

THE PSYCHOANALYTIC CONCEPT OF AGGRESSION

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The concept of aggression as an instinctual drive raises problems which are of great interest, both practically and theoretically. In the present paper the following topics will be considered: the nature of the evidence for the existence and operation of aggression as an instinctual drive in mental life; the source of the aggressive drive; aggression and the pleasure principle; aggression and psychical conflict; the aims of aggression; the relationship between aggression and the maturation and development of ego functions; the theory of drive fusion.

EVIDENCE FOR THE AGGRESSIVE DRIVE

When the concept of libido as an instinctual drive was first introduced, it was considered to be a psychophysical phenomenon, i.e. in the borderland between mind and body. As Freud put it (1905, p. 168; 1915*a*, pp. 121–2), it represents a demand on the functioning of the mind which is made by the body. In keeping with this concept Freud maintained (1915*a*, p. 124) that, to be satisfactory, drive theory must rest on other than purely psychoanalytical or, in general, on purely psychological data. He felt that such data alone cannot furnish an adequate basis for a theory of drives. When the concept of an aggressive drive was introduced (Freud, 1920), it too was considered to be a borderland or psychophysical phenomenon in the sense just indicated. This view has persisted: like libido, aggression is generally thought of as a demand made by bodily processes on the functioning of the mind.

It seems reasonable to assume that what chiefly influenced Freud in the direction of assuming the operation of aggression as an innate, driving force in mental life was the increasing appreciation of the importance of unconscious, self-destructive and self-punitive trends in mental life, an appreciation which derived from his psychoanalytical practice during the decade 1910–1920. The psychoanalytical treatment of patients suffering from bouts of depression, undertaken during that period by Abraham and himself, was probably of parti-

cular significance. It may be that the dreadful, unexpected carnage of the 1914–1918 war increased his sensitivity to the manifestations of aggression in the working of the minds of individuals. However, the evidence which convinced Freud that aggression deserves to be classed as an instinctual drive was probably chiefly psychoanalytical evidence.

It is all the more interesting, therefore, to observe that when Freud (1920) actually introduced the concept of aggression as an instinctual drive, he remained true to his earlier conviction that psychological data alone are insufficient for the purpose. What he did was to adduce evidence in favour of the existence in all living matter of a drive to return to the inorganic state. The manifestation of this omnipresent death drive in mental life, he argued, is the instinctual drive of aggression. He thus attempted to base the concept of aggression as an instinctual drive on a foundation of biological as well as of psychoanalytical evidence.

During the decades immediately following 1920 there was extensive discussion in the psychoanalytical literature concerning the validity of assuming a death drive in all living matter. Opinion is still somewhat divided on the matter among psychoanalysts, but the view expressed by Hartmann *et al.* (1949) is widely enough accepted to be considered a general one. According to them, the validity of the concept of a death drive is a matter for biologists to decide. Whether the concept is correct or not does not, in their opinion, affect the validity of the assumption that aggression is an instinctual drive in man's mental life.

The general acceptance of this opinion raises questions which have so far received little consideration (Brenner, 1970). The first such question is whether psychoanalytical evidence alone is a valid basis for a theory of instinctual drives. As we have already noted, Freud believed it is not. He resorted to the idea of a death drive because he felt compelled to base the psychoanalytical theory of aggression on more than just psychoanalytical evidence. Is such a step necessary? May it not be that psychoanalytical

data by themselves are sufficient evidence for the theory of aggression, without reference to such a general biological speculation as that of a death drive?

From our present vantage point, some 75 years after the discovery of the psychoanalytical method, it is difficult to see any convincing reason why we should not base a theory of instinctual drives on the data derived from the application of that method. An instinctual drive is a theoretical construct which serves the purpose of explaining the nature of basic motivation, of the prime impetus to mental activity. The most simple and direct way to proceed to the formation of the concept of an instinctual drive would seem to be to examine psychoanalytical data from as wide a variety of patients as possible and to look for some uniformity among them. When one does so, the data seem, to most analysts, to fall naturally into two groups, sexual wishes and aggressive ones. Why is this not sufficient to justify the assumption that aggression is an instinctual drive as well as sexuality? Psychoanalytical evidence clearly points in the direction of the conclusion that the two are equally or, at least, comparably important in supplying to mental activity the impetus which is the basic characteristic of what we call an instinctual drive (Freud, 1915*a*, p. 122).

In 1905 only Freud himself had had extensive experience with the psychoanalytical method. Even in 1915 there was only a handful of analysts with much experience. Moreover, the method itself was less developed than it has since become, so that it is fair to presume that its results were less reliable and less precise than they are now. By now, in contrast with the situation at the beginning of this century, there are hundreds of psychoanalysts, each of whom has had more than two decades of experience with the psychoanalytical method on a total of thousands of patients. It was reasonable in 1915 to be modest, even sceptical, about the importance and the reliability of purely psychoanalytical evidence, especially when used as a basis for drawing conclusions about the nature of the very wellsprings of human motivation. The same scepticism is not necessary today. We should, of course, welcome evidence from other branches of biology which confirm our theory of the instinctual drives, whether it be from human physiology, from comparative psychology, or from any other discipline. By the same token we must not ignore established facts and theories from other branches of scientific know-

ledge which would contradict our theories (Brenner, 1969). However, we need not defer the development of our own theories, even those concerning the instinctual drives, until we have evidence concerning them from other, related disciplines.

SOURCE OF THE AGGRESSIVE DRIVE

In psychoanalytical theory the instinctual drives are assumed to derive from somatic sources. They are thought of as measures of the demand of bodily processes on the functioning of the mind. In the case of aggression, as matters stand at present, we have no evidence that this idea is correct. It is possible that evidence will become available in the future to link aggression as an instinctual drive to particular physiological and endocrine phenomena. As yet, however, we have no knowledge of such links. As we have noted, the evidence on which we base the concept of aggression as an instinctual drive is purely psychological. Until other, non-psychological evidence may become available, to speak of aggression as a demand of the body on the mind is to do no more than to express belief in the prediction that in time such evidence will be found. It is not a statement that can be supported by evidence which is available at present.

Put in other words, we are not now in a position to specify any source for aggression which is comparable to the erotogenic zones and to those sexual hormones which act directly on certain brain cells as sources of the sexual drive. We have no doubt that genetically determined aspects of the form and functional characteristics of the brain are reflected in the psychological phenomena which we attribute to the operation of the aggressive drive. We are not at present, however, acquainted with any other source of aggression as a drive than this one, i.e. than the form and function of the brain (Brenner, 1955, p. 32; 1970).

AGGRESSION AND THE PLEASURE PRINCIPLE

Freud's (1920) original view was that aggression is beyond the pleasure principle, whence the name of the monograph. According to this formulation, the discharge of aggression, unlike the discharge of libido, is unaccompanied by pleasure in and of itself. Only when it is fused with libido, i.e. erotized, and directed toward representations of external objects is aggression considered to give rise to pleasure when discharged (Freud, 1920, p. 63; 1923, p. 233; 1930, p. 478).

More recent authors have expressed a different opinion concerning aggression and the pleasure principle, an opinion which was first clearly stated by Hartmann *et al.* (1949). They suggested that aggression bears the same relation to pleasure and to unpleasure as does libido: discharge of aggression, generally speaking, gives rise to pleasure, accumulation and lack of discharge, generally speaking, give rise to unpleasure. As far as one can judge from the literature, this formulation has been generally accepted. Little notice, however, seems to have been given to the fact that this is a change which has both theoretical and practical consequences (Brenner, 1970).

The most important of the former has to do with the idea that a compulsion to repeat is a characteristic of the instinctual drives. This idea is associated with the concept that aggression is beyond the pleasure principle, a derivative of a universal death drive (Freud, 1920). Our current concept of aggression makes it unnecessary to ascribe the repetitive nature of childhood instinctual wishes to a special characteristic of the drives themselves, namely to a repetition compulsion (Kubie, 1939). We have an adequate explanation without the need of assuming such a special quality of the drives, since we assume that, in the absence of gratification, wishes of instinctual origin persistently seek gratification. Childhood wishes which remain ungratified as the result of anxiety and conflict about them, remain active and continually drive an individual in the direction of gratification, a direction which may lead to any of the familiar consequences that such psychical conflicts have, such as self-punishment or symptom formation.

AGGRESSION AND PSYCHICAL CONFLICT

The practical consequences of relating the discharge of aggression to the pleasure principle concern the role of the aggressive drive in psychical conflict and symptom formation. For some time it was the prevalent view that the sexual and aggressive drives play different roles in these phenomena. The former was believed to account for neurotic symptom formation, the latter for self-punitive and self-destructive trends (Freud, 1930, p. 139). This formulation served the useful purpose of emphasizing the great role which aggression plays in superego functioning. The bulk of what we can identify as self-directed aggression in mental life seems to be related to the superego. However, most

analysts are agreed that derivatives of aggression play a role in psychical conflict which is at least comparable to that played by derivatives of the libidinal drive. Some, indeed, have gone so far as to consider aggression to be the prime source of anxiety (Klein, 1948). It seems to accord more closely with observable clinical data to place aggression and libido on an approximately equal footing in this respect. Certainly those childhood instinctual conflicts which persist into adult life and which are accessible to scrutiny by the application of the psychoanalytical method always relate in part to frightening aggressive wishes which give rise to the familiar variety of defensive reactions and compromise formations. One can hardly escape the conclusion, which is generally accepted at present, that the aggressive drive plays an important role in psychical conflict and in the consequences of conflict which are of particular interest to us: symptoms and character traits. It is likely, in fact, that it was the increasing awareness of the twin role of aggression and libido in psychical conflict that led to the conclusion that the two drives bear a similar relationship to the pleasure principle as well (Brenner, 1970), and that in clinical work one must analyse the aggressive as well as the libidinal aspect of such conflicts.

THE AIMS OF AGGRESSION

Freud (1923, 1930, 1933, etc.) identified the aim as destruction of whatever is the object of the drive. This is in keeping with his concept that aggression is the psychological derivative, or counterpart, of a universally present death drive. It may be worth noting in this connection that the equivalence, death = destruction, is a psychological one, i.e. an equivalence which arises from man's imagination. It is not a physical fact. On the contrary, in the part of the physical world which constitutes man's immediate environment, there is no such thing as destruction of any material object, whether alive or inanimate.

Hartmann *et al.* (1949, p. 18) were more cautious than Freud in keeping with their non-committal attitude with respect to the theory of a death drive. They suggested that there may be different aims, corresponding to different degrees of instinctual discharge, and seem to have inclined toward the view that 'full' discharge corresponds to death or destruction of the object. Stone (1970) was still less in agreement with the idea that the aim of aggression is to destroy. While he recognized the strength and

importance of aggressive and destructive wishes in mental life, he felt that their aims are in fact so diverse as to raise serious doubts concerning the very concept of aggression as an instinctual drive. In general, however, psychoanalytic writers accept the view that the aim of the aggressive drive is 'destruction of the object'. This is true even of those authors who do not subscribe to Freud's original reason for this conclusion, that aggression corresponds to a death drive.

Such a view is no longer a logical necessity, as it was originally. We have already suggested that the concept of aggression as an instinctual drive is properly based on psychological data accessible to the psychoanalytical method of observation. It is these data which support the concept, and it is from the study of these data that a decision must be made concerning the aim of aggression. We have no other data on which to base a decision.

Certain general remarks are in order at this point. The psychoanalytic method depends on communication, and primarily on verbal communication, i.e. on language. Its application yields reliable results concerning the mental processes of individuals who are sufficiently developed to acquire and, in most instances, to use language (Arlow & Brenner, 1969; A. Freud, 1969, p. 38 ff). As psychoanalysts, we have information concerning the psychical processes of such individuals which is both extensive and reliable. Our information concerning younger individuals is much less certain and extensive, since we cannot apply the psychoanalytical method directly in such cases. Our ideas concerning their psychology depends on observation of behaviour alone, as it does with animals other than man. It is tempting to attribute to such very young infants psychological processes which resemble those with which we are familiar in older individuals who are accessible to the psychoanalytical method (Klein *et al.*, 1952). A number of authors (e.g. Waelder, 1937; Glover, 1947; Brenner, 1970) have indicated the pitfalls and impropriety of such an approach, so appealing at first glance. The fact is that we have as yet far less reliable information concerning the psychology of the early period of post-natal life than we should like to have, despite the several programmes of study that have been conducted in recent years by psychoanalytically trained observers.

These remarks are pertinent to our present problem in the following way. We assume that

the sexual and aggressive drives are operative from the first days of life. This follows from our belief that they are genetically determined. Thus we attribute oral tensions and gratifications to babies from the onset of post-natal life, although to be sure, Freud (1905, p. 222; 1914, p. 87; 1915a, p. 126) pointed very early to the likelihood that infantile sexuality has a root in early experience as well as in genetic endowment, a relationship which he indicated by the term *anaclitic*. In the case of the sexual drive, available physiological evidence seems to support the probability that we are correct in assuming that an instinctual drive is more nearly independent of experience than are those other aspects of mental functioning which we subsume under the heading of the ego (Brenner, 1970).

However, it is possible that matters are not as simple as we have supposed them to be in this respect. Particularly with respect to aggression we are not yet in a position to draw any certain conclusions concerning its characteristics during the period of life prior to an age at which we can use psychoanalysis as a method of observation. What we know about the instinctual drive of aggression is what we have learned from the psychoanalysis of children and adults. It does not derive either from physiology or from observations of the behaviour of infants. However much we may wish to go beyond the limits of our present knowledge, we must recognize the uncertainty of our conclusions if we attempt to do so. If we wish our generalizations to have a reasonable degree of validity, we must be content, for the present, to base our ideas concerning the aggressive drive on psychoanalytical data.

When we turn to our practical task with these general considerations in mind, what do we actually find that we can identify as the aim of aggression? Without pretending to give a completely satisfactory answer to this question, we can say that the aims of aggression vary from one stage of life to another. The most familiar variation is that which parallels the variation of libidinal aims in the progression of libidinal phases. We speak of oral, anal and phallic aggressive aims, all of which, like the corresponding libidinal aims, are observed to be active in mental life well into the oedipal period and beyond, i.e. well into that time of life which can be studied directly by the psychoanalytical method. In addition, intellectual development brings with it the possibility for alterations in the aim of aggression. A child's wish to make another feel the same pain as himself, or to kill

someone, are aggressive aims which, after a certain age, are so common as to merit the term universal, yet the probability is that they do not occur at all in the mind of a very young child. Before a certain age, as Freud (1900, p. 19, pp. 254-5) pointed out long ago, death is a meaningless word. The recognition that others feel as we do is likewise absent in the very young. It is only in the course of development, then, that a child becomes capable of such aggressive aims. One might add the clinically important observation that when one encounters fantasies of death and killing in one's work with a patient, one should bear in mind the fact, long since documented, that death may symbolize castration. A child's wish to kill, or his fear of being killed, often expresses a fantasy of genital mutilation and penetration, rather than, or in addition to, a primarily aggressive wish.

On the basis of the available psychological evidence, then, it seems correct to say that aggressive aims vary with mental development and experience, and, as we have repeatedly noted, it is psychological evidence that justifies the assumption of an aggressive drive. Such a complex state of affairs seems to offer a regrettable contrast to what we know about the sexual drive, whose aims are the same from one individual to the next and are understandable and expressible in physiological-anatomical terms rather than in psychological ones. Yet are there not similarities as well as differences?

The differences are clear: sexuality is genetically bound to the erotogenic zones. The pattern of orgasm is likewise largely determined by inherited, genetic factors. But even orgasmic patterns are often strongly influenced by psychological factors as well. They may be greatly altered by psychical conflicts which are significantly related to ego functions and to experience. The same is true for the relative importance of one or another of the erotogenic zones, as well as for the details of just what stimulation is sought for gratification. Much attention has been paid to the importance of experience in determining sexual objects; less to its importance with respect to sexual aims, though these are, in fact, also dependent on experience in no small measure. Freud (1905) early called attention to the variety of the sexual aims of childhood, the progress in the alterations in their relative importance, and their final organization at puberty. When we consider the part which is played in this complicated development by experiential and related psychological factors, it seems reasonable to

conclude that there are, in fact, substantial similarities between the aggressive and the sexual drives with respect to the variety and developmental alterations of their aims. To note these similarities should not lead one to discount the differences. Both similarities and differences are important to keep in mind.

As a final comment on the subject of the aims of aggression, it may be in order to suggest the following at the present stage of our knowledge of the subject. Aggressive aims vary with mental development and experience. They seem to be related to what hurts or frightens a child. Perhaps their close relationship to the aims of the libidinal component drives is due at least in part to the fact that the wishes connected with these sexual aims so often cause fear or pain, or both; the child hurts, or wants to hurt, someone else by doing to him what hurts or frightens the child himself.

The consideration of the part played in the development of the instinctual aims of aggression by the factors of maturation and experience leads to the general subject of the relationship between the instinctual drives and ego functions. Is this a relationship which is primarily one of antagonism or one of cooperation; or is the relationship too variable to permit of generalizations couched in such broad terms?

The circumstances of psychoanalytic observation are such as to emphasize those instances in mental life in which there is conflict between the ego and the instinctual drives. An individual urgently wishes gratifications and at the same time urgently opposes those very wishes because of the fear and guilt which are associated with the gratifications in question. Yet even in such instances the relationship between ego and id is by no means a simple one. The instinctual derivatives which we observe by means of the psychoanalytical method are always wishes for a *particular* form of gratification which involve *particular* objects. They are not inchoate, indefinite pressures for unspecified activity. Indeterminate tensions of this sort may be active very early in life. We suspect that they are. But we know nothing of them directly; we have no data about them. The only mental processes that we can observe, the only ones about which we can collect information by the use of psychoanalysis, are ones which have clearly been influenced by experience; ones which have been, in part, moulded by observation, by memory, by thought, however primitive; in a word, ones which involve the functioning of the child's ego.

One can say the same thing in another way by pointing out that the instinctual wishes of childhood which are repressed, or defended against in other ways, and which give rise to conflict and to symptoms, are wishes which concern childhood events and memories that are specific for that child, as well as his thoughts and fantasies about them. It has been suggested (Beres, 1960, personal communication) that, to be consistent in our theories, repressed wishes and fantasies must be regarded as belonging properly under the heading of the ego. Freud's decision was different, however. From the very beginning he included such repressed wishes under the heading Ucs., and, later, the heading, the id. His reason for deciding to do this is based on the dynamics of the mind. Such repressed wishes have the driving quality which is the most characteristic attribute of the instinctual drives; a quality which Freud considered to be so basic that he used it to name them as he did: the drives. Freud (1915*b*, pp. 190-1) recognized the fact that to include repressed wishes among the mental manifestations of the instinctual drives makes more difficult the task of distinguishing between them and other mental phenomena. As he expressed it, such wishes are dynamically part of the Ucs., even though by their formal characteristics they seem to be part of the Pcs. The fact is that our present theoretical division of the mental apparatus into ego, superego and id is so useful in clinical work precisely because it is based in large part on *dynamic* relationships within the mind (cf. Arlow & Brenner, 1966). As A. Freud (1936, p. 5 ff.) noted, in the absence of conflict there is no division among the mental agencies.

The nature of man is such that the experiences and objects of early life help to determine the conditions of gratification of his instinctual drives forever after. One cannot discuss the aims of either aggression or sexuality without giving due consideration to this aspect of the relationship between the instinctual drives and the functions of the ego. There is no doubt that the course and development of the instinctual drives is influenced by other factors as well, among which are certainly some that are genetically determined. What is important to bear in mind is the intimacy and the complexity of the relationship between such factors and those which we relate to the functioning of the ego.

DRIVE FUSION

The final topic to be considered in this pre-

sentation is the theory of the fusion and defusion of the instinctual drives. The German word which Freud usually employed in this connection (*Mischung*) is slightly more ambiguous than the English word, fusion. It means either mixture or alloy.

If one assumes, as did Freud, that aggression is the reflection in mental life of a generally present death drive, the concept of fusion is an attractive possibility. In the physical sphere, one can assume that it is the fusion of the two drives that accounts for the immortality of germ plasma and that makes possible the reproduction of species. In addition it seemed to Freud that clinically observable facts in connection with identification, and with regression, in general, support his fusion-defusion theory from the psychological side. Identification plays a demonstrably large role in both melancholia and in superego formation. In both there is a concomitant increase in self-directed aggression. Freud reasoned as follows. Identification is a primitive form of object relation. The appearance of identification in melancholia and in superego formation is therefore to be attributed to regression. One can explain the increase of self-directed aggression if one assumes that regression leads to a defusion of the instinctual drives, the unmixed aggression being once more self-directed, as it was originally, before it became mixed with libido and turned outward in the normal course of development after birth.

If one does not take the position of relating aggression as an instinctual drive in mental life to a universally present death drive, it is difficult or impossible to decide whether aggression and libido are separate at birth and become mixed in the course of development, as Freud asserted, or whether they are indistinguishable at birth and develop into separate and distinguishable factors in mental life in the course of development, an alternative suggestion made by Fenichel (1935, p. 367 ff.), Jacobson (1964, p. 13), and others. The psychological data are not such as to permit a decision. One cannot, as we have observed already, gather reliable pertinent evidence by the use of the psychoanalytical method before a very considerable degree of development has already taken place, nor are reconstructions thoroughly convincing.

For example, identification has been found to be of much more general importance in mental life and development than was apparent when Freud wrote 'Mourning and Melancholia' in 1917. It is not a primitive mechanism that

recurs regressively only in connection with object loss. On the contrary, even in superego formation, identification with the feared and envied rival is principally dependent on factors other than object loss. Identification certainly plays a large role normally as well as pathologically in many of the object relations of later life, as well as in the early ones, and it is not always accompanied by an increase in self-directed aggression. In some instances, as, for example, in group formation, it leads to diminution of self-directed aggression and turning of aggression outward. In other instances, no major shift is discernible in the aims and object of aggression. In other words, the clinical facts connected with the phenomenon of identification are not compellingly in support of Freud's theory of instinctual fusion.

Another set of phenomena that have been adduced in support of the theory of fusion has to do with ambivalence. It has been asserted that psychoanalytical observations demonstrate that ambivalence is maximal in the earliest, oral phase of life, and minimal in the post-oedipal genital phase, at least when psychosexual development is normal. In the psychoanalytical literature of a few decades ago one frequently comes across the view that one of the chief goals of psychoanalytical therapy is to assist the patient to achieve a stage of post-ambivalent object relations, a stage which was either relinquished as a result of regression at the onset of his neurosis, or one which he never achieved in any substantial measure.

No one can doubt the clinical significance of ambivalence, nor overlook the great role it plays in many aspects of pathological mental conflicts. However, it is as yet unproven that there is a normal progression from ambivalence to non-ambivalence in the first years of life, a progression which, if it were to be demonstrated, would offer considerable support to Freud's theory of instinctual fusion, since it would fit so well with it, and be so naturally explained by it. The psychoanalytical evidence which is available at present speaks more strongly in favour of the view that psychical conflicts which are related to

intense feelings of love and hate toward the same individual arise in most persons during or after the third year of life, i.e. in the course of the oedipal phase of development. One cannot disprove the possibility that ambivalence as a potent force in mental life regularly antedates the oedipal period, though there are substantial arguments in favour of the view that it is unlikely. One can say, however, that all available evidence speaks in favour of the view that ambivalence is normally at its peak during the oedipal period rather than that it is then in decline from a previously higher level of intensity.

Thus, what evidence we have at present is not sufficient to support a decision in favour of the two theoretical possibilities that have been offered. We cannot say whether aggression and sexuality are separate at birth and gradually mix or fuse in the course of normal development, or whether the two differentiate gradually from a common matrix, as Fenichel (1935) and others suggest.

SUMMARY

(1) Psychological evidence seems to be an acceptable basis for the concept of aggression as an instinctual drive. Supporting evidence from other branches of biology, though it would be welcome, is not essential, nor is it available at present. (2) No source of aggression can be specified, other than a psychological one. Aggression cannot, at present, be related to any physiological phenomena other than brain functioning. (3) There is no evidence at present to support the view that the aggressive drive is a measure of the demand of bodily processes on mental functioning. (4) Aggression and libido bear similar relations to the pleasure principle. In general, discharge is associated with pleasure; lack of discharge, with unpleasure. (5) The respective roles of the two drives are likewise similar with respect to psychical conflict. (6) The aim of aggression is not uniformly destruction of the cathected object. On the contrary, the aim is variable, and is intimately related to experience and to ego functions. (7) In general, the relationship between ego functions and the drives is an extremely complex and close one. (8) It seems impossible to decide at present between the theory of drive fusion and that of drive differentiation.

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