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# To Love and Be Loved

## Summary:

In “Instincts and their Vicissitudes,” Sigmund Freud entertains the possibility of a third developmental stage beyond the oppositions love-indifference and love-hate: love-being loved. Though he casually dismisses the possibility in the paper itself, the polarity love-being loved demands investigation, as it seems to signal a higher form of sublimation than we typically find in Freud’s writings.

It’s always a mistake to seek resolution in psychoanalysis. Resolution can sometimes (rarely) come, but to seek it is to impose one kind of wish on the process of attempting to uncover another. There is good reason, beyond simply revisionist adaptation to a medical paradigm, that psychoanalysts historically favored a more detached, “scientific” viewpoint. Impossible in one sense, but that’s maybe the point.

There’s a deeper reason, however, that resolution is a mistake, and that is simply that conflict is the primary mode of access we have to the fundamentals of psychic life. Commentators sometimes chide Freud for his “pessimism” in his lifelong commitment to an irreconcilable dualism, but I would argue that such dualism was a function of a certain epistemological principle: that drives or instincts cannot be known directly but only when they come into conflict.

Boil everything in life down to some underlying drive, like love, sex, play, power, etc., and you will be in the realm of paranoid fantasy. Not “wrong” exactly, capable of interesting explanations from time to time, but essentially locked in a state of reading one text and interpreting another. The only way in which drive theory can avoid distortions of this kind is by focusing on *conflict*: those moments when analysands express a painful both/and. “I am mourning my sister’s death, and I also want to fuck her husband.” “I love my father and my girlfriend, but I kind of wish they both had syphilis and died.”

This was Socrates’s method in divining the three components of the soul. We will know that there is something separate in there when we can recognize division. I *want* to eat Planters’ Cheez Balls all the time, but I *know* they are not good for me. Appetite and calculation—two parts of the soul. Freud was engaged in a similar endeavor with drive theory, and this is why there must always be at least two drives. Conflict is our window to the depths.

This all being said, I want to explore a moment of resolution in one of Freud’s most unresolved texts, “Instincts and their Vicissitudes” (1915), one that can really only be glimpsed momentarily in the text before being washed away in the tumultuous sea of the metapsychology papers. As is well-known, Freud was in a time of crisis when working on these papers, which he described to Karl Abraham as “war-time atrocities” (Freud and Abraham, 1965, p. 228). In attempting to systematize his work since *The Interpretation of Dreams*, his entire intellectual edifice crumbled, at the same time that his social world was falling apart.

Love, Freud tells us in “Instincts and their Vicissitudes”, has three opposites: “In addition to the antithesis ‘loving-hating’, there is the other one of ‘loving-being loved’; and, in addition to these, loving and hating taken together are the opposite of the condition of unconcern or indifference” (p. 133). Hating, being loved, indifference. This typological differentiation is then grafted onto a developmental model governed by three polarities: subject-object, pleasure-unpleasure, active-passive. At the beginning of mental life, the subject-object polarity reigns:

During this period, therefore, the ego-subject coincides with what is pleasurable and the external world with what is indifferent.... If for the moment we define loving as the relation of the ego to its source of pleasure, the situation in which the ego loves itself only and is indifferent to the external world illustrates the first of the opposites which we found to ‘loving’. (Freud, 1915, p. 135)

James Strachey cannot help but note that something is already afoot in his translator’s note to this passage:

On p. 133 Freud enumerates the opposites of loving in the following order: (1) hating, (2) being loved and (3) indifference. In the present passage, and below on pp. 136 and 139, he adopts a different order: (1) indifference, (2) hating, and (3) being loved. It seems probable that in this second arrangement he gives indifference the first place as being the first to appear in the course of development. (p. 135n)

And indeed, after a brief discussion of narcissism, in which the subject-object polarity is dominant and thus love is opposed to indifference, Freud launches into a description of the way in which the next polarity, pleasure-unpleasure, parses this original state of being such that *hate* emerges as the opposite of love. At this stage, “the ego-subject coincides with pleasure, and the external world with unpleasure (what was earlier indifference)” (p. 135). Indifference itself is revalued “as a special case of hate or dislike, after having first appeared as their forerunner” (p. 136). An interesting discussion of the genesis of hate ensues: it’s not simply that hate is equivalent to unpleasurable, but rather that in being subsumed by the pleasure-unpleasure polarity, the self-preservative orientation of the ego comes to be infected by sexual functions:

The ego hates, abhors and pursues with intent to destroy all objects which are a source of unpleasurable feeling for it, without taking into account whether they mean a frustration of sexual satisfaction or of the satisfaction of self-preservative needs. Indeed, it may be asserted that the true prototypes of the relation of hate are derived not from sexual life, but from the ego’s struggle to preserve and maintain itself. (Freud, 1915, p. 138)

So stage 1: subject-object polarity, love-indifference opposition. Stage 2: pleasure-unpleasure polarity, love-hate distinction. Which seems to set us up for a stage 3: active-passive polarity, love-being loved distinction, but the following is the sum total of Freud’s (1915) discussion of stage 3:

The third antithesis of loving, the transformation of loving into being loved, corresponds to the operation of the polarity of activity and passivity, and is to be judged in the same way as the cases of scopophilia and sadism (pp. 139-140).

That’s it. Rambling pages about the relation between scientific inquiry and theory, a detailed and complex explanation of the genesis of the love-hate dichotomy, and then *this*, at a moment when according to the developmental schema he has established, we are supposed to be looking at something like *maturity*?

It’s worth noting here a simple, but important, point that Freud ignores: as opposed to love-indifference and love-hate, love-being loved is an opposition that you can inhabit without conflict. You can’t love someone and be indifferent to them, just like you can’t love someone and hate them. Ambivalence, I know, I know—this is just to say that outward expressions of indifference or hate can *endanger* love. Not so, however, with the third polarity: you *can love* someone and also *be loved* by them without contradiction, and indeed, one might posit this as an ideal. Lots of people have the capacity to love, to fall under someone else’s spell in a way that transcends mere attraction. Gliding from one sexual encounter to another in adolescence, it’s tempting to cynically dismiss such a distinction, but there inevitably comes a time when

something sticks; when jagged psychic grooves align with others like ill-fitting puzzle pieces, and we can access another point of transcendence, beyond the physically sexual.

But that's kind of the easy part. We are primed from early childhood for this to happen. The work comes in opening oneself to the evolution of this alignment; to learn to *be in love*, to be loved by someone who is often irritating and unthinking, who goes through fits of fancy and cruelty, who gets old and frail and increasingly useless. And this is only to speak of a love object insofar as they are a true object; often we can't even grant that status. Hang around someone long enough and they become an extension of yourself, someone who you kind of expect to move around like a limb and from whom independent subjectivity can come as something of an unwanted surprise.

To love *and* to be loved, to both give and receive while both expressing and overcoming hostility and indifference—it does *seem* like the right third stage in this developmental schema, but it's wholly neglected by Freud. A passing line at the end of the paper gives us some sense of why: “Of these three polarities we might describe that of activity-passivity as the *biological*, that of ego-external world as the *real*, and finally that of pleasure-unpleasure as the *economic* polarity” (p. 140). Earlier he offers a jarring portrayal of this relegation of activity-passivity to the biological: “The antithesis active-passive coalesces later with the antithesis masculine-feminine, which, until this has taken place, has no psychological meaning” (p. 134). In other words, men love, and women *are* loved. Freud does note that the “coupling of activity with masculinity and of passivity with femininity... is by no means so invariably complete and exclusive as we are inclined to assume”, but insofar as the polarity is settled by culture, it “has no psychological meaning” (p. 134).

There's something of interest here, it's not all just gender anachronism. Culture does solve certain things for us, at the same time that it produces new problems. But it's still not clear that, *even within Freud's conceptual universe*, this explanation is satisfactory. A possible third developmental stage that bears no psychological meaning is a bright red flag that Freud should have recognized. An outmoded gender conception only gets us so far as an explanation for this oversight.

To my mind, the reason for his quick gloss on the third polarity is that it uncomfortably raises the possibility of resolution; of *sublimating* the love-hate opposition into a love-being loved distinction. You can't overcome ambivalence, right? Is it really possible to imagine such dialectical resolution in psychoanalysis? To think of hate as something that can be transcended, lifted up into a new, more innocuous stage of being much as the love-hate distinction revalued indifference? Freud always had a need for loved friends and hated enemies. The opposition just seems so natural—directing one part of your energy to warmth, care, and sex, and the other part to burying those who deserve it. The possibility of something more than this appears ridiculous, like Al-Ghazali's (2005) proposal of a third judge beyond reason or the senses, opening a third eye that you never knew you had.

The moment is gone before it ever really happens. Before you can ask, “Wait, what about love-being loved?”, the whole metapsychology comes crashing down, and in its wake arises a new conceptual universe within which Eros is locked in eternal struggle with the death drive. Just a passing dream, one that wouldn't even stick without interpretation.

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