

Evil: A psychoanalytic meditation

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For David H. Emmert, MD

Some time ago, my friend Frederico Pereira suggested that I reflect on the problematic of evil and write about it. It was an extraordinary suggestion, for which I thank him. It indicated to me the depth of his wide-ranging concerns and experiences in matters psychoanalytic. My multiple attempts in trying to think through the problematic of evil have opened up a fertile space for thought and writing. Simultaneously, they have also offered me remarkable emotional experiences as forays into what I deem as the unknown. This is so because there is no escaping the problem of evil. In its multiplicity of manifestations, evil inevitably appears at the doorstep of our everyday life and crosses the threshold of our lived experience. As such, it also fully impinges on our intellectual and creative life in the humanities and sciences. Accordingly, the human condition finds itself inextricably bound up with occurrences and expressions of evil in various measures always and everywhere. By evil, I mean to specify acts that in any way harm or in any way destroy sentient life, gratuitously or purposely, randomly or predictably, even if such sentient life is one's own.

In my experience, the diverse modes of reflection on the problematic of evil approximate the uncanny. I say this because reflection and imagination disclose evil as a contradictory affective blend of total familiarity and strangeness, closeness and distance, comprehension and incomprehension. On the surface of it, a merciless light seems to shine that leaves no shadows. In its depths, reign chaos and night, which largely makes human existence an adventure in despair. Evil imparts the peculiar eeriness of something that is at once within and without our psyche, that is, simultaneously endopsychic and psychogenetic. It is at the same time our flesh and blood and incorporeal abstraction. Oddly, grave malignity as fate, "banality," and temporality permeate it in various measure. This paradoxical sense of evanescence and "banality" of evil is what so acutely struck the philosopher Hannah Arendt. In my view, all this adds up to what the adjective "weird" conveys in the American language, which still carries in it something of its etymological strong meaning in Old English. For these reasons, I experience thinking on evil as an *estranging* and at moments *disorienting* activity.

On first glance, subjecting unthinkable and unspeakable evil to thought and speech makes it clear that it lies beyond reflection as a twilight horizon of ineffability and menace. Evil reveals itself equally as a jumble of the known unknown, the unknown known, and hints of the unknowable. In any case, it intimates irrational malevolence, hidden behind a myriad of frequently benign appearances that can develop within and without us. In its complementary relationship with good, evil even more radically challenges our rationality. The complementarity of good and evil forces our mind into a

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veritable limit-situation. The upshot is the emergence of a malignant mystery that tends to lead us beyond good and evil, as we ordinarily perceive them. Yet, mystery – malign, benign, or otherwise – does not necessarily negate scrutiny, speculative thought, theological, theoretical, or scientific. Quite the contrary is always true. Mystery inevitably precedes knowledge, in sciences and the humanities, properly making up a never-ending dialectical chain.

In what follows, I will briefly meditate on the problematic of evil. I essentially conflate Freudian psychoanalytic theory of the dual life and death instincts and the potential descriptive phenomenology of their psychobiological effects. I borrow Freud's definitions of life and death instincts as two classes of antithetical drives. The first, the life instinct, energized by the libido or Eros, sustains life; the second, the "death instinct" or "death drive" (*Todestrieb*) or Thanatos, aims to reverse the course of life's development and growth. Freud based his conceptualization of both instincts on the biology of his time; therefore, for him, life and death instincts were primarily scientific as well as psychoanalytic formulations.

I shall restrict my use of the phenomenological description of evil to its multitude of lived experiences as "the work of the negative" (*le travail du négatif*), as André Green has so cogently referred to it. The work of the negative directly draws its energy from the death instinct. As Green has emphasized, there are no doubt cases in which the work of the negative helps the ego in the Freudian structural model of the psyche by repressing unconscious urges of the id and the super-ego that would be damaging to it. Nevertheless, the work of the negative mostly oscillates between countless manifestation of masochism and sadism to various extents and purposes. Here, I use the terms masochism and sadism in their most inclusive meaning as destructive forces or "contributions," to use Freud's expression, to the libido. That is why a phenomenology of the work of the negative as generalized sado-masochism imposes itself upon us as heuristic and epistemological possibilities. By implication, such phenomenological descriptions of evil as the unrestricted work of the negative will make clear that the problematic of evil, in and of itself, ultimately lies mostly beyond our present analytical tools and for that reason beyond our comprehension.

I

Considering the inorganic matter as the matrix from which all living substance originated, Freud put the final aim of all drives as a striving for the restoration of death, death being the condition that was earlier than life (1977, p. 25).

Heinz Lichtenstein, *The Dilemma of Human Identity*

In 1920, as we know, Freud conceptualized the death instinct in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. With admirable lucidity, he wrote,

an instinct is an urge inherent in all organic life to restore an earlier state of things which the living entity has been obliged to abandon under the pressure of external disturbing forces; that is, it is a kind of organic elasticity, or, to put it another way, the expression of inertia inherent in organic life (1961, p. 30).

This primary, conservative and therefore retrogressive instinct has its foundation solidly in chemistry and biology. In its theoretical intent, it clearly distinguishes between two immense and intricately interconnected orders of existence: the organic and the inorganic. The inorganic precedes the organic and constitutes a material universe as basal elements of primary matter (*prima materia*). The world of primary matter and energy has its complex origin and history of development. It possesses intricate dynamics of atomic and subatomic structures. Contemporary theoretical and applied physics relegates the study of atomic and subatomic structures to quantum mechanics and nanophysics, which consider it as being anything but *inert*.

The second order of existence consists of the organic compounds as unicellular and multicellular tissues. Through evolutionary processes, cellular chemistry has endowed such organic compounds with the potential of life and thus sentience. This transformation takes place “under the pressure of external disturbing forces,” whose origin, underlying principle, and goal remain mysteries. The upshot of this transformation is that multifaceted unicellular organic chemistry. The unicellular life evolves into its multicellular manifestations as vegetal, arboreal, animal, and human life, and thereby sentience and consciousness in various measures. In the case of human beings, cellular life achieves the status of consciousness that is also conscious of itself, a mode of double consciousness. The sciences of organic chemistry, biology, psychobiology, medicine, and psychology assign themselves to the study of such intricate organisms. At the heart of the dialectics of the inorganic versus organic, Freud locates the concept of the life and death instincts. He does so in full awareness that the inorganic is the essential building block of the universe, constituting unimaginable intergalactic spaces of interchangeable matter and energy, world without end.

As I have pointed out in passing, modern and contemporary physics has taught us that we can no longer consider the inorganic as *inert*. Each atom is the source of subatomic galaxies of its own, with vast subatomic powers. Hence, we need to understand the concept of death in the Freudian death instinct as return to the *prima materia* of the inorganic in a new way. The stasis and inertia ordinarily associated with the death and disappearance of conscious life is a surface phenomenon. The inorganic is the stuff of universal existence whose origin, dynamics, and eventual purpose yet remain inscrutable. In this sense, the death drive becomes manifest in its psychobiological mechanisms that seek to return the infinitely elaborate but unstable organic life to its less synthetic, much more stable ordinary and inscrutable state of inorganic elements.

In the unlimited cluster of dialectical oppositions that characterize good and evil, it would seem legitimate to state that the death instinct would stand as the psychobiological basis of evil. As such, it is primarily a human phenomenon. Such evil defines itself as destructive human intentions and acts as the most widespread sado-masochistic drives. Thus, I refer to evil exclusively as we human beings perceive it and experience it. Furthermore, to the extent that one considers evil as the work of the death instinct, its origin resides both inside and outside us, as perpetrators and victims, or both at the same time. Yet, I need to emphasize the recognition of evil, as the opposite of good, is totally a human phenomenon, even in its theological considerations. “I should not be surprised if evil has entered the world with man [human beings],” writes Paul Ricoeur, “for he [the human being] is the only reality that presents this unstable ontological constitution of being greater and lesser than himself” (1986, p. 1). One can only agree with and applaud Ricoeur’s acuity on the phenomenology of evil.

II

One part of the causes of evil is comprehensible and explainable. However, another part remains opaque and seems to go beyond all causality. It is within this opaque part where evil’s most essential core resides [*Une part des causes (du mal) se comprend, s’explique. Mais une autre part reste opaque et semble échapper à toute causalité. C’est peut-être sa racine la plus essentielle*] (1986, 399; my translation).

André Green, “*Pourquoi le mal?*”

The death instinct, as an active and enduring ensemble of negative psychobiological transformations that are coextensive with human life, makes the transition from the organic to the inorganic existence in death inexorable. These negative transformations result in pathologies, injuries, degradations, diminutions, and final annihilation of body and consciousness in death. On the one hand, the death of consciousness announces the negation of the existential meaning of an individual life. On the other hand, the necrosis of body tissues that ensues after death paves the way

for the final journey of the organic to the realm of the inorganic, from which there is no direct return. Thus, the death instinct, independent of judgments that belong to the field of ethics and govern the distinctions between right and wrong and good and evil in human life, defines itself in an avoidable process of disintegration of organic life.

Following Freud, Green calls this disintegrative process the “unbinding process” (*la déliaison*). As the dialectical opposite of the unbinding process, the binding process (*la liaison*) belongs to the life instinct and the libido. The principles of evolution, self-preservation, development, procreativity, creativity, and construction of meaning are effects of the life instinct and its life-affirming drives. Psychologically, the binding process is, then, a fundamentally integrative and synthesizing activity. The life instinct as binding processes brings together similar or distinct, comparable or disparate elements and sets them in motion in creative and constructive syntheses of organic chemistry. I correlate such binding processes, wherever and whenever they may occur, with good. On the plane of creativity, the binding processes appear to reenact the mystery of the primary transformation of syntheses of the inorganic into the organic compounds endowed with life. For this reason one may consider *all* creative activities as redemptive.

In contrast, the death drive aims at the psychobiological unbinding of all such creative transformations and syntheses, whether primary or secondary. In so doing, the death instinct delineates radically different kinds of destructive patterns energized by repetition compulsion, which according to Freud defines the concept of all instinctual drives, and which is operative in cyclical activities of nature. The death instinct calls for nothing less than a return to that unimaginable moment that inorganic elements “under the pressure of external disturbing forces” transform themselves into the organic and produce living organisms. The death drive therefore constitutes itself as an indomitable conservative call back to the self-sameness of the inorganic as the purest form of repetition as matter and energy. Or, on another plane of signification and in the well-known words of the English burial service: “In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return”. For this reason, “ashes to ashes, dust to dust,” as Freud so accurately recognized it, is an ur-story foretold by the death drive.

III

Lacking Freud’s stoical courage, the Epigoni have come to drop the death instinct without putting any other hypothesis in its place (1959, p. 75).

Norman O. Brown, *Life against Death*

The psychobiological truth of the death instinct, transforming itself as it does into the enormous work of the negative as an open-ended series of unbinding processes, compels me to think of it as generative of evil. There can be a descriptive phenomenology of evil then as we perceive it, experience it, and reflect on it, as both potential evildoers and victims. This would be true whether the work of the negative occurs on individual, group, national, or national level. The death instinct regarded as evil through operations of the work of the negative comprises an epiphenomenon that, from my perspective, is neither reductive nor a mere ethical judgment.

Amplifying somewhat on what I have already stated, I would say that, persuaded by Freud’s straightforward conceptualization of the death instinct as I am, I deem authentic the causal link between the death instinct and the existential reality of the lived experience of evil. The death instinct provides the foundational matrix of the indissoluble mixture of biological and endopsychic factors that surface as our experience of evil. However, in no way do I intend this foundational linkage to be didactic or dogmatic. Freud reminds us that compared to the “life instincts,” the “death instincts seem to do their work unobtrusively” (*Beyond the Pleasure Principle* 57). In view of this comparison, the

death instinct as it surfaces in the work of the negative can be enormously subtle in its interminable, many-faceted operations. It also bears repeating, that I do not consider the secondary linkage between evil and the work of the negative an inviolable totalization. Since repression clearly falls into the domain of the work of the negative, it can often prevent destructive urges to overcome the ego, at least provisionally. Nevertheless, without psychoanalytic interventions such repressions may eventually return through the inconspicuous manipulations of the death instinct. One may say that this is precisely the reason why the return of the repressed so traumatizes the ego.

Having made such qualifications, one may still state that, for reasons yet unknown and possibly unknowable, the death instinct in its dual regressive-progressive dialectics with the life instinct manifests itself as an inexorable call for return of the organic to its inorganic origin. Which is why in its inevitable emergence, the death instinct shapes up as the inexorable dialectical antithesis rather than simple opposition to the life instinct. The force and inevitability of such an invincible dialectic is the reason for our difficulty to comprehend the profound mystery of the equation of the death instinct with evil. This incomprehension compels Green to paraphrase the words of Angelus Silelsius [German mystic, 1624-1677] “The rose is without why” to “Evil is without why”. In other words, there is no discernible reason for the existence of evil. All we can say is: *Evil exists*. As such, evil situates itself on the other side of our powers of reasoning and understanding as human beings.

IV

Having defined evil as the work of the negative generated by the death instinct, I recognize that still one major question remains. Is the Freudian formulation of the death instinct a mere well-formulated psychoanalytic speculation? Or does it merely represent a highly daring and sophisticated conceptual construct, but is not either scientifically or clinically valid? Do psychoanalysts, biologists, psychiatrists, and our own lived-experiences confirm the authenticity of the death instinct? For my part, I must say I fully adhere to it and do so without any reservation. Freud’s theoretically advanced concept of the death instinct offers a remarkably bold and exceptionally brilliant psychoanalytic insight. I believe so in spite of the criticism leveled at it by some psychoanalysts as having no biological or endopsychic basis, mostly in the last century. Today, this criticism is no longer even remotely convincing. The recent studies on programmed cellular and molecular death in cellular biology and medicine scientifically affirm the existence of the death instinct as apoptosis. Apoptotic processes change the morphology and biochemistry of cells. One biologist, Zahra Zakeri, writes of the “cell-killing signals that shapes the embryo” (*When Cells Die* 97). Such signals later result in the daily death of 50 to 70 billion cells in the average human body. Studies of entropy in physics also affirm the tendency of organized entities toward formal degradation, disorganization, and return to simpler states. Entropy of homological entities toward less intricate primary assemblages and arrangements propose something akin to the Freudian concept of the death instinct.

V

The pervasive intermingling of the death drive and the libido reveals the death drive’s radically parasitic relation to the life instinct. Often the death instinct undermines the work of the life instinct to such a magnitude that it seriously weakens or kills off its host, as it were. It develops alongside the life instinct in a state of quiet symbiosis but gravely undermines it. For example, the death instinct profoundly subverts the structures and functions of the sex drive through sado-masochistic compulsions in a variety of forms and extents.

It is possible to imagine the temporal dimension of the life instinct and the death instinct as being set in motion at the cellular moment of human conception as a function of the sex drive. The temporal

dimension of human life and death coincide at this unthinkable moment that hovers between being, nothingness, and future creative and destructive potentials. The human embryo is already replete with the potential mysteries what lies ahead of it as life and death. No matter how counter-intuitive it might appear, the death instinct is an inextricable element of the life instinct from the moment of the inception of human life. As a result, the death drive is coextensive with the life instinct and eventually will be coterminous with it in the disappearance of conscious life and the necrotic process.

As it would be clear by now, from my viewpoint, this fusion of the life and death instincts as conception marks the place where good and evil will eventually make themselves manifest to us as possibilities of lived experience. I would suggest the site of this emergence as my response to the ancient question, *unde malum?* (“Whence evil?”). In this light, one may describe evil as a covert basal concurrence of the death instinct within the incalculable manifestations of the life instinct.

The impenetrable union of life and death at the instant of cellular conception and its latent endopsychic expressions render our daily life an unavoidable series of balancing acts between good and evil. In the structural model of the psyche, Freud considers the ego as the battlefield between the super-ego and the id as opposing forces. All modes of violence, aggression, cruelty, reconciliation, compromise, mercy surrender perpetually to one or the other and contest the integrity and the balance of the ego. Since Freud theorizes that the id and substantial parts of the super-ego itself are unconscious, these negotiations frequently turn up in consciousness as occult, fearsome, if not indeed paralyzing. The keen interest of these negotiations to psychoanalysis is due to this irreducible quotient of unconscious merger of good versus evil in their diverse extents in the ego as effects of the dual life and death instincts.

Now we must yet answer other significant questions: How does this seemingly impossible fusion of the mutually exclusive death drive as destructive impulses, desires, wishes and the life instinct with its unlimited life drives take place? How can one elucidate their functions alongside one another? Here, we need to remind ourselves of Freud’s assertion that the “pleasure principle seems actually to serve the death instincts” (*Beyond the Pleasure Principle* 57). I find in Green’s twin notions of “*narcissisme de vie, narcissisme de mort*” (narcissism of life, narcissism of death) an invaluable source of psychoanalytic illumination of Freud’s far-reaching and seemingly contradictory assertion about the pleasure principle serving the death instinct. One may say that the Freudian notion of “primary narcissism” which is born in reciprocal relations between infant and mother as love of self is a feature of the life instinct as the “narcissism of life”. However, the vicissitudes of “primary narcissism” are inherent in the extreme form of secondary narcissism, which Green aptly refers to as “narcissism of death”. Narcissism of death masquerades as love of self as it destroys all the vestiges of libidinal binding relationships to other human beings and to the environing world as libidinal objects. For Green, narcissism of death erases perception in “negative hallucination” and the borderline psychotic state of “blank psychosis” (*la psychose blanche*). It compels the psyche into ostensibly an unstoppable glide into indifference to what is external to self-love. That is the reason narcissistic disorders are so resistant to successful psychoanalytic treatment. Narcissism of death may exteriorize itself in acts of unbelievable cruelty and barbarity, always in the name of self-love, self-protection, and paranoia. I find the destructive union of the death instinct with narcissism to be a paradigmatic example for the unrestricted number of other cases in which the death instinct coincides with the life instinct and radically subverts its function or thrusts it aside.

Defining evil as an ensemble of unbinding processes of the death instinct as the psychobiological work of the negative, as I have done, implies an ineradicable pessimism. This pessimism makes it impossible to foresee conditions of the possibility of a human world without evil. As Freud clearly discerned, the death instinct is an endopsychic phenomenon with deep roots in inorganic and organic matter and their structures and functions. The death instinct is not under the control of our conscious will and its psychogenic components as such.

Yet, this pessimism does not totally exclude the hope of attenuating the work of the death instinct as evil in its incessant work to negate the life instinct. One can always confront what forced Hegel to declare in *Phenomenology of Spirit* that each consciousness “*seeks the death of the other*”

(1977, p. 113). The Hegelian formulation is a matter of desiring the death of the other by negation of their consciousness, a matter reifying this consciousness and returning it to its inorganic origin. For Hegel, it is clearly the death instinct at work in a dramatically manifest manner. It is a philosophical statement that maximally lays bare the ramifications of the Freudian concept of the death drive. Nonetheless, as Jean-Paul Sartre pronounced it so many decades ago, consciousness is nothingness, that is, mere awareness whose objects are external to itself. It confers on each individual a certain freedom of choice towards the predetermined elements of one's life and one's environment. On the plane of ontology, for instance, Martin Heidegger's concept of "being-toward-death" provides a positive awareness of the final and indisputable triumph of the death instinct over the life instinct.

From this standpoint, death becomes the inexorable horizon of life. However, "being-toward-death" as accepting that "I die" everyday is far from a mortifying experience. Paradoxically, it vivifies life by maximizing the sense of the life instinct's predicament in its mysterious pairing with the death instinct. Assuming awareness of the relentlessly psychobiological negative activities of the death instinct attenuates its unconscious force as a drive. In this sense, psychoanalysis plays a crucial role in lessening the effect of the unbinding operations of the death instinct that we attribute to evil. Bringing the whole process to the forefront of consciousness and placing it in the light of a "receptive unconscious," using Christopher Bollas's terminology places it within the realm of consciousness freedom and offers us choice and thus a measure of responsibility. Hence, there is a possibility of choosing the struggle of a *creative* life over against the destructive death instinct, or at least a tolerable amalgam of both.

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