

Eros And The Death Drive In Freud: A Defense Of Empedocles

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I. Introduction

The aim of this short essay is to look closer at Sigmund Freud's writings on the concept of an instinctual death-drive found in *Civilization and Its Discontents*.¹ In it, Freud develops his thesis that there is a universal force of destruction operating alongside, and in opposition to, the universal force of creation, which is *Eros*. I will consider this point of view taken up by Freud as a continuation of the early Pre-Socratic philosopher Empedocles' notion of motion. In order to do so I will briefly discuss Freud's thoughts on aggression in man and society in order to then turn towards the philosophy of Empedocles and more specifically to the principles of motion he claims to be embodied by the deities *Aphrodite* and *Neikos*. This will then grant me the possibility of bringing up their ontological differences (and similarities). As a conclusion my aim is to discuss the possibility of Freud having disregarded certain elements of Empedocles' reasoning and end with an invitation to reflect upon if it renders Freud's pessimistic conclusion of a civilization tugging away at its own ends true?

II. Problems With The Phrase "Cosmic Phantasy"

In *Analysis Terminable and Interminable* Freud claimed that the Pre-Socratic philosopher Empedocles was the predecessor of his own thoughts on the two main forces governing our instincts. The forces of creation and destruction. Whilst on the one hand granting the originality of this idea to Empedocles, Freud then continued to claim that the view put forward by Empedocles was a "cosmic phantasy" and that he

¹ Sigmund Freud, *Civilization And Its Discontents*, trans. James Strachey, (New York: W.W Norton & Company, 1962)

instead had developed the idea through psychoanalysis into a more scientific truth by looking at biological mechanisms.²

A quick reflection on the phrase expressed by Freud on the “cosmic phantasy”, that Empedocles supposedly had been devoted to, bring several troublesome questions. What does Freud mean by “cosmic phantasy”? And, is it not possible that he himself was guilty of pursuing this “cosmic phantasy”, only through the prism of psychoanalytic thought?

III. The Destructive Force In *Civilization And Its Discontents*

In order to better understand Freud’s view on the destructive force, also known as the death drive, I have chosen to examine his writings in *Civilization And Its Discontents* where he gives his thoughts on its origin and consequences for man and society.

The first problem that Freud encounters, and acts as a catalyst for the possible existence of a death drive, is the problem of aggression in man.³ In his earlier writings Freud had already posited that a force of creation, *Eros*, was the main force of activity and that in it forces of destruction and anger was contained. This view was strengthened by the sadistic and masochistic tendencies exhibited in the force of *Eros*, by the ego and superego. He therefore speaks of a bipolarity in *Eros*.⁴ However, this view of bipolarity seemed to be challenged by the existence of non-erotic acts of aggression. Furthermore, the common denominator for both *Eros* and the death drive was to be found in the libido. Even if they have this in common, according to Freud, it takes on a different process in the relation libido-death drive. Instead of finding enjoyment in creation it finds its main subject in the form of destruction and when this force is tamed it directs itself towards (external) objects and thus gives the ego a sense of satisfaction. That satisfaction is felt by having a sense of power over nature.⁵ The conclusion derived from the previous reasoning leads us, and Freud, to claim that aggression is an innate force in man and seems to be an obstacle for the development of culture.⁶

² Sigmund Freud, “Analysis Terminable and Interminable”, *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis*, 18 (1937) :398

³ Freud, *Civilization*, 67

⁴ *Ibid.*, 67

⁵ *Ibid.*, 68

⁶ *Ibid.*, 69

This struggle is what all life essentially consists of and so the evolution of civilization may be simply described as the struggle of the human existence.⁷

This brief account of Freud's discovery of the death drive will now enable us to discuss the ideas of Empedocles, which hopefully will bring to light the similarities in both thinkers and come to a deeper understanding of the problem posed in the beginning.

IV. Empedocles' Notion Of Motion: Aphrodite And Neikos

Empedocles conceived of two forces governing the universe: Love and Strife. Within these two forces a cosmology emerge from the two deities Aphrodite, representing Love, and Neikos, representing Strife. Contrary to his predecessor Parmenides, Empedocles based his cosmology and physics on the principle of change, i.e. motion. Starting out from the four elements; air, fire, water and air (as also Parmenides did) he held that they could account for the existence of change in combination with the knowledge received from the senses and would render the co-existence of things possible, i.e. the material world. The basic structure of the universe was ascribed to a *rhizomata* (root-like) system.⁸ The cosmology is emerging:

Hear first the four roots of all things: bright Zeus, life-giving Hera, and Aidoneus, and Nestis who moistens the springs of men with her tears.⁹

These four principles were nonetheless static and in order for motion to come about a dynamic element had to be exerting its powers in the background. As mentioned above, these two forces were the forces of Love and Strife. The motion set about by these forces was of a cyclic nature with moments of union and dispersion in a continuum ad infinitum.

But now I shall go back over the course of my verses, which I set out in order before, drawing my present discourse from that discourse. When Strife reached the lowest depth of the eddy and Love comes to be in the midst of the whirl, then all these things come together at this point as to be one

⁷ Ibid., 69

⁸ In contrast to the later development of systems following the structure of *stoicheia* (elements) by Aristotle.

⁹ Fr. 6, Aetius 1, 3.20

alone, yet not immediately, but joining together at their will, one from one place, another from another. And as they were joining Strife began to move outwards to the circumference. But many things remained unmixed, alternating with those that were mixed, as many as Strife, remaining aloft, still retained; for not yet had it entirely departed to the utmost boundaries of the circle, but some of its members were remaining within, and others had gone outside. But, just as far as it is constantly rushing forth, just so far there ever kept coming in a gentle immortal stream of perfect Love; and all at once what before had attained to immortality became mortal, what had been unmixed before was now mixed, each exchanging its path. And as they were mingled together, countless tribes of mortal things were spread abroad, patterned in every sort of form, a wonder to behold.¹⁰

As seen in the fragment above there is no trace of bipolarity in the nature of these two forces as they come together and intermingle with each other, leaving space for one another, to in the next moment meet in union. Empedocles also believed that at those times when the universe was moved by Strife there was nevertheless a considerable amount of Love retained in our bodies that we could reach through unity in intercourse. If this is to be true, the opposite movement would also be the case; that when the universe is moved by Love there is also an amount of Strife active within our bodies, and thus in our actions.

This cosmology of Empedocles hides more behind its mysterious face. Not only is it a fascinating theory but it also holds true to modern day physics. Simply put, we still consider physics as an interplay between two forces of attraction (Love) and repulsion (Strife) that act on specific particles (roots). Is it then still fair to say that what he was developing was a “cosmic phantasy”? Or is this a too easy answer given by Freud when discarding the true uniqueness of Empedocles thought? Again, my aim is not to disprove Freud but rather try and see the similarities and try to receive some insight into the mysterious riddle of the phrase “cosmic phantasy”.

In the next section I will discuss what seems to be an ontological difference of the two forces between the two thinkers.

V. Simultaneousness Or Succession

One of the main ontological differences that seem to be evident is that Freud’s notion of the death-drive is one that is working simultaneously along side *Eros* whilst

¹⁰ Fr. 35, Simplicius, *De Caelo* 529.1 and Fr. 36, Stobaeus, *Anth.* 1, 10.11

Empedocles' notion of the same drive is seen as a successive force to *Aphrodite* or Love.

Freud rejects the bipolarity of *Eros* on the basis of discovering the independency of the death-drive as an expression of (non-erotic) anger. In doing so he continues with his psychoanalytic thought by a supposed internalization of the anger within the ego that gives way for the superego to exert its authoritative power and induce a sense of guilt in the individual. All the meanwhile this process takes place there is never a reduction of the *Eros* in the individual to the death-drive, i.e. the life force is never held hostage by the destructive force. The instinct of life maintains and upholds life and is therefore also the creative force that enables the 'eternal struggle' in man to take place. If the creative force had succumbed to the death-drive there would be no reason for the individual to carry out his life-affirmative actions.

In Empedocles another process seems to be taking place – a process of succession. When ascribing the forces of Love and Strife as the principles governing the universe there is an emphasis on the one force following the other. They are not working simultaneously but only seem to intertwine during certain moments during the swirling movements of the universe.

The question then arises if this is really so. Going back to the fragment above by Empedocles there seems to be another movement going on as well. A movement very similar to that of Freud's death-drive, namely, a simultaneous movement. Although it is true that the forces of Love and Strife is treading separate paths, flowing to the boundary of the circle only to return to the middle again, there is always a certain amount from each of the respective forces that merge and become one. This seem to prove the 'togetherness' of the two forces as working at the same time in the universe, i.e. it is not only the case that one leaves to be succeeded by the other one to reign. To elucidate yet again what I have already made clear a re-reference to the quote above will be helpful.

[...] what had been unmixed before was now mixed, each exchanging its path.

I am here referring to the mixture of forces, which in turn gives way for the 'exchange' of paths. So, indeed, there is still an active element of succession, albeit with an occurrence of mixture, which I believe holds great importance. It is now clear

that both theories part-take in the ontology of simultaneousness, even if Freud's theory does so to a greater extent.

In the concluding section I will discuss what consequences the ontological similarities have for Freud and his reasoning of a death-driven society and finally either embrace or reject the phrase "cosmic phantasy".

VI. Concluding Thoughts

Up until now I have not given a full explanation of how the death-drive works through aggression within the individual on the levels of ego and superego. Neither will I attempt to do so, simply because it is not the purpose of this essay to discuss the psychoanalytic processes in which Freud develops his ideas but rather the actual death-drive as an independent force per se. What I on the other hand do need to mention is briefly how the death-drive, according to Freud, is mirrored on a larger scale onto society, as to be able to criticize his assumption that follows from it.

In the third part of this essay I mentioned that Freud sees the aggression felt by the individual as being internalized by the ego and therefore granting the superego accessibility to the actor of a censor. The same process is, according to Freud, happening in society through the creation of a group out of individuals. The problem arises in the *egoistic* trend in the individuals strive for happiness and a *cultural* trend within society that institutes restrictions, the conflict being that of happiness and constraints. The culture also develops a superego based on restriction which hinders the pursuit of happiness for the individual.¹¹

The conclusion put forward by Freud is one that discusses the possibility of society putting up too harsh restrictions in the service of trying to get rid of anger, instead of perhaps accepting it as a force to be reckoned with – not a force to be suppressed.¹²

If we grant the argumentation I have followed hitherto to be true it seems that we are dealing with an identical force seen both in Freud and Empedocles. The question remains why Freud sees this force as such a problem and Empedocles not?

One must take into account the different purposes they professed, Freud on the one hand a science of psychoanalysis, Empedocles a blend of cosmology and physics.

¹¹ Freud, *Civilization*, 88-89

¹² *Ibid.*, 90-92

Yet the destructive force remains the same and seems only to take on different shapes in the hands of both. It also renders Freud's phrase of ascribing Empedocles thoughts to a "cosmic phantasy" truthful to his own reasoning. If we grant Freud that what he was developing was on the basis of biological mechanisms in man (psychology), then it might at first glance look as if the mysterious elements are taken out of consideration. But speaking of a life force called *Eros* and a force exhibiting its influence as a death-drive *is* mysterious. There is no empirical evidence for these forces, they are pure speculation. That is not to say that they are false or nonsensical, but it puts it into perspective the consequences of not being cautious when labeling other pre-historic figures as mysterious or only dealing with 'cosmic' matters. After all, Freud's own reasoning is based on an idea of certain properties in a microcosm (individual) as being paralleled by those in a macrocosm (civilization).

Finally, as an open question, if the death-drive/force of destruction/Strife is active in the world as in man is it necessarily that civilization is trying to do away with it, or is it simply that the force of Love has yet to take a larger hold of us in order to exhibit greater acts of charity to one another?

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