into one channel.

But, of course, there is an clear danger of going too far in such attempts at integration. We must be wary of making such theoretical connections in Freud’s name. The conceptual platform on which this type of theoretical extension must be built is, as we have observed, itself rather insecure. Having questioned the intellectual basis of the original theory, such an exercise is of doubtful legitimacy both in itself and also in its tendency to repeat the type of unsupportable speculation around which fundamental objections to the Freudian view have been based.

In addition to criticisms of the basic premises and the internal logic of the theory, others have been made from the perspective of International Politics as a field of study – the main one on which the hypotheses impinge. The idea of a monistic explanation of such a central concept as war has long been unacceptable to students of International Relations. As one scholar of Freud’s social theory has complained, ‘plunging below war, psychology turns up varieties of “aggression” as if these somehow subsume diplomatic history and the development of modern weapons’.[56] Generally speaking, the sub-systemic, sub-state microcosmic level of analysis is little considered in contemporary International Relations theory.

The prevailing orthodoxies of British and American thought on International Politics have differed in focus and methodology but have been generally united in their commitment to collectivities [whether states or ‘systems’] as the basic levels of analysis. Freudianism, with its rejection even of the dynamic dimension of social psychology, is non-collective and

microcosmic to the ultimate degree.[57] On grounds both of its mono-causal nature and its unit of analysis, therefore, the psychoanalytic theory of war finds little favour in its second half-century.

All this notwithstanding, however, the Freudian 'presence' in late twentieth century social thought is pervasive – both as a significant orthodoxy in its own right and as the starting point for subsequent and, for many, more credible revisions. Moreover, historically the decade of the 1930s was clearly one of immense significance for the whole question of inter-state conflict and its avoidance. Psychoanalysis was one of the most significant intellectual movements of the period. The *Why War?* correspondence brought these historical and intellectual concerns together by attempting to elicit an answer to the former from the theories of the latter. However unsatisfactory the results of the exercise and however much the central theories involved have been superseded by modification and revision, it remains one of considerable significance in the history of European ideas in the inter-war period.

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Notes

[1] James Strachey, Editor's Note to *Why War?* [1933], *The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Standard Edition [London 24 volumes 1953-74] [hereinafter SE] Volume XXII [1964], p.197.

2 *Ibid*, p.199.

3 'He is cheerful, full of himself and agreeable. He understands as much about psychology as I do about physics and we had a very pleasant talk'. Quoted in Ernest Jones, *Sigmund Freud: Life and Work* [Volume III] *The Last Phase: 1919-1939* [London 1957], p.139.

[4] *Ibid*, p.164.

[5] *Ibid*, p.187.

[6] Quoted in William Clark, *Freud: the Man and the Cause* [New York 1980], pp.485-86.

[7] *An Autobiographical Study* [1925/1935 Postscript], SE XX [1959], p.72.

[8] *Why War?*, p.200.

[9] *Ibid*, p.201.

[10] Quoted in Jones III, p.359.

[11] *Ibid*, p.360-61.

[12] *Totem and Taboo* [1913], SE XIII [1953], pp.141-46.

[13] *Why War?*, p.205.

[14] Ernest Jones, his official biographer, observed: 'Freud's immediate response to the declaration of war was an unexpected one. One would have supposed that a pacific savant of fifty-eight would have greeted it with simple horror, as so many did. On the contrary, his first response was rather one of youthful enthusiasm, apparently a reawakening of the military ardours of his boyhood'. *Sigmund Freud: Life and Work* [Volume II] *Years of Maturity 1901-1919* [London 1967], p.192.

[15] Letter to Frederic Van Eeden [1914], SE XIV [1957], pp.301-02.

[16] 'Thoughts for the Times on War and Death' [1915], SE XIV pp.276-77.

[17] *Ibid*, p.285.

[18] Jones II, p.415.

[19] 'Thoughts for the Times on War and Death', p.279.

[20] It is certainly true that Freud found little to admire in the political processes of the state. In the Freudian view, as represented by Philip Rieff, 'the state holds no promise of elevating human nature, except through irrational and transient enthusiasms; in general, the state epitomizes the worst elements of human desire'. 'Psychology and Politics: the Freudian Connection', *World Politics*, Vol.7 No.2 [January 1955], p.299. Yet it is difficult to reconcile this distaste with the implied acceptance of the state as the institutional embodiment of the civilization process.

[21] *Why War?*, pp.214-15.

[22] *Ibid*, p.214.

[23] Several writers from within psychoanalysis have provided accounts of varying usefulness of Freud's theories of the instincts and aggression. The most concise is that given by the editor of the Standard Edition of the *Collected Works*, James Strachey, in his introduction to *Civilization and its Discontents* [1930], SE XXI [1961], pp.ix-xiii. Another orthodox Freudian examination is offered by Rose Edgumbe in her chapters on 'The Death Instinct' and the 'Aggressive Drive' in Humberto Nagera [ed], *Basic Psychoanalytic Concepts on the Theory of Instincts* [London 1970], pp.67-70 and 71-79. Perhaps the most exhaustive and challenging exploration is that by the Marxist neo-Freudian Erich Fromm in 'Freud's Theory of Aggressiveness and Destruction' which forms an appendix to *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness* [London 1974], pp.439-78.

[24] *Analysis of a Phobia in a Five Year-Old Boy* ['Little Hans'] [1909], SE X [1955], p.140. This was at the time of the final conflict between Freud and Adler which ended with the latter's departure from the Vienna circle. It is perhaps reasonable to suppose that Freud's deep resentment against his one-time collaborator helped to confirm rejection of the concept of an autonomous aggressive instinct.

[25] *Studies on Hysteria* [1895], SE II [1955], p.246.

[26] *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* [1905], SE VII [1953], pp.157-58. Freud argued here that sadism was the consequence of the disordering of the relationship in which the aggressive component usurped the primary position.

[27] *Instincts and their Vicissitudes* [1915], SE XIV, p.137.

[28] *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* [1920], SE XVIII [1955], p.38.

[29] *Ibid*, p.40.

[30] *Civilization and its Discontents*, p.122.

[31] *Why War?*, p.211.

[32] *Civilization and its Discontents*, p.123. Freud was able to 'locate' the process in this way as a result of the formulation of his structural theory in *The Ego and the Id* [1923], SE XIX [1961], pp.19-39. Here he introduced the now widely familiar tripartite concept of the psyche. The 'id' was the seat of the instincts and the successor to the earlier concept of the unconscious; the 'ego', a term already widely used to describe the conscious self, was now defined more closely as an excrescence of the id which mediates between it [the id] and the outside world; the 'super-ego' is the portion of the psyche which assimilates parental prohibitions and acts, approximately, as conscience.

[33] 'The instinct for self-preservation is certainly of an erotic kind, but it must nevertheless have aggressiveness at its disposal if it is to fulfil its purpose. So, too, the instinct of love, when it is directed towards an object, stands in need of some contribution from the instinct for mastery if it is in any way to obtain possession of that object'. *Why War?*, pp.209-10.

[34] Freud's own political outlook and his view of himself as 'a liberal of the old school' is discussed by Paul Roazen in *Freud and his Followers* [London 1975], pp.518-19.

[35] *Why War?*, pp.211-12.

[36] *Civilization and its Discontents*, p.122.

[37] *Why War?*, p.212. In the earlier work however the same precept is seen as not merely difficult but impossible – and ridiculed by Freud in consequence. *Civilization and its Discontents*, pp.109-11.

[38] *Why War?*, pp.213-14.

[39] 'Thoughts for the Times on War and Death', p.288.

[40] *Why War?*, p.214.

[41] *Ibid*, p.213.

[42] Not even that most loyal of his followers, Ernest Jones, could summon up much enthusiasm when he dealt with that part of Freud's theory in his official biography; Jones III, pp.297-300.

[43] The terms 'left' and 'right' here are meant in a figurative rather than an explicitly political sense following the usage of J.A.C. Brown in his *Freud and the Post-Freudians* [Harmondsworth 1964], p.129. Both Horney and Fromm were however on the political left as well.

[44] As Karen Horney puts it, 'If man is inherently destructive and consequently unhappy, why strive for a better future?'; *New Ways in Psychoanalysis* [London 1939], p.132. Interestingly, some support for the death instinct is offered from the left by Marcuse who sees it at work in the psychic destructiveness of modern industrial capitalism and thus takes up the unlikely position of defender of Freudian orthodoxy against its progressive critics; Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization* [Boston 1955], pp.270-73.

[45] See, for example, Alasdair MacIntyre's critique of the Marcusean position in this respect in *Marcuse* [London 1970], p.50.

[46] See Leonard Berkowitz, *Aggression: a Social-Psychological Analysis* [New York 1962], pp.9-11 for an account of the experimental evidence against the 'nirvana principle'.

[47] Fromm discusses Freud's changing position on the principle of tension reduction in *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness*, pp.472-478.

[48] *Ibid*, p.470.

[49] This concentration on the aetiology of neurosis – and particularly on its sexual basis – was of course a major factor in Freud's break first of all with Adler and then with Jung. The social 'purposes' of neurotic behaviour were later explored by analysts such as Fromm, Horney and Harry Stack Sullivan in the 1930s and 1940s. As a result, the Adler school, during its subsequent decline, insisted that this group was neo-Adlerian rather than neo-Freudian. See, for example Heinz L. Ansbacher and Rowena R. Ansbacher, *The Individual Psychology of Alfred Adler*, [London 1958], pp.16-17.

[50] Werner Levi, 'On the Causes of War and the Conditions of Peace', *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol.4 No.4 [December 1960], p.415. Levi points out that what 'these [psychological] explanations fail to do is to indicate how these human factors are translated into violent conflict involving all citizens, regardless of their individual nature, and performed through a highly complex machinery constructed over a period of years for just such a purpose'.

[51] *On Narcissism* [1914], SE XIV. p.101.

[52] *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* [1921], SE XVIII, p.127.

[53] *Ibid*, p.100. As one of Freud's most 'political' works, *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* has attracted the attention of a number of political theorists. See for example Paul Roazen, *Freud: Political and Social Thought* [London 1969], pp.226-32 and Philip Rieff, 'Origins of Freud's Political Thought', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, XVII [April 1956], pp.235-249.

[54] *The Future of an Illusion* [1927], SE XXI, p.9.

[55] *Why War?*, p.212.

[56] Philip Rieff, 'Psychology and Politics', p.305.

[57] The decade after the end of the Second World War appears to have been something of a high-water mark for applications of psychoanalytic thought to political theory with major works by T.W. Adorno, Harold Laswell and Herbert Marcuse bringing Freudian insights to such questions as authority and alienation. By the mid-1960s however the Freudian vogue seemed largely to have passed.

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