

Death drive: A concept redefined



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ABSTRACT

Based on individualism, determinism and the human-nature dualism, Freud affirmed the existence of an aggressive drive in psychic processes and theorized the integration of the subject in social life, from the perspective of opposition/domination, configuring the natural and insurmountable character of the death drive. In an attempt to overcome the dichotomy inherent in the concepts formulated in Freudian metapsychology,

contemporary psychoanalytic theories, especially Winnicott's, have revised the concept of the death drive and what gravitates around it. From this perspective, Winnicott interpreted the emergence of subjectivity from the interaction of the subject with the environment and aggressiveness as an expression of primary love, denying it as a manifestation of the instinctual movement that aims at destruction and death. For him, reliability and connection with the environment are fundamental conditions for the process of self-creation and transformation of the subject. From this perspective, Winnicott made the dynamics of the elements of the drive theory and the pleasure principle consonant with the complexity of current times. The bibliographic study, presented here, supports the construction of the theoretical-methodological framework of the analysis of the psychoanalytic theory and the unfolding of the Freudian inflection, based on the thought of the psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott, whose theory revised the idea of the death drive, formulated by Freud, in 1920, in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. As a result, the study points out elements to think about the conception of integrated nature, alien to the machinic metaphor, from the idea of a being capable of creation and self-transformation with its power to act.

Keywords: Freudian metapsychology, Death drive, Conceptual revisions, Creativity, Power of action.

1 INTRODUCTION

If we want to grasp what is rich in the history of the psychoanalytic movement, we must grasp what is creative, inventive, novelistic, fantastic, even mad, in Freud's work. Félix Guattari

This study analyzes how psychoanalytic theory conceives Nature - external and internal - and the unfolding of the Freudian inflection in the thought of the contemporary psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott, whose theory revised the paradigms of psychoanalysis formulated by Freud in 1920, launched with the idea of the death drive in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*.



In the twentieth century, many major epistemological transformations occurred with the discoveries of quantum mechanics (Max Planck's quantum of energy, Werner Heisenberg's uncertainty principle, Ilya Prigogine's dissipative structures, Niels Bohr's principle of complementarity in the integration of subject to object, among others), which favored the overcoming of the dichotomous nature/culture view and allowed the emergence of new perspectives in the way of understanding the psychic conflict formulated by Freud.

Starting from the assumption that, in formulating the theory about the natural and insurmountable character of the death drive, Freud based himself on some assumptions of the modern paradigm (individualism, determinism, human-nature dualism) to affirm the existence of an aggressive drive in psychic processes and to theorize the integration of the subject in social life from the perspective of opposition and domination, The need arose to analyze contemporary psychoanalytic theories that made revisions of the concept of the death drive and what gravitates around it, in an attempt to overcome the dichotomy inherent to the concepts formulated in Freudian metapsychology. The relevance of this study lies in this analysis.

As specific objectives, we seek to point out some elements of the drive theory and the pleasure principle formulated by Freud and to demonstrate how Winnicott's theory proceeded in its updates, making the dynamics of these concepts more consonant with the complexity of current times.

To achieve these objectives, we configured the study as qualitative because it describes and interprets the non-quantifiable social reality, in an attempt to answer the questions that are affirmed in the field of subjectivity, symbolism, meaning and intentionality, bringing the subject closer to the object in a dialectical relationship.

From secondary sources consisting mainly of books, book chapters, specialized periodicals and magazines, the bibliographic study supported the construction of the theoretical-methodological framework, which constituted the conceptual foundation from which we used to guide the intended analysis.

As a result, the study points out some elements to think about a conception of an integrated nature, alien to the machinic, deterministic metaphor, and more associated with the idea of a living being capable of creation and self-transformation.

In this article, we develop the concept of creativity as a counter-hegemonic category to the system that captures human subjectivity and places the subject as its own tormentor in the "society of fatigue" (HAN, 2015) and point out some questions for reflection.

Although Freud was inspired by the scientific discoveries of the nineteenth century, by adopting the unconscious as an object of study, he signaled the foundation of the "society of fatigue" (HAN, 2015; 2021) and the "society of the spectacle" (DÉBORD, 1997), characterizing contemporaneity, where the subject worships narcissism and sees the other as an object for his enjoyment, no longer



attending to Foucauldian disciplinary control, but being himself a subject of performance and production. This productivist society generates psychopathologies that shape relationships riddled with intolerance and disrespect for individualities, which contribute to the emergence of anguish and melancholy, analytical categories of psychoanalytic theory.

From this perspective, this article is structured in three sections.

In the first, we briefly present the contradictions of Freud's metapsychology which, at the same time that he bases the theoretical-metapsychological body of psychoanalysis on modern paradigmatic assumptions – the medical-physicalist of his time and the human-nature dualism – takes paths that distance him from this perspective by basing psychoanalytic theory on clinical experience theorizing about the unconscious, the death drive and the role of intersubjectivity in the constitution of subjectivity.

In the second, we expose some revisionist ideas of the Englishman Donald Winnicott.

And, in the third, we describe the power of creativity as a counter-hegemonic strategy to contemporary dictates.

We conclude by making considerations about the concept of univocity, which reflects the overcoming of Freud's Cartesian dualism and the possibility of thinking about psychoanalysis from the expansion of the paths of potentialization of the subject, with a view to a reconciliation with oneself and with the globalized world under the control of capital.

2 CONSIDERATIONS ON THE CONTRADICTIONS OF FREUD'S METAPSYCHOLOGY

Throughout his work, Freud changed his conception of nature, both external and internal (body, instinct and passions). However, despite these transformations, his psychoanalytic theory was always based on the modern paradigm, conceiving nature in the metaphorical perspective of a machine, whose dynamism obeyed deterministic laws that could be reduced to the logic of identity, with the separation of man from nature and the reduction of the process of knowledge to knowledge and scientific experiences.

For Gadamer (1997), the main representative of the twentieth-century hermeneutic school, in modern science, human beings and nature have become mere objects at the disposal of reason. From this perspective, Heidegger (2015) considered that the understanding of being as objectivity enables the use of technological rationality to oppress nature and men. Such thoughts make it impossible for us to think about the complexity of nature and the human being and impoverish the relationship between them, favoring the passivity and inertia of those who are faced with processes of degradation of nature and self-destruction of their species. In addition, the subject has diminished his power (freedom) to exist in a state of happiness, i.e., feelings of joy coming from active affections, translated by Spinoza as autonomy (Sawaia, 2009).



However, Plastino (2009), an Argentine psychoanalyst living in Brazil, draws attention to the hegemonic conception of man and nature in modernity and to the objective that intends to submit nature to human designs, from which the impasse between two processes in the twentieth century will emerge:

the consistent signs of the unfeasibility of civilization built from the paradigmatic assumptions of modernity and the questioning of these assumptions made possible by the results obtained by the sciences and knowledge constructed within the paradigm itself (PLASTINO, 2009, p. 140-141).

This author also states that it will be from overcoming this impasse in relation to the way the human being deals with nature, with other men and with his own nature, from which the psychoanalytic theory emerges. But, if, on the one hand, Freud inaugurates a movement of rupture with the modern paradigm when he states:

- 1- the unconscious psyche, which contests the definition of man as a rational being;
- 2- intersubjectivity as a central aspect in the constitution of subjectivity;
- 3- the specific modality of clinical experience as a psychoanalytic method;

On the other hand, Freudian metapsychology is riddled with modern paradigmatic assumptions, which reveals contradictions in the theoretical-metapsychological body of psychoanalysis.

Thinking about these contradictions and after a rigorous review of Freud's texts, Martins (2009) points out the need for a reform of the paradigms of psychoanalysis and proposes a new conception of psychic conflict, based on reflections guided by his own clinical experience and by inspirations from Spinoza, Deleuze and Nietzsche, in the philosophical field, and from Winnicott in the field of psychoanalysis. De Spinoza absorbs the thought that human culture is nature's way of being; Deleuze's concept of univocity, and Nietzsche's vision of the primordial one.

Given the short time for the elaboration of this article, there is no way to deepen the study of philosophical inspirations, emphasizing only brief considerations and sticking to psychoanalytic reflections.

In relation to Freud's theory, the following analysis focuses on the theory of the death drive and what gravitates around it, informing about the general context of psychoanalytic theory and some of its fundamental concepts (drive theory and pleasure principle) and about a proposal for contemporary reinterpretation.



2.1 DRIVE DUALISM AS A FUNDAMENTAL ELEMENT IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF FREUDIAN METAPSYCHOLOGY

The formulation of an ontology for psychoanalysis stems from the need to construct a theoretical-conceptual framework of a speculative nature that guides empirical research, in order to have coherence between speculations and clinical experience.

Hence, we ask: how was this Freudian theoretical framework that characterizes "the ontological basis of metapsychology" constructed?

And we rehearse an answer: in the dualism between the life drives and the death drives. This dualism is a fundamental element in the construction of Freudian metapsychology, which uses myth to establish an infrastructure for understanding the psychic apparatus. The mechanism of blind repetition, opposition to all change, and the desire to assert one's own excessive power characterize these drives.

But what is drive? Impulse is the experience of a demand that pushes the subject towards an activity (even a passive one) and that is imposed on him from within. The subject is submerged by this violent instinctual force and only at the cost of many efforts can he subtract and resist it. The "demonic" side of this pressure is explained by the "anguish" that the subject feels in the face of the instinctual demand and its anonymous and repetitive character. Whether he yields to this impulse or resists it, the subject is usually equally distressed or "terrified." It is for this reason that the model of traumatic neurosis imposed itself on Freud in his theory of drive in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (Bernet, 2016).

For Freud, man is threatened by three sources of suffering: the hyperpower of nature, the fragility of the human body, and the relationship with other human beings.

In his classic text *The Discontent of Civilization* [1887], Freud presents the idea that suffering comes from the impossibility of man completely dominating nature, that is, of fulfilling the Promethean project of modernity. The unfolding of the modern perspective centered on the dualism of human being/nature refers to the use of the individualistic premise, which translates into the principle of pleasure.

Considered as a tendency of the psychic apparatus to completely free the mental apparatus from excitations, to keep the amount of constant excitation in it or to keep it as low as possible, this principle "determines a tendency and exerts an influence on the activity and purpose of psychic life" (Giacoaia, 2008, p. 25) equating itself with happiness and its inverse. to displeasure.

By relying on Fechner's physicalist perspective of constancy, which determines the tendency to maintain the quantities of energy within constant mechanical systems (Giacoaia, 2008), Freud impoverished his approach and transformed the pleasure principle into "an inadequate theoretical tool to deal with the complexity of human experience related to feelings of happiness or unhappiness" (Plastino, 2009, p. 144).



By basing his approach on drive dualism, Freud tied it to the dominant determinism in the modern paradigm and maintained the inevitability of the cultural malaise caused by the feeling of guilt resulting from the expansion of two elementary drives – Eros and death drive – thought of by Freud as cosmic principles that act on all men.

From this perspective and synthetically complementing what was pointed out in the introduction of this article, Freud theorized the integration of the subject in social life from the perspective of opposition and domination, affirming the existence of an autonomous aggressive drive in the man who emerges

of some central assumptions of the modern paradigm (determinism, individualism, human-nature dualism), of the reading of the scientific knowledge of the time (entropy), of the civilizational moment (pessimism caused by the war and the post-war crisis) and of Freud's own subjectivity (Plastino, 2009, p. 145).

For Han (2021), the death impulse, responsible for the aggressive inclination of human beings, is in line with Bernard Maris' idea¹ that the cunning of capitalism's destructiveness lies in channeling and directing the forces of destruction towards the growth and sociometabolic reproduction of capital.

From this perspective, Han asks whether "is the death impulse appropriate for thinking about the destructive process of capitalism?" "Or does capitalism reign a completely different kind of death impulse that escapes Freud's theory of the impulse?" (2021, p. 10).

In his book *I Am the Monster Who Speaks to You*, Preciado reminds us that:

An epistemology is a closure of our cognitive system that not only provides answers to our questions, but also defines the very questions that we can ask ourselves based on a previous interpretation of sensory data. Scientific paradigms are engagements shared by a social community that, without having the character of infallible or fully demonstrated axioms, are widely accepted insofar as they serve to solve all kinds of problems. Paradigms are "universes of discourse" in which a certain coherence, a certain techno-semiotic peace, a certain agreement reign. An epistemology is characterized precisely by flexibility, which allows the resolution of a certain number of problems. Until the problems that this epistemology creates become, so to speak, more numerous than those it solves. Thus, by definition conservative, slow and viscous, it becomes obsolete, harmful and even deleterious, and is replaced by a new epistemology, a new device, capable of answering the new questions (2022, p. 51-52).

3 INSPIRATIONS AND REINTERPRETATIONS OF FREUDIAN METAPSYCHOLOGY BY WINNICOTT

Based on Freud's ideas and experiences, especially in conceptual productions that affirm the unconscious and its centrality in the dynamism of the psyche and participation in knowledge and in the constitution of subjectivity and human relations, Winnicott (1983) interpreted the emergence of subjectivity from the interaction of the subject with his environment and aggressiveness as an

¹ French economist killed in the terrorist attack on *Charlie Hebdo* in 2015, author of the book *Capitalisme et pulsion de mort*.



expression of primary love. denying it as a manifestation of an instinctual movement that aims at destruction and death. For him, reliability and the indissoluble connection with the environment are fundamental conditions for the process of self-creation and transformation of the subject.

In this line of interpretation, in addition to rejecting the conception of the death drive as formulated by Freud, Winnicott minimizes the pleasure principle and sustains a natural ethics by conceiving nature, including human nature, in the vitalist perspective that thinks of it as a living and complex being, denying its formulation as a machine, whose dynamism is reduced to efficient causality. Based on this vitalist perspective, Winnicott sustains the relationship between culture and the environment that favors human spontaneity. For this English psychoanalyst, the word spontaneity is the interpretative key to this relationship because it expresses the dynamism of living nature that is actualized through the creative process, which can be realized in the environment conducive to human potentialization.

By conceiving fantasy as prior to reality, insisting on primary creativity, Winnicott thinks of a different relationship with nature, overcoming determinism and elaborating other ways for human beings to develop their cognitive capacities, beyond destruction and domination, but incorporating integration and belonging (Plastino, 2009, p. 147).

From this perspective, he postulates an innate tendency to the integration of the ego (Winnicott, 2000, p. 223) and a tendency to produce a spontaneous ethical feeling (Plastino, 2009, p. 148), abandoning the individualistic premise and maintaining that the creation of subjectivity only occurs in an environment conducive to the emergence of spontaneity. With this, Winnicott conceives a new humanism, more consonant with the demands of contemporaneity, expressed in the words of the French thinker, Edgar Morin, when he says that:

Nature is what reconnects, articulates, and profoundly communicates the anthropological, the biological and the physical. So we need to rediscover Nature in order to rediscover our Nature (...) (Morin, 2005, p. 451).

From this perspective, Morin postulates that human solidarity is essential and a constituent part of the relationship that human beings establish with nature and the cosmos.

4 CREATIVITY AS A COUNTER-HEGEMONIC MOVEMENT

In the contemporary social context, creativity is seen as a personal task and not a collective one. But in order to break social inertia, brain/mind need to correlate in a certain circumstance in which there is a common intention.

As in the processes of nature, the notion of order is represented in the processes of the mind as an "infinite order that tends to evolve towards new orders and, in this way, to develop hierarchies, to constitute new types of structure" (Bohm, 2011, p. 23).



For the contemporary physicist David Bohm, efforts to impose a mechanical order on the mind can generate unexpected results that conflict with the order that the individual wants to impose. This is because conflict sets in in the mind of a sensitive and alert individual when he or she understands the irrelevance of mechanical patterns that prescribe how the individual should be, think, and feel, while at the same time impulses toward a creative reaction occur. Because it is painful, the mind tries to escape the conflict by moving from a reflexive state of disinterest to a state of torpor, assumed as natural in contemporary society.

This state of "disorder" of the mind, which denies contradictions or fantasies by avoiding awareness of the conflicts generated in the mind as a function of the set of human reactions, makes it impossible for the mind to solve subtle, deep and complex problems in any field of change and development. Hence, Bohm warns of the need to pay attention to the state of confusion of the mind because it is from it that the creative act emerges. From the perspective of guiding the processes capable of awakening the creative human potential, Amit Goswami (2008, 2015) postulates some questions:

- Why is creativity universal among children and not among adults?
- How can we stimulate the enchantment that permeates children's experiences, so that they resist the conformism and alienation brought about by the media?
- How can we stimulate creativity, which brings joy and satisfaction, in a technological and industrial society that generates consumerism and mediocrity?
- Is there a relationship between creativity and self-development?
- How to build a creative society?

Taking up the notion that creative ideas result from the play of consciousness, which is the basis of being,² Goswami recognizes that spiritual growth is an "inner" creativity, as opposed to creativity in the arts and sciences, which is external. In his words,

when we sing the music of creativity, using the harmony most appropriate to the demands of a given creative moment, our individual and simple verses become part of the overarching cosmic multiverse – the united verse we call the universe (Goswami, 2008, p.16).

5 BRIEF NOTES ON THE PSYCHOANALYTIC CLINIC OF POTENCY AND THE RECONCILIATION BETWEEN LIFE AND DEATH

In the exercise of introducing some questions about Freud's assumptions anchored in the representation of modern nature, we see that, despite the conceptual transformations that occurred throughout his work, Freud builds the psychoanalytic theory based on the paradigmatic view that separates the body/machine from the rational mind. This view results in a reductionist perspective that makes it difficult to understand the complexity "of nature and of the human being, as well as of the

² In quantum physics, matter becomes less material, only possibility in consciousness.



relations between them, leaving man defenceless to deal with the evident processes of destruction of nature and self-destruction of the species" (Plastino, 2009, p. 140), experienced in the current moment of civilization.

However, it is interesting to point out that it is from the processes of knowledge forged by psychoanalytic knowledge (affirmation of the unconscious psyche, of the affective factors in the constitution and functioning of subjectivity and intersubjectivity as a central aspect in the constitution of subjectivity) from which the rupture with the individualist premise, the foundation of modern thought, emerges. Contradictorily, however, many other concepts formulated in the theoretical-metapsychological body of psychoanalysis, such as the death drive, adhered to the dualism and determinism characteristic of modernity.

Although supported by Freud's discoveries, Winnicott makes a new reading based on his humanist vision, integrating the individual with the environment, rejecting the theory of the death drive and postulating aggressiveness as a vital impulse that animates the individual in his relations with the other and with the world, along with the sexual drive, understood as sensoriality and expression of the original drive. sustaining the dynamism of human nature and its association with the idea of the strength of creativity, of non-linear mental processes, in the expansion of the power of action.

Among the studies that point to the need for a reform of the paradigms of psychoanalysis, the considerations about the dynamics proposed by Freud in the context of the nineteenth century, woven by André Martins in his book *Death Drive?* (2009), draws attention, mainly, to the analysis of the concept of univocity in Deleuze, Spinoza, Nietzsche and Winnicott, with the intention of overcoming Freud's Cartesian dualism (MARTINS, 1998a, 2000d, 2009).

In the interweaving of these thinkers in relation to the understanding of this concept, Martins evokes the "primary feeling" of being one with the world and the way in which this experience influences the affections in the subject's adult life, the way they affect themselves and their relationships with others.

Based on Winnicott (2000b, 1983), Martins (2009) analyzes the emergence of the feeling of continuity with the world and how it persists, to a greater or lesser extent, according to the feeling of the baby and the child when they feel powerful and confident in relation to the environment in which they live, little or very welcoming. This feeling of union with the environment, as if it did not exist apart from itself, portrays the "oceanic feeling" that Freud characterizes as emerging from the feeling of love, because it brings to the individual the "feeling of the indissoluble bond of being one with the world" (Freud, 1987, v. 21a, p. 73).

However, based on Winnicott, Martins states that it is not appropriate to name this feeling oceanic, considering that the feeling of continuity with the world is related to the individual's ability to feel less or more powerful, that is, less or more capable of acting in the world in a singular way. For



Martins, this ability is intrinsically related to the feeling of welcoming the environment because, if it is favorable, the individual feels good about himself and faces adversity, even in the most difficult moments, anchored in his ability to create, that is, in the strong feeling of individuation and singularization. Otherwise, the unconscious feeling of lack contributes to the emergence of the feeling of revolt, usurpation, and non-contentment with what is received in relationships, in the world, and in life in general, because it seems little in the face of the idealization of what others have received in their most pleasant experiences.

For Martins, the term oceanic only accounts for continuity and he suggests the annulment of this continuity by the possibility of falling "into the utopia of a world of equals, whose standardization, however common it may be socially, violates the principle that each one only is, only exists, from himself, as a unique being and, therefore, different from the others" (Martins, 2009, p. 314).

Thus, if for Freud, the feeling of the self is demarcated as an ocean, where each drop is individual, differentiated, singular and unique, for Deleuze, the term univocity is translated from the idea of the existence of a co-pertinence between the individual and the whole, the latter being a single real constituted by an infinity of particularized entities. In Spinoza's terms, it is "a single substance (or Nature) constituting, from it and in it, several unique and singular modes", which Nietzsche calls the primordial one or "original mother", "that unique living being that engenders and procreates in the orgasm of which we are confused" (Martins, 2009, p. 315).

In this interpretative vein, Winnicott (1983k) expresses the feeling of univocity in the "ability to be alone", understood as the external trust provided by the memory of the first welcoming environment that allows one to feel loved, included and safe. Otherwise, the feeling coming from an unwelcoming environment generates abandonment, insecurity and separability from others and from the world, seen as the external other that promotes the correction of individuals' choices based on morality where right and wrong predominate outside the individual's own intuition and spontaneity. Therefore,

Bringing the real, the feeling of welcome within us, is what unites us to others. Perceiving, understanding and feeling that this reality constitutes everything and everyone is what allows us to affect ourselves without the affection of gender, racial, social prejudice or other types of segregation and resentment. On the other hand, it is also what allows us to feel individuated, and not undifferentiated drops in the ocean, so that we can be selective, not as a moral judgment, but in our encounters, setting limits beyond which we would feel invaded and, thus, assuming and fully experiencing our unique way of being, not repressing anger and envy, being affirmative of our way of being and of the present moment – being able to improve it precisely by being able to approve it. It is a conquest of our affections, to which analysis can contribute in a fundamental way (MARTINS, 2009, p. 316).

This achievement incorporates the affective understanding that there is no existence without conflict, because "there is no pleasure without pain, life without death, creation without perishing, real



without corporeality, existence without becoming, becoming without an arrow of time" (Martins, 2009, p. 317).

In the Nietzschean sense, the tragic consists in not idealizing life and ourselves, but valuing it and ourselves as we are, in our incompleteness and imperfection, reinterpreting reality at each present moment, with a view to expanding our power to act.

By emphasizing that being incomplete is not the same as being flawed, in the Lacanian and Platonic perspective of a perfect world, beyond concrete reality, Martins states that

Only those who lack something are at fault, and in order for us to lack something, we must at least ideally be complete, or have the possibility, even if unrealizable, of being complete. Or again, what exists, reality, the sensible world, can only be considered faulty in relation to another reality, an ideal world, desired as complete (2009, p. 318).

In this process of becoming, incomplete and uncertain, the contemporary human being is driven to reflect on what strategies to develop to overcome capitalism's obsession with death, given that its coercion of accumulation and growth creates, not only ecological catastrophes, but also mental catastrophes. According to Han, a Korean philosopher and German citizen,

The coercion of performance is destructive, making self-assertion and self-destruction one and the same. People optimize themselves to die. Indiscriminate self-exhaustion leads to a mental breakdown. The brutal struggle of competition is destructive. It produces a coldness of feelings and an indifference towards others that brings a coldness and indifference towards oneself (2021, p. 20).

In view of the above, we ask whether there is a possibility of overcoming the metaphysical heritage that makes capitalism an aspirant to capitalism. Infinite Capital. To the metaphysics that denies death, Adorno opposes the thought that "takes for itself the undiminished or sublimated consciousness of death" (apud Han, 2021, p. 28), in the perspective of reconciling consciousness with life and mastering necrophilia that transforms it into reified, mechanical life, inert thing, inanimate artifact, undead.

These brief considerations suggest that we think about psychoanalysis from the perspective of expanded paths of the subject's potentialization, based on the valorization of the integration between body and mind, nature and culture, sensible world and intelligible world, death and life, aiming at mutual conciliation for the enrichment of the psychoanalytic technique and the human world.



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