Introduction

> *All cognition of the All originates in death, in the fear of death. Philosophy takes it upon itself to throw off the fear of things earthly, to rob death of its poisonous sting, and Hades of its pestilential breath . . . Without ceasing, the womb of the indefatigable earth gives birth to what is new, each bound to die, each awaiting the day of its journey into darkness with fear and trembling. But philosophy denies these fears of the earth. It bears us over the grave which yawns at our feet with every step.* (Franz Rosenzweig, 1971 [1921], p. 3)
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> *[H]ere the philosophers are thinking too philosophically . . .* (Sigmund Freud, 1915, p. 293)

Around the same time Rosenzweig was beginning to formulate these words as a soldier during World War I, another Jewish thinker writing in German was taking a completely different stance: "The high-sounding phrase, 'every fear is ultimately the fear of death', has hardly any meaning, and at any rate cannot be justified" (Freud, 1923, p. 57). Freud's words, here and elsewhere, constituted merely the first steps in what has become a long-lasting psychoanalytic journey. They express much more than the occasional concrete remark and bear witness to, rather, a fundamental and mostly hidden tendency. In psychoanalysis, the greatest effort thus far to "map" the human psyche, death seems to occupy, as I hope to show, only a marginal place. A thorough reading of analytic writings reveals a sort of a "denial of death," or at least a reluctance to acknowledge death as a constituting factor in mental life. Sometimes death anxiety is reduced to other fears and mental states. At other times death's significance in psychic life is denied, or death is simply ignored. This book explores the theme of death and death anxiety in psychoanalysis, and the existence of a lacuna, an act of repression, in psychoanalysis' handling of death. It aims to show how and why death has been marginalized or repressed in psychoanalysis.

It all starts from a few statements by Freud about death's inaccessibility to the unconscious (1915, pp. 289, 296–7; 1923, pp. 57–9; 1926, pp. 129–30, 140). Death is negative, abstract, it involves time, and cannot, therefore, be part of unconscious thought. Accordingly, if people

are afraid of death, these fears should be understood as secondary, as indications of another "deeper" problem, mostly castration. This is where it all starts but not where it all ends. For this position reverberates throughout the history of psychoanalysis, finding various expressions. It consists in a kind of disbelief in death, an unwillingness to recognize death as a possibly influential psychic factor.

While it deals with the psychoanalytic approach to death in general, the focus of this book is Freud. I examine some of the central Freudian texts with the aim of exploring the role of death in psychic life. Freud's importance here is much more than historical, for several reasons. His position with regard to death had a tremendous influence on future generations of theoreticians. In fact, interestingly, in very few areas did Freud's views endure with such little challenge and undergo so little revision. The reiterations and variations of his position amount to a psychoanalytic "common sense" regarding the secondary nature of the fear of death. An exploration of Freud's writings thus goes straight to the heart of the problem.

However, as sometimes happens, Freud's position on death is more ambivalent, vacillating, and complex than the positions of many of his followers. Even when reductionistic, it is multifariously so. Freud's work, particularly in its less reductionistic manifestations, contains fruitful intuitions and sharp insights into the nature of our attitude toward death. It often betrays a tension between reductionistic tendencies and attempts to attribute the utmost significance to death. Many times, only Freud's more reductionistic statements were adopted by future generations of theoreticians and analysts. In Freud, psychoanalysis is captured in its *status nascendi*, allowing us to examine the psychoanalytic approach in its formative stages, and observe its initial structure and fractures. A close reading of Freud's texts enables us also to question the justification and inevitability of psychoanalytic accounts of death, and to ask whether there is another way.

There certainly is another way, for Freud actually had two significant points of view on death. The one, much more prominent, is evident throughout his work, and does not regard death as a psychic motive or death anxiety as a factor in mental life. It finds expression in both explicit statements and implicit presumptions, constructions, and biases, the uncovering of which constitutes much of the work of the current study. The second point of view, less dominant and often hidden, regards death as central, and often reflects a personal belief held by Freud, rather than his "professional" views. The two positions undermine and displace each other. Oftentimes, what looks like a clear expression of one turns out upon examination to disclose the other. Places where Freud seems

to explicitly accept death as a psychic factor are sometimes revealed at bottom to be further cases of neglect or repression of death, and vice versa.

This ambivalence, this wavering, is manifest throughout this book. It is reflected in the movement between Chapters 1 and 2, from Freud's theoretical resistance to death to his personal engagement with it, and in the hesitations and doubts that accompanied the forming of that theoretical resistance in the first place (Chapter 1). It comes into play in Freud's major essay on death, "Thoughts for the Times on War and Death" (Chapter 6), a text where the two thoughts on death are all the time at war. It sometimes displays itself as a kind of return of the repressed, as is the case in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, where death simply keeps asserting itself over and over but is ignored on the theoretical level (Chapters 3 and 4). The theory itself keeps coming back to death, be it in sporadic gestures that acknowledge its importance, mostly in Freud's cultural writings (Chapter 8), or in the direct attempt to conceptualize it and not let it remain outside the cathedral of theory, Freud's notion of the death drive, which again, we shall see (Chapter 7) fails to acknowledge death in the very attempt to do so. In fact, this pattern is so dominant that it could be said to be structuring Freud's psychoanalytic theory.

It does, in effect, go on after Freud: Theorists declare death important but fail to integrate it well into the theory. While the overall picture allows death meager space (see Chapter 9), we witness repeated attempts throughout the history of psychoanalysis to address this theoretical lack (Chapters 10, 11, and 12). If it is almost always the reductionistic or evasive position that has the upper hand, this has perhaps to do with reasons embedded deeply within the psychoanalytic worldview, addressed in Chapter 13. The theory, on the whole, fails in its attempts to incorporate death, and showing how this takes place is my main task in this book.

Throughout the history of psychoanalysis several thinkers have made the claim that the psychoanalytic approach to death is reductionistic (Rank, 1950 [1945]; Klein, 1948; Brown, 1959; Searles, 1965 [1961]; Becker, 1973; Meyer, 1975 [1973]; Lifton, 1979; Hoffman, 1979, 1998; Yalom, 1980; Lachmann, 1985; Bonasia, 1988,[1] and more

[1] Bonasia's (1988) paper, one of the best on the subject, has only come to my knowledge in the very final stages of preparing the manuscript (probably due the journal's recent inclusion in PEP) and therefore is regretably not analyzed or alluded to in this work. Its analysis of the death drive is expecially pertinent and bears close resemblence to the one offered in Chapter 7.

recently Piven, 2004. It has also been suggested more marginally by Stern, 1968a, 1968b, Jonte-Pace, 2001, and a few others). As Lifton (1979) points out: "Psychological theory has tended either to neglect death or to render it a kind of foreign body, to separate death from the general motivations of life" (p. 4).

In examining the problem more closely than has been done to date, this book exposes different modes of reduction and shows that they are multiple, complex, and often hidden. Freud's texts and those of others are carefully read, and their approach to death is analyzed in detail. Many times we shall see, death is ignored, even when nothing is stated explicitly. Even in places where supposedly analytic texts do attribute some importance to death, they often do so in ways that distort its existential significance. Reduction in these cases is elusive and covert, yet persistently active.

Through exposing the specific ways in which death and death anxiety are constructed in analytic theory, and aiming to find out what is *implied* by them, the adequacy and validity of those constructions is questioned. We shall see how reduction distorts the fact of death itself, how it creates contradictions and dead-ends in the theory. However, the contrary will also be shown: not only how Freud has dispersed throughout his writings sharp intuitions regarding death, but how death reasserts itself constantly in the texts and refuses to be silenced, how the psychical phenomena related to death defy reduction. The theory, I suggest, must be taken seriously to show why its treatment of death is lacking. It cannot be simply dismissed as inadequate. In probing its unintended constructions and its inconsistencies, I show how they reflect a fundamental problem with the psychoanalytic approach to death.

I give a close reading of Freud's key texts, and analyze the role death plays in them or the attitude toward it expressed in them. In most of them the question of death had not so far been studied attentively or has been subject to misinterpretations and clichéd reading. The present study is also one of the first to comprehensively review Freud's ideas on death.[2]

My analysis also does not stop at Freud. It deals with various psychoanalytic currents to demonstrate the pervasiveness of the neglect of death throughout psychoanalysis' development.

The current study, unlike most existing work on the subject, calls attention not only to psychoanalysis' obliviousness to death, but also to its deep relation to the psychoanalytic attitude. Such obliviousness or

[2] Only Piven (2004), to my knowledge, has done so previously (Hoffman's, 1979, study is also important, but very brief). Piven's overall perspective, while intriguing, seems not always critical enough in its approach to the Freudian texts.

active belittling of death's importance is not treated here as a minor blind spot, or a phenomenon confined to isolated passages, but rather as a deep-rooted, pervasive stance, embedded in psychoanalytic thought. The reductive approach cannot be simply brushed under the carpet by passing over several problematic passages.

Curiously, the few critiques made so far on the analytic approach to death have not been integrated or incorporated into analytic thought. They are hardly referred to, and there is no real network of discussion around them. They remain islands within analytic thought, and indeed, islands rarely frequented. Moreover, analysts do not seem to think that the psychoanalytic attitude to death is problematic at all. This fact, that the relevant critiques have been rejected or ignored, is another symptom of the problem, and necessitates a further, more elaborate enquiry into the causes.

The interest in critically examining psychoanalytic theory is twofold. It lies both in the fact that psychoanalysis is the most overarching theory of the human psyche, and hence should not be blind to a central dimension of life, and in the influence of psychoanalysis on clinical contexts, as part of the worldview of therapists.

Clearly, to some extent death is already a part of psychoanalysis: It is present in analytic discussions of loss, trauma, masochism, suicide, war neurosis or the Holocaust and is part of many clinicians' awareness. But these are isolated areas, theoretical patches, bypassing the deeper position against death. The fundamental problem remains, and needs to be addressed directly. This would help make the theory more truthful and alive.

Death in theory

Our idea of death evolves both from the fact of death itself and from images and perspectives on death, perspectives which are cultural-historical: "[i]n American society, a high number of automobile deaths is acceptable; a high number of crib deaths is not" (Stephenson, 1985, p. 2). Of course, the psychoanalytic view of death is only part of larger historical transformations in the perception of death, due to the changing intellectual climate, the decline of the influence of religions, mass death events in the twentieth century and the development of medicine and institutionalization, to name just a few salient factors. Nevertheless, it is also important in itself, for its ideas, for its representativeness of cultural trends, for its role in ideological transformation, and for its ongoing influence through therapeutic practice. What kind of picture does psychoanalytic theory present of death?

Theory creates blindness. Even useful, fruitful theories bring about a certain blindness. In illuminating reality, they ipso facto relegate other parts of it to the darkness. Concepts we use sharpen our perception of certain aspects of reality, but necessarily blind us as to others.

Of course, the psychoanalytic world has a well-based tradition of constantly putting its premises in question and updating them. Many times, however, in what concerns death, even when certain faults or lacks are explicitly recognized, and an attitude that deviates from the dominant theory is expressed, one is still limited in the extent to which one is able to recognize the nature of the problem. One may notice the problem, but not see how deep it goes. Alternatively, one tries to correct the theory, but still carries it on one's back, and part of reality remains hidden in the shadow of theory.

The current study tries to illuminate a basic lack in analytic theory with respect to death, an aspect of human life that largely remains outside its understanding of the human subject. It attempts to shed some light on some things hidden in the dark.

Yet, one may ask, does death anxiety really exist? Is death in general part of psychic life? It is my contention that it does and that it is. It is not the goal of this book though to demonstrate this. Anyone who thinks otherwise, or believes her finitude has no relevance for her life, is kindly asked to go and sincerely examine the nearest mirror before going on reading. Broad expositions of death's central role in psychic life, and specifically of death anxiety, can be found in Becker (1973) and Yalom (1980), while Heidegger (1996 [1927]) offers perhaps the most profound philosophical argumentation for death's centrality for the human being. I try in general not to use the idea of the "existence" of death anxiety or death's psychic influence as an argument in itself, but to examine the psychoanalytic approach to death on its own terms. It is true though that on a certain level the existence of death anxiety is also a matter of belief: not that there is no evidence or argumentation for it, but one could always counter them if one's mind is set on it.[3]

[3] There are two essential sources for the idea that death anxiety exists, and one marginal source. The two essential ones are a simple consideration of the human condition and sincere introspection. Can one honestly dismiss, upon thinking of the human's basic situation in the world, that one's finitude is completely without psychic consequences? And do we not know, from our own experience, even if only vaguely, that the knowledge of the future event of death deeply affects us? Even if it is rarely on our minds, even if we do not normally experience the anxiety of it, do we not sense it, albeit in brief, fleeting flashes of awareness?

The less important source of support is the empirical study of death anxiety and depression. One can cite numerous experiments that examine psychic responses to

Interestingly, one person for whom death and death anxiety were certainly significant was Freud himself. As I shall describe in Chapters 2, 3, and 4, in his private life, death was a constant worry for Freud, and death anxiety a daily experience. At all times aware of his mortality, he can be said to have lived his life under the shadow of death, the same shadow he claimed in his writings to be but an insignificant specter. Asking, therefore, if death receives a sufficient place in Freud's work derives a basic justification from this gap between what he tells us in writing and what he tells his friends in private.

Because I claim that the analytic approach to death is problematic, something must perhaps be said as to what kind of approach to death would be less problematic. As I said, I do not set about here to advance the view that death anxiety or death is a troublesome issue for people. However, this intuitive, common sense notion is so widespread among diverse schools of thought, not to mention laypeople, and finds such frequent expression in mythology, art, literature, etc., that in some respect, the burden of proof falls on those who claim that death is not significant. The support the analytic arguments provide for this claim is, as I shall show in the first chapter, insufficient. Much of the examination of the analytic approach is carried out here, then, vis-à-vis a common sense approach, which I believe is available to anyone.

Moreover, even without supposing any alternative view, it is still possible to demonstrate the problematic nature of the current state of affairs concerning the psychoanalytic approach to death. As I said, I expose inconsistencies and contradictions in the theory, showing that it does not hold up as is, that the phenomena it seeks to explain remain unexplained, and that internal tensions undermine the effort to understand death in the usual analytic terms. I also show how death stubbornly "rises from the grave" after ostensibly being put to death by existing explanations. Death simply will not be silenced.

death across age, sex and ethnic groups and that look at various related factors (e.g., Feifel & Branscomb, 1973; Feifel & Hermann, 1973; Hoelter, 1979; Persinger, 1985; Alvarado, Templer, Bresler, & Thomas-Dobson, 1992–1993; Maglio & Robinson, 1994; Neimeyer, 1997–1998; Galt & Hayslip, 1998; Rasmussen, Templer, Kenkel, & Cannon, 1998; Fortner, Neimeyer, & Rybarczyk, 2000; Thorson & Powell, 2000; Tomer & Eliason, 2000; Tomer & Eliason, 2005; Lehto & Stein, 2009). If I refer to empirical research as less important, it is because the first two considerations are so fundamental that even if empirical studies were to find no death anxiety or depression at all, one would still have reasons to regard them as fundamental human possibilities and concerns.

Of special importance are experiments in Terror Management Theory (TMT) showing how influential the awareness of death, death anxiety and the defense against them are in shaping and supporting cultural belief systems and ideologies, as well as self-esteem (see Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 1998).

In addition, as I have said already, much of the approach to death I expose is inexplicit and unintended. Thus, rather than directly attack the analytic claims that diminish the importance of death, I show how death, or significant aspects of it, are disregarded even when this is not the aim. The obliviousness to death in psychoanalysis is, to anticipate later conclusions, more a part of a worldview, the result of a network of ideas, than merely a position in itself. To sum up these points, ignoring death can be shown to be problematic without any view external to psychoanalysis.

This notwithstanding, an alternative conception is built up step by step, and not explicitly at first, as we proceed through an examination of the analytic corpus. Through a systematic inquiry into the shortcomings of existing analytic understandings of death, it will gradually become clearer what a more adequate approach to death could look like. In the final chapter, I address the issue more directly and attempt to delineate more specifically the various aspects of death and death's repercussions in psychic life, which should be addressed.

It is still perhaps worthwhile here to note why some conceptions of death are perceived as flawed or lacking. They are lacking not necessarily with regard to a specific alternative understanding, but rather in the measure to which they succeed in accounting for the phenomena themselves. First and foremost, the problem with many analytic understandings of death is that they dismiss the phenomenon of death anxiety itself. They purport to account for it, but render it something else.

Similarly, the reality of death is often not acknowledged. Death's influence is not recognized as such; the event of death as a real thing in the world, that will take place, is forgotten.

In addition, specific dimensions of this fact of life are left unaddressed, especially those harder and more threatening to incorporate. For example, that we know about it in advance, and acknowledge its inevitability. Another important example is death's imminence, the fact that it could come at any moment. If we do not address this fact, we have failed to address death's influence. Similarly, that death is an event external to us is often blurred in analytic explanations.

More common are specific understandings of death, which leave out many of its more general influences. Psychoanalytic studies often refer to very particular cases of death or annihilation anxiety. Rarely is the deeper impact of the fact we are finite brought into account.

In sum, such psychoanalytic conceptions of death's psychic impact often fail to contribute to our understanding of it, and neglect significant parts of psychic life.

Death in the clinic

For me, then, to a large extent there is no real question whether death is part of psychic life. Clinicians, however, might feel troubled by two subtler concerns I wish to address here. Readers untroubled by these clinical questions might move directly to the next section. The first possible reservation is that clinically, "in reality," death is simply not an issue. The second is that it is an issue but that analysts take good care of it, and that they do not reduce it when it comes to the anxious patient.

Is death a clinical issue? In the works of those who do seem to be aware of the issue of death, one can find numerous descriptions of cases where death is a central theme; for example, Stern (1968a), Rosenthal (1973a [1963]), Meyer (1975 [1973]), Lifton, (1979), Yalom (1980), Lachmann (1985), Hulsey & Frost (1995), Hoffman (1979, 1998), Langs (1997), and De Masi (2004). Langs (1997, pp. 30–3) and Yalom (1980) insist on how abundant death references actually are in therapies. It can be shown that even in Freud's own case histories death is ubiquitous: in some cases in Freud and Breuer's *Studies in Hysteria* (Yalom, 1980, pp. 59–64; Breger, 1981, pp. 112–13; Lifton, 1979, p. 205), in the case of the Rat Man (Lifton, 1979, pp. 207–10) and of Little Hans (pp. 213–9; Stern, 1968a, pp. 5–6) or the Wolf Man (Piven, 2004, pp. 125–39). Valuable analyses and descriptions of the role death plays in psychopathology can found in Rank (1950 [1945] pp. 119–33), Brown (1959, pp. 87–134), Searles (1965 [1961]), Leclaire (1971), Becker (1973, pp. 208–52), Meyer (1975 [1973]), Lifton (1979), Yalom (1980, pp. 110–58), and Piven (2004).

After citing numerous cases where death is a central theme, Yalom (1980) concludes that in fact, in light of all he encounters in the clinic and the importance death has in people's lives, the absence of discussions of death in the clinical literature seems to amount to a "conspiracy of silence" (p. 55). He cannot understand how it is that what repeatedly comes up in the clinical context is so scarce in the literature. Elements of the clinical exchange pertaining to death are either dropped from discussion, mentioned but ignored, or translated into other psychological terms (*ibid.*).

Indeed, while one can understand a theoretical reluctance to deal with death, it would be odd if death were also absent from the clinical exchanges themselves. As Yalom (1980) asserts, it is not that death concerns do not come up, but often rather that "the therapist is not prepared to hear them" (p. 57). If the therapist is receptive to death, she will frequently recognize it in what patients say (*ibid.*). However, when

the ear is obstructed, no mention of death by a patient, no matter how direct and imposing, will be heard.

In addition, the claim of some analysts that they simply do not encounter death-related issues in their therapies sounds to me very unanalytic. Since when does one rely in psychoanalysis solely, and without further examination, on the direct account of patients? Do patients normally speak openly about their castration fears? Death is never an easy issue for anyone, and naturally death anxiety is not readily admitted; yet it is easily repressed. Clinicians should deal with death as they deal with other issues in psychoanalysis, follow their suspicions, and go beyond the defenses. The problem is that "when mortality does not stare the analytic dyad in the face, we tend not to invite it into the room" (Frommer, 2005, p. 485).

To unresolved death fears in the therapist, Yalom adds the general inattention to death in psychological theory, regarding which he suggests some interesting preliminary ideas. My work is solely concerned with the second of these issues. I focus on the negligence of death on the theoretical level, the ways in which it is excluded, denied, ignored, reduced, pathologized, and rejected. The key for an improved clinical attention to death is directing more theoretical attention, not only to the issue of death, but also to the way this issue has been rejected.

The theory is crucial here. Death cannot remain a matter of personal preference alone. Because it is not an issue, one will rarely look for it. Analysts will often look for issues when guided by theory: hidden channels of aggression, sources of gratification, narcissistic injuries. If the "official" theory remains silent about death, one will not be on the lookout for it (Moreover, when practitioners do not look for death, the patients might adapt themselves, just as Freudian patients have Freudian dreams and Jungian patients have Jungian dreams. If death is not an important issue for therapists, it will be brought up less by patients).

This gains special importance from the fact that the role finitude plays in our life is not restricted to concrete manifestations of affect such as anxiety and depression. Death affects us in profound ways, as I shall show. It guides our global evaluation of life. It is a shadow behind our perspective on things, behind choices, behind our basic sense of presence in the world, behind our feelings and commitments. Concern about death is often something that operates silently, something fundamental to human existence, a question posed which precedes life, so to speak, and accompanies it. It is like a background to life, a basis on which psychic life is erected. As such, it does not always find direct concrete expression. Unless the theory says something about it, a substantial part of the most inner substrates of the psyche risks remaining in the dark.