II

OUR ATTITUDE TOWARDS DEATH

The second factor to which I attribute our present sense of estrangement in this once lovely and congenial world is the disturbance that has taken place in the attitude which we have hitherto adopted towards death.

That attitude was far from straightforward. To anyone who listened to us we were of course prepared to maintain that death was the necessary outcome of life, that everyone owes nature a death and must expect to pay the debt—in short, that death was natural, undeniable and unavoidable. In reality, however, we were accustomed to behave as if it were otherwise. We showed an unmistakable tendency to put death on one side, to eliminate it from life. We tried to hush it up; indeed we even have a saying [in German]: 'to think of something as though it were death.' That is, as though it were our own death, of course. It is indeed impossible to imagine our own death; and whenever we attempt to do so we can perceive that we are in fact still present as spectators. Hence the psycho-analytic school could venture on the assertion that at bottom no one believes in his own death, or, to put the same thing in another way, that in the unconscious every one of us is convinced of his own immortality.

When it comes to someone else's death, the civilized man will carefully avoid speaking of such a possibility in the hearing of the person under sentence. Children alone disregard this restriction; they unashamedly threaten one another with the possibility of dying, and even go so far as to do the same thing to someone whom they love, as, for instance: 'Dear Mummy, when you're dead I'll do this or that.' The civilized adult can hardly even entertain the thought of another person's death.

1 [A reminiscence of Prince Hal's remark to Falstaff in I Henry IV, v, 1: 'Thou owest God a death.' This was a favourite misquotation of Freud's. See, for instance, The Interpretation of Dreams, Standard Ed., 4, 205, and a letter to Fliess of February 6, 1899 (Freud, 1950a, Letter 104), in which he explicitly attributes it to Shakespeare.]

2 [i.e. to think something unlikely or incredible.]
THOUGHTS ON WAR AND DEATH

without seeming to himself hard-hearted or wicked; unless, of course, as a doctor or lawyer or something of the kind, he has to deal with death professionally. Least of all will he allow himself to think of the other person's death if some gain to himself in freedom, property or position is bound up with it. This sensitiveness of ours does not, of course, prevent the occurrence of deaths; when one does happen, we are always deeply affected, and it is as though we were badly shaken in our expectations. Our habit is to lay stress on the fortuitous causation of the death—accident, disease, infection, advanced age; in this way we betray an effort to reduce death from a necessity to a chance event. A number of simultaneous deaths strikes us as something extremely terrible. Towards the actual person who has died we adopt a special attitude—something almost like admiration for someone who has accomplished a very difficult task. We suspend criticism of him, overlook his possible misdeeds, declare that 'de mortuis nil nisi bonum', and think it justifiable to set out all that is most favourable to his memory in the funeral oration and upon the tombstone. Consideration for the dead, who, after all, no longer need it, is more important to us than the truth, and certainly, for most of us, than consideration for the living.

The complement to this cultural and conventional attitude towards death is provided by our complete collapse when death has struck down someone whom we love—a parent or a partner in marriage, a brother or sister, a child or a close friend. Our hopes, our desires and our pleasures lie in the grave with him, we will not be consoled, we will not fill the lost one's place. We behave as if we were a kind of Asra, who die when those they love die. 1

But this attitude of ours towards death has a powerful effect on our lives. Life is impoverished, it loses in interest, when the highest stake in the game of living, life itself, may not be risked. It becomes as shallow and empty as, let us say, an American flirtation, in which it is understood from the first that nothing is to happen, as contrasted with a Continental love-affair in which both partners must constantly bear its serious consequences in mind. Our emotional ties, the unbearable intensity

1 [The Asra in Heine's poem ('Der Asra', in Romanzen, based on a passage in Stendhal's De l'amour) were a tribe of Arabs who 'die when they love'.]

II OUR ATTITUDE TOWARDS DEATH

of our grief, make us disinclined to court danger for ourselves and for those who belong to us. We dare not contemplate a great many undertakings which are dangerous but in fact indispensable, such as attempts at artificial flight, expeditions to distant countries or experiments with explosive substances. We are paralysed by the thought of who is to take the son's place with his mother, the husband's with his wife, the father's with his children, if a disaster should occur. Thus the tendency to exclude death from our calculations in life brings in its train many other renunciations and exclusions. Yet the motto of the Hanseatic League ran: 'Navigare necesse est, vivere non necesse.' ('It is necessary to sail the seas, it is not necessary to live.')

It is an inevitable result of all this that we should seek in the world of fiction, in literature and in the theatre compensation for what has been lost in life. There we still find people who know how to die—who, indeed, even manage to kill someone else. There alone too the condition can be fulfilled which makes it possible for us to reconcile ourselves with death: namely, that behind all the vicissitudes of life we should still be able to preserve a life intact. For it is really too sad that in life it should be as it is in chess, where one false move may force us to resign the game, but with the difference that we can start no second game, no return-match. In the realm of fiction we find the plurality of lives which we need. We die with the hero with whom we have identified ourselves; yet we survive him, and are ready to die again just as safely with another hero.

It is evident that war is bound to sweep away this conventional treatment of death. Death will no longer be denied; we are forced to believe in it. People really die; and no longer one by one, but many, often tens of thousands, in a single day. And death is no longer a chance event. To be sure, it still seems a matter of chance whether a bullet hits this man or that; but a second bullet may well hit the survivor; and the accumulation of deaths puts an end to the impression of chance. Life has, indeed, become interesting again; it has recovered its full content.

Here a distinction should be made between two groups—those who themselves risk their lives in battle, and those who have stayed at home and have only to wait for the loss of one of their dear ones by wounds, disease or infection. It would be most interesting, no doubt, to study the changes in the psychology of the combatants, but I know too little about it.
must restrict ourselves to the second group, to which we ourselves belong. I have said already that in my opinion the bewilderment and the paralysis of capacity, from which we suffer, are essentially determined among other things by the circumstance that we are unable to maintain our former attitude towards death, and have not yet found a new one. It may assist us to do this if we direct our psychological enquiry towards two other relations to death—the one which we may ascribe to praeval, prehistoric men, and the one which still exists in every one of us, but which conceals itself, invisible to consciousness, in the deeper strata of our mental life.

What the attitude of prehistoric man was towards death is, of course, only known to us by inferences and constructions, but I believe that these methods have furnished us with fairly trustworthy conclusions.

Primaeval man took up a very remarkable attitude towards death. It was far from consistent; it was indeed most contradictory. On the one hand, he took death seriously, recognized it as the termination of life and made use of it in that sense; on the other hand, he also denided death and reduced it to nothing. This contradiction arose from the fact that he took up radically different attitudes towards the death of other people, of strangers, of enemies, and towards his own. He had no objection to someone else’s death; it meant the annihilation of someone he hated, and primitive man had no scruples against bringing it about. He was no doubt a very passionate creature and more cruel and more malignant than other animals. He liked to kill, and killed as a matter of course. The instinct which is said to restrain other animals from killing and devouring their own species need not be attributed to him.

Hence the primaeval history of mankind is filled with murder. Even to-day, the history of the world which our children learn at school is essentially a series of murders of peoples. The obscure sense of guilt to which mankind has been subject since prehistoric times, and which in some religions has been condensed into the doctrine of primal guilt, of original sin, is probably the outcome of a blood-guilt incurred by prehistoric man. In my book Totem and Taboo (1912-13) I have, following clues given by Robertson Smith, Atkinson and Charles Darwin, tried to guess the nature of this primal guilt, and I believe, too, that the Christian doctrine of to-day enables us to deduce it. If

the Son of God was obliged to sacrifice his life to redeem mankind from original sin, then by the law of talion, the requital of like by like, that sin must have been a killing, a murder. Nothing else could call for the sacrifice of a life for its expiation. And the original sin was an offence against God the Father, the primal crime of mankind must have been a parricide, the killing of the primal father of the primitive human horde, whose mnemonic image was later transfigured into a deity.4

His own death was certainly just as unimaginable and unreal for primaeval man as it is for any one of us to-day. But there was for him one case in which the two opposite attitudes towards death collided and came into conflict with each other; and this case became highly important and productive of far-reaching consequences. It occurred when primaeval man saw someone who belonged to him die—his wife, his child, his friend—whom he undoubtedly loved as we love ours, for love cannot be much younger than the lust to kill. Then, in his pain, he was forced to learn that one can die, too, oneself, and his whole being revolted against the admission; for each of these loved ones was, after all, a part of his own beloved self. But, on the other hand, deaths such as these pleased him as well, since in each of the loved persons there was also something of the stranger. The law of ambivalence of feeling, which to this day governs our emotional relations with those whom we love most, certainly had a very much wider validity in primaeval times. Thus these beloved dead had also been enemies and strangers who had aroused in him some degree of hostile feeling.5

Philosophers have declared that the intellectual enigma presented to primaeval man by the picture of death forced him to reflection, and thus became the starting-point of all speculation. I believe that here the philosophers are thinking too philosophically, and giving too little consideration to the motives that were primarily operative. I should like therefore to limit and correct their assertion. In my view, primaeval man must have triumphed beside the body of his slain enemy, without being led to rack his brains about the enigma of life and death. What released the spirit of enquiry in man was not the intellectual enigma, and not every death, but the conflict of feeling at the death of loved yet alien and hated persons. Of this conflict of

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4 Cf. Totem and Taboo, Essay IV [Standard Ed., 13, 146 ff.].
5 Ibid., Essay II [Standard Ed., 13, 60 ff.].
feeling psychology was the first offspring. Man could no longer keep death at a distance, for he had tasted it in his pain about the dead; but he was nevertheless unwilling to acknowledge it, for he could not conceive of himself as dead. So he devised a compromise: he conceded the fact of his own death as well, but denied it the significance of annihilation—a significance which he had had no motive for denying where the death of his enemy was concerned. It was beside the dead body of someone he loved that he invented spirits, and his sense of guilt at the satisfaction mingled with his sorrow turned these new-born spirits into evil demons that had to be dreaded. The [physical] changes brought about by death suggested to him the division of the individual into a body and a soul—originally several souls. In this way his train of thought ran parallel with the process of disintegration which sets in with death. His persisting memory of the dead became the basis for assuming other forms of existence and gave him the conception of a life continuing after apparent death.

These subsequent existences were at first no more than appendages to the existence which death had brought to a close—shadowy, empty of content, and valued at little until later times; they still bore the character of wretched makeshifts. We may recall the answer made to Odysseus by the soul of Achilles:

‘For of old, when thou wast alive, we Aryges honoured thee even as the gods, and now that thou art here, thou rulest mightily over the dead. Wherefore grieve not at all that thou art dead, Achilles.’

So I spoke, and he straightway made answer and said: ‘Nay, seek not to speak soothingly to me of death, glorious Odysseus. I should choose, so I might live on earth, to serve as the hireling of another, of some portionless man whose livelihood was but small, rather than to be lord over all the dead that have perished.’ ¹

Or in Heine’s powerful and bitter parody:

Der kleinste lebendige Philister
Zu Stuckert am Neckar
Viel glücklicher ist er
Als ich, der Pelide, der tote Held,
Der Schattenfürst in der Unterwelt.²

¹ Odyssey XI, 494–91. [Trans. A. T. Murray.]
² [Literally: ‘The smallest living Philistine at Stuckert-am-Neckar is far happier than I, the son of Peleus, the dead hero, the shadow-prince in the underworld.’ The closing lines of ‘Der Scheidende’, one of the very last of Heine’s poems.]

(II) OUR ATTITUDE TOWARDS DEATH

It was only later that religions succeeded in representing this after-life as the more desirable, the truly valid one, and in reducing the life which is ended by death to a mere preparation. After this, it was no more than consistent to extend life backwards into the past, to form the notion of earlier existences, of the transmigration of souls and of reincarnation, all with the purpose of depriving death of its meaning as the termination of life. So early did the denial of death, which we have described [p. 290] as a ‘conventional and cultural attitude’, have its origin.

What came into existence beside the dead body of the loved one was not only the doctrine of the soul, the belief in immortality and a powerful source of man’s sense of guilt, but also the earliest ethical commandments. The first and most important prohibition made by the awakening conscience was: ‘Thou shalt not kill.’ It was acquired in relation to dead people who were loved, as a reaction against the satisfaction of the hatred hidden behind the grief for them; and it was gradually extended to strangers who were not loved, and finally even to enemies.

This final extension of the commandment is no longer experienced by civilized man. When the furious struggle of the present war has been decided, each one of the victorious fighters will return home joyfully to his wife and children, uncheckered and undisturbed by thoughts of the enemies he has killed whether at close quarters or at long range. It is worthy of note that the primitive races which still survive in the world, and are undoubtedly closer than we are to primate man, act differently in this respect, or did until they came under the influence of our civilization. Savages—Australians, Bushmen, Tierra del Fuegans—are far from being remorseless murderers; when they return victorious from the war-path they may not set foot in their villages or touch their wives till they have atoned for the murders they committed in war by penances which are often long and tedious. It is easy, of course, to attribute this to their superstition: the savage still goes in fear of the avenging spirits of the slain. But the spirits of his slain enemy are nothing but the expression of his bad conscience about his blood-guilt; behind this superstition there lies concealed a vein of ethical sensitiveness which has been lost by us civilized men.³

Pious souls, no doubt, who would like to believe that our nature is remote from any contact with what is evil and base, will

¹ Cf. Totem and Taboo (1912–13) [Standard Ed., 13, 66 ff.].
not fail to use the early appearance and the urgency of the prohibition against murder as the basis for gratifying conclusions as to the strength of the ethical impulses which must have been implanted in us. Unfortunately this argument proves even more for the opposite view. So powerful a prohibition can only be directed against an equally powerful impulse. What no human soul desires stands in no need of prohibition; it is excluded automatically. The very emphasis laid on the commandment ‘Thou shalt not kill’ makes it certain that we spring from an endless series of generations of murderers, who had the lust for killing in their blood, as, perhaps, we ourselves have to-day. Mankind’s ethical strivings, whose strength and significance we need not in the least depreciate, were acquired in the course of man’s history; since then they have become, though unfortunately only in a very variable amount, the inherited property of contemporary men.

Let us now leave primaevan man, and turn to the unconscious in our own mental life. Here we depend entirely upon the psycho-analytic method of investigation, the only one which reaches to such depths. What we ask, is the attitude of our unconscious towards the problem of death? The answer must be: almost exactly the same as that of primaevan man. In this respect, as in many others, the man of prehistoric times survives unchanged in our unconscious. Our unconscious, then, does not believe in its own death; it behaves as if it were immortal. What we call our ‘unconscious’—the deepest strata of our minds, made up of instinctual impulses—knows nothing that is negative, and no negation; in it contradictory coincide. For that reason it does not know its own death, for to that we can give only a negative content. Thus there is nothing instinctual in us which responds to a belief in death. This may even be the secret of heroism. The rational grounds for heroism rest on a judgement that the subject’s own life cannot be so precious as certain abstract and general goods. But more frequent, in my view, is the instinctive and impulsive heroism which knows no such reasons, and flouts danger in the spirit of Anzengruber’s Steinklopferrans: ‘Nothing can happen to me’. Or else those reasons only serve to clear away the hesitations which might hold back the heroic reaction that corresponds to the unconscious. The fear of death, which dominates us oftener than we know, is on the other hand something secondary, and is usually the outcome of a sense of guilt.¹

On the other hand, for strangers and for enemies we do acknowledge death, and consign them to it quite as readily and unhesitatingly as did primaevan man. There is, it is true, a distinction here which will be pronounced decisive so far as real life is concerned. Our unconscious does not carry out the killing; it merely thinks it and wishes it. But it would be wrong so completely to undervalue this psychical reality as compared with factual reality. It is significant and momentous enough. In our unconscious impulses we daily and hourly get rid of anyone who stands in our way, of anyone who has offended or injured us. The expression ‘Devil take him!’, which so often comes to people’s lips in joking anger and which really means ‘Death take him!’, is in our unconscious a serious and powerful death-wish. Indeed, our unconscious will murder even for trifles; like the ancient Athenian code of Draco, it knows no other punishment for crime than death. And this has a certain consistency, for every injury to our almighty and autocratic ego is at bottom a crime of âše-majesï.

And so, if we are to be judged by our unconscious wishful impulses, we ourselves are, like primaevan man, a gang of murderers. It is fortunate that all these wishes do not possess the potency that was attributed to them in primaevan times;² in the cross-fire of mutual curses mankind would long since have perished, the best and wisest of men and the loveliest and fairest of women with the rest.

Psycho-analysis finds as a rule no credence among laymen for assertions such as these. They reject them as calumnies which are confuted by conscious experience, and they adroitly overlook the faint indications by which even the unconscious is apt to betray itself to consciousness. It is therefore relevant to point out that many thinkers who could not have been influenced by psycho-analysis have quite definitely accused our unspoken

¹ Cf. Frazer’s brilliant argument quoted in Totem and Taboo [Standard Ed., 13, 123].
² ‘Hans the Stone-Breaker’—a character in a comedy by the Viennese dramatist Ludwig Anzengruber (1839-89). ]
³ See Totem and Taboo, Essay IV [Standard Ed., 13, 85 f].
thoughts of being ready, heedless of the prohibition against murder, to get rid of anything which stands in our way. From many examples of this I will choose one that has become famous:

In *Le Père Goriot*, Balzac alludes to a passage in the works of J. J. Rousseau where that author asks the reader what he would do if—without leaving Paris and of course without being discovered—he could kill, with great profit to himself, an old mandarin in Peking by a mere act of will. Rousseau implies that he would not give much for the life of that dignitary. ‘Tuer son mandarin’ has become a proverbial phrase for this secret readiness, present even in modern man.

There are also a whole number of cynical jokes and anecdotes which reveal the same tendency—such, for instance, as the words attributed to a husband: ‘If one of us two dies, I shall move to Paris.’ Such cynical jokes would not be possible unless they contained an unacknowledged truth which could not be admitted if it were expressed seriously and without disguise. In jest—it is well known—one may even tell the truth.

Just as for primaeval man, so also for our unconscious, there is one case in which the two opposing attitudes towards death, the one which acknowledges it as the annihilation of life and the other which denies it as unreal, collide and come into conflict. This case is the same as in primal ages: the death, or the risk of death, of someone we love, a parent or a partner in marriage, a brother or sister, a child or a dear friend. These loved ones are on the one hand an inner possession, components of our own ego; but on the other hand they are partly strangers, even enemies. With the exception of only a very few situations, there adheres to the tenderest and most intimate of our love-relations a small portion of hostility which can excite an unconscious death-wish. But this conflict due to ambivalence does not now, as it did then, lead to the doctrine of the soul and to ethics, but to neurosis, which affords us deep insight into normal mental life as well. How often have physicians who practise psychoanalysis had to deal with the symptom of an exaggerated worry over the well-being of relatives, or with entirely unfounded self-reproaches after the death of a loved person. The study of

1 [This is also quoted in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900a), Standard Ed., 5, 485.]
THOUGHTS ON WAR AND DEATH

We recall the old saying: Si vis pacem, para bellum. If you want to preserve peace, arm for war.

It would be in keeping with the times to alter it: Si vis vitam, para mortem. If you want to endure life, prepare yourself for death.

APPENDIX

LETTER TO FREDERIK VAN EEDEN

[This letter was written by Freud at the end of 1914, a few months after the outbreak of the first World War and a few months before the composition of his ‘Thoughts for the Times on War and Death’. Van Eeden, to whom the letter was addressed, was a Dutch psychopathologist, better known, however, as a man of letters. He was a long-standing acquaintance of Freud’s, although never accepting his views. The letter was first published in German by van Eeden in an Amsterdam weekly periodical, De Amsterdammer, on January 17, 1915 (No. 1960, p. 3). It seems not to have been reprinted in German hitherto. An English translation is included in the second volume of Dr. Ernest Jones’s life of Freud (1955, 413), and the version which follows is the same, apart from a few verbal changes.]

Vienna, December 28, 1914.

Dear Dr. van Eeden,

I venture, under the impact of the war, to remind you of two theses which have been put forward by psycho-analysis and which have undoubtedly contributed to its unpopularity.

Psycho-analysis has inferred from the dreams and parapraxes of healthy people, as well as from the symptoms of neurotics, that the primitive, savage and evil impulses of mankind have not vanished in any of its individual members, but persist, although in a repressed state, in the unconscious (to use our technical terms), and lie in wait for opportunities of becoming active once more. It has further taught us that our intellect is a feeble and dependent thing, a plaything and tool of our instincts and affections, and that we are all compelled to behave cleverly or stupidly according to the commands of our [emotional] attitudes and internal resistances.

If you will now observe what is happening in this war—the cruelties and injustices for which the most civilized nations are responsible, the different way in which they judge their own lies

1 [The periodical’s name was later changed to De Groene Amsterdammer.]