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Thomas Svolos

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LACANIAN REVIEW ONLINE

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In one of his last essays, *Civilization and Its Discontents*ⁱ, Freud offered a kind of metapsychological model of what we Lacanians call the drive (poorly translated in English as instinct). He advanced a hypothesis of a struggle between *Eros*, which propelled the human being to life, and *Thanatos*, which pushed the human being to death and destruction. This dyad, this tension, was deployed by Freud to read various psychological and social phenomena.

In a way, we find this dyad reworked in Jacques-Alain Miller's lectures delivered years ago in Brazil, just published in French as *L'Os d'une Cure*. One of the points I recall from this text is Miller's description of the end points of psychoanalysis, and, in particular, the importance in Lacan's early work of the "assumption of death" in the psychoanalytic experience. The analysand, the patient, in psychoanalysis, must come to terms with his or her own mortality, a form of limitation. Later in Lacan's work, Miller emphasizes the "assumption of sexuality" as key to the psychoanalytic treatment. Each analysand must come to terms with how he or she will live life as a sexed being. It is notable that in both of these moments, these "assumptions," the issue at play is an unknown: there is no knowledge of death as an experience (witness all the fascination people have for the so-called "near death" experiences) and sexuality itself also has an ineffable or lawless quality to it, what Freud called an inherent "polymorphous perversity,"ⁱⁱ in spite of all our socially constructed conventions about it.

We see this tension, the dyad of death and life, at play in subjective responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. Obviously, the issue of death is at the forefront of many people's minds now. Clearly, this infectious agent is an agent of death and has killed large number of people and will kill yet more before this is over. And, the brave physicians, nurses and other health care professionals confront this on a daily basis in hospitals and clinics, even more so given resource limitations in personal protective equipment and ventilators, that not only will force them to put their lives on the line, but also potentially put them in situations where they will have to make life or death choices regarding access to care. And, indeed, all people and all social institutions will make decisions about how to respond to this threat of death—choices about how to assume (or not assume) responsibility to address this agent of death: choices about

following or ignoring public health recommendations and so forth. In our practice and in conversations with friends and colleagues, these are issues that people are talking about and dealing with.

But, in addition to the struggle with death, as psychoanalysts, we also readily observe subjective struggle with *Eros*, with not just sexuality proper, but more broadly about how to choose to live: to go on living on a day to day basis, with all the impact of this pandemic on daily life, impact that ranges from minor inconveniences to the implementation of “shelter in place” orders in whole states and countries. People struggle enormously with issues about how to connect with family and friends and neighbors and co-workers. The shattering of our fictions or our fantasies of how we live in the world we live in and the disruption to rituals and patterns of how we experience life on a day to day basis has destabilized relationships and many people’s ability to enjoy life. These are the concerns that I hear about equally strongly, at least in my tiny corner of the world and in what I read in newspapers. The losses, not only of death, but of life, are real, and here I am referring to the disruption of our daily life such as work routines, socializing, restaurant and café life, cultural activities, school, and our rituals of celebration and mourning, such as graduations and funerals. But, what we are losing is not life itself, is not the drive proper, we might say, but the fantasies that provide us access to it, the semblants that we use to structure our day to day experience so that we might find enjoyment in it. That is key to remember, for the life drive is still present. We find it in unexpected places. The citizens of urban centers like Milan stand on their balconies, and whole neighborhoods sing songs. Citizens of Barcelona bring their musical instruments out on the balcony and provide an impromptu concert for neighbors, to great applause. Scientific colleagues missing out on important social discussion at cancelled scientific meetings all sit in their respective offices, in front of their computers, with a drink in their hands and hold virtual happy hours to chat and gossip with one another. Educational programs jump into high gear to find ways to teach students at home, using online technologies to keep the academic mission alive in difficult times. Churches provide religious ceremonies on the internet. The stories and examples one hears about or reads on the internet give testimony to the strength of *Eros* to bring people together, to keep life alive even in the face of death.

This crisis and the responses we hear about in our practice and in society also highlights the critical value of the final work of Lacan. The stable Symbolic Order that defined much of the early Lacan (and his reading of Freud as well) is gone, or, rather, is unveiled as a semblant, and one that is on shaky grounds at moments like this. But, as we read in the final Lacan, those semblants (psychic reality, the Oedipus complex and so forth) are just one way to take hold of the Real and hold the subject together, merely common “knotting strategies,” as it were, as they were taken up by lots of people and institutionally supported. In this moment of crisis, we find the value of other, novel, knotting solutions, other *sinthomes*, in the very creativity that people talk about in sessions and in society. Jacques-Alain Miller, in *Six Paradigms of Jouissance*ⁱⁱⁱ, emphasized the special role for creativity and pragmatics in the final Lacan—I can think of no better example of this than what we find now in subjective, and social, responses to this pandemic.

Yes, this pandemic is terrible, and we must assume the responsibility individually and socially to confront the death and destruction that it brings. And we, as psychoanalysts, can help people struggling with that. But, as psychoanalysts, we always are focused on what is not working in our analysands’ lives. My sense is that in addition to death, it is *Eros* or life itself that is at stake, and helping people know how to assume the responsibility of how to live is another no less important and urgent challenge we face today. The old ways may no longer work, but we find people creating new ones every day.

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ⁱ Civilization and its Discontents: 1929: Sigmund Freud: SE XXI : Published at www.Freud2Lacan.com : See [here https://www.freud2lacan.com/docs/Civilization_and_Its_Discontents.pdf](https://www.freud2lacan.com/docs/Civilization_and_Its_Discontents.pdf) : Probably SE XXI p141, ‘Just as

a planet revolves around a central body as well as rotating on its own axis, so the human individual takes part in the course of development of mankind at the same time as he pursues his own path in life. But to our dull eyes the play of forces in the heavens seems fixed in a never-changing order; in the field of organic life we can still see how the forces contend with one another, and how the effects of the conflict are continually changing. So, also, the two urges, the one towards personal happiness and the other towards union with other human beings, must struggle with each other in every individual; and so, also, the two processes of individual and of cultural development must stand in hostile opposition to each other and mutually dispute the ground. But this struggle between the individual and society is not a derivative of the contradiction-probably an irreconcilable one-between the primal instincts of Eros and death. It is a dispute within the economics of the libido, comparable to the contest concerning the distribution of libido between ego and objects; and it does admit of an eventual accommodation in the individual, as, it may be hoped, it will also do in the future of civilization, however much that civilization may oppress the life of the individual to-day.

The analogy between the process of civilization and the path of individual development may be extended in an important respect.

ⁱⁱ A) **Sigmund Freud: Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality: 1905d : SE VII p123-245**

Published at www.Freud2Lacan.com see [here](https://www.freud2lacan.com/docs/Sexuality.pdf) <https://www.freud2lacan.com/docs/Sexuality.pdf>

- Essay II Infantile Sexuality, Section Castration Complex and Penis Envy, p113-114 of pfl, SEVII p191 : Polymorphously Perverse Disposition & SE VII p195

B) [Notes on Seminar VII: 18th November 1959 from page 7 to 15](#) (Wo es war, ... & polymorphous perversion & definition of Jouissance & Happiness) by Julia Evans on 6th October 2012 or [here](http://www.lacanianworks.net/?p=523) <http://www.lacanianworks.net/?p=523> Done

ⁱⁱⁱ See [Paradigms of Jouissance : 24th, 31st March & 7th April 1999 \(Paris VIII\) : Jacques-Alain Miller](#) or [here](http://www.lacanianworks.net/?p=12432) <http://www.lacanianworks.net/?p=12432>