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Între Eros și Thanatos sau de la agresivitate la distructivitate

Rezumat

În abordările psihanalizei (Sigmund Freud) cât și în cele ale etologiei (Konrad Lorenz) agresivitatea are condiționări endogene fiind deci un instinct. Chiar dacă se remarcă această abordare identică în ceea ce privește caracterul instinctual al agresivității cele două științe se despart net în concluziile divergente formulate. În primul rând o asemenea divergență vizează sensul atașat agresivității. Și anume, dacă în cazul lui Freud vorbim despre agresivitate ca despre o simplă transformare a instinctului morții, sensul ei neputând fi altul decât distructivitatea, pentru Konrad Lorenz agresivitatea ar fi un element al organizării ființelor vii, rezultând așadar o funcție total diferită, adică aceea de a conserva viața. Plecând de la această abordare în lucrarea de față vom face o analiză prin care să arătăm că dualismului freudian al Erosului și Thanatosului îi corespunde în etologie un dualism al agresivității și contraagresivității. Iar, în timp ce în psihanaliză cei doi vectori pulsionali au naturi și țeluri total opuse (conservarea și respectiv distrugerea vieții) în etologie ei îndeplinesc un scop comun: conservarea speciilor.

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Between Eros and Thanatos or from Aggressivity to Destructiveness

Summary

In the approaches of psychoanalysis (Sigmund Freud) as well as those of ethology (Konrad Lorenz) aggressivity has endogenous conditioning being consequently an instinct. Even though as concerns the instinctual character of aggressivity the two sciences agree, they clearly diverge in formulating their conclusions. The first among these divergences refers to the meaning attached to aggressivity. Namely, if in Freud's view aggressivity is simply a transformation of death drive, its meaning being actually destructiveness, according to Konrad Lorenz, aggressivity becomes an element in the organization of living beings, thus resulting a completely different function, i. e. the conservation of life. Starting from this premise, the present paper intends an analysis in order to show that corresponding to the Freudian Eros and Thanatos dualism there is an aggressivity and counter aggressivity dualism in ethology. Thus, while in psychoanalysis the two drives have totally opposed characters (conservation and respectively destruction of life), they have a common aim in ethology: the conservation of species.

Between Eros and Thanatos or from Aggressivity to Destructiveness

Simultaneously with the publication of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), Sigmund Freud made public his ambition to have contributed through this study to the elucidation of the „enigma of life”. The basis of the whole demonstration is reduced to the two fundamental driving forces in the biosphere – Eros and Thanatos – which were analyzed from the perspective of their interconditioning, that is their dialectic. Thus the second (and last) formulation of the Freudian theory is structured with regard to instincts, a fact that besides the psychological connotation, has undoubtedly also a philosophical (ontological) one².

In this theory about instincts, the ordinary sexual drive appears as a particular case of Eros, more precisely that side of it that is „object”-oriented (i.e. towards other individuals, following the reproductive function). As life instinct, Eros contains also the narcissical libido but also any other impuls that leads to the „reunion of the parts of the living substance” and „the maintenance of their cohesion”. Thus, its exclusive substratum are not only the germinative cells, but it becomes a characteristic of all cells. The same thing happens with the death instinct, the antagonist of Eros: Thanatos is „inscribed” in each cell of the living organisms. The orientation of the „vector” that acts here has the aim to return life to the inorganic stage that preceded it, namely death³. According to the Freudian vision, Thanatos acts, from the very beginning of life, as a tendency to dissolve, in a return to the peace of the inorganic, the tension felt by the young organism. If, at the beginning of natural history the way to death was very short, meanwhile, under the influence of the external conditions, organisms become more and more complex, and the return to inorganic becomes a long and complicated process, conditioned by Eros. The (ephemeral) effect of Eros’s victory over Thanatos is the metamorphosis of self-destructiveness into the destructiveness against the world. This really destructive aggressive is for Freud the expression of a biological tendency; in other words, it is an inborn tendency. The hypothesis Freud launched gave rise to extremely heated discussions, pros and cons concerning his thesis.

The most important opponent of Freud’s position was the Nobel Prize laureate Konrad Lorenz, one of the founders of ethology, expressing his complete disagreement: „This hypothesis is in disagreement with biology and in the ethologist’s eyes it is useless and false”⁴. Still, even if ethology does not sustain Freud’s thesis, such a grid applied to the German psychoanalyst’s vision of aggressivity could be a supplementary method of „the scientific testing of his entire hypothesis on the death instinct, starting from the conclusions to the premises”⁵ This idea belonging to Vasile Dem. Zamfirescu is extremely interesting especially as concerns its conclusions. One of the Romanian researcher’s first conclusions is that both with Freud and Lorenz, aggressivity⁶ has endogenous determinants (or sources, as he writes), being an instinct. Thus ethology is the second

² Vasile Dem. Zamfirescu, *Între logica inimii și logica minții [Between the Logic of the Heart and of the Mind]*, Ed. Trei, București, 2003, p. 297

³ *Ibidem*, pp. 300-301

⁴ K. Lorenz, *Das Sogenannte Böse*, Boratha-Schoeler Verlag, Wien, 1970, p. X, Apud. Zamfirescu, op. cit., p. 302

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 303

⁶ We want to stress the fact that we refer to intra-species aggressivity, i.e. between animals of the same species.

important contemporary orientation (after psychoanalysis) sustaining the instinctual character of aggressivity. Notwithstanding this coincidental approach as regards the instinctual character of aggressivity, the two sciences have divergent positions.

One of these divergencies refers to the *meaning* given to aggressivity: if for Freud aggressivity was a simple modification of the death instinct, its meaning being nothing else than destructiveness, with Konrad Lorenz aggressivity represents an element of the living beings' organisation, having thus the function of conservation of life. Nevertheless, taking into account Lorenz's position when he sustains that the natural aim of aggressivity is the conservation of species, the question arises: how did evolution succeed the performance of keeping aggressivity inside the boundaries of its constructive aim? Then, how is it possible that with human beings aggressivity has still a destructive orientation?

In order to answer the first question one has to enter into the „realm of Eros”, that Freud considered to be the life instinct, drawing a parallel with animal life so that ethology could offer some means to help us better understand mankind. Such an attempt – writes V.D. Zamfirescu – is justified also from a psychoanalytical point of view: Freud, although he refers especially to human beings, considered that Eros and Thanatos act in the entire living world⁷. A comparative analysis of behavior, as ethology is also known, identifies in a category of almost suicidal *soothing gestures* with the exposure of the the most vulnerable parts of the body, exposure that has the intention to induce in the stronger rival a feeling similar to the human feeling of pity. The significance of this behavior „can be deciphered with the help of a gesture from the human world, when the deposition of the weapons indicates an unmistakable pacifying intention.” The instinctual gestures of animals do not want to say something else in the dictionary of bio communication”⁸. Even though these soothing behaviors do not exhaust the whole range of techniques that counter-aggressivity⁹ possesses, they are extremely suggestive for the way in which evolution succeeded to channel aggressivity towards its constructive aim. The transcending of this aim, the slide towards destructiveness is prevented exactly by its inscribing certain inhibitions in the genetic code. The stress laid upon behaviors resembling morality, the biological „adjustments” of animals' social behaviour, unknown before the appearance of ethology, shows, in the same time, the orientation of this discipline concerning Eros, the life instinct. In contrast with psychoanalysis for which the sexual instinct is the most important vector, ethology transfers the accent upon the non-sexual elements, even giving the impression of an underestimation of sexuality.

If with animal groups the importance of sexuality as a means of cohesion between individuals and inside the group is reduced (due to the rarity of mating periods) with humans, the only living beings with a permanent sexual activity, things are completely different. Concentrating more upon animal behaviour, Lorenz and his collaborators are right in the field that has consecrated them, while on the other hand, Freud was not wrong when he presented sexuality as the principal instrument of Eros with humans. Which does not mean that the social cohesion forces ethologists identified with animals are not present in human communities. The merit of human ethology is exactly that of having demonstrated that also with humans there are inborn social behaviors, moral values with biological roots. V. Dem Zamfirescu remarks that, from the perspective of ethology, one could say that the much discussed death instinct can be seen simply as a *philosophical myth* invented by Freud who did not have the knowledge of modern biology to explain the origins of

⁷ V.D. Zamfirescu, *op. cit.*, p. 307

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 308

⁹ One could add, for example, remotivation behaviours; see for details V.D. Zamfirescu, *op. cit.*, pp. 310-313

destructive aggressivity a phenomenon with serious consequences in human society. Refusing Freud's speculative hypothesis devoid of any biological sustenance, Lorenz separates aggressivity from destructiveness. Aggressivity is unquestionably an instinct, but its aim is not destructive but constructive, the conservation of species. In order to keep aggressivity inside the boundaries of its aim, not letting it slide towards destructiveness, evolution has created a number of inborn inhibitions which prevent the attack from producing a dangerous or mortal injuries to the congener and similarly the signals which trigger these inhibitions. They are as many non-sexual sequences of life instinct. In ethology, corresponding to the Freudian dualism of Eros and Thanatos, there is the dualism of aggressivity and counter-aggressivity. Nevertheless, while in psychoanalysis the two drives have radically different characters and aims (the conservation or respectively the destruction of life), in ethology they have a common target – the conservation of species. In this situation counter aggressivity „aims” only at controlling aggressivity, preventing it from becoming destructive. For Lorenz, the human being is no exception in the course of evolution: similarly with other social animals, the human being has been „endowed” by nature with an aggressive instinct that has no connection with destructiveness. The natural direction of human aggressivity is similar to that of other living beings: the conservation of species. Both the inhibitions of aggressivity and the signals aiming to prevent aggressivity from becoming destructiveness are part of the human instincts¹⁰. In ethology, corresponding to the idea that in the case of animals one can speak of a kind



Lupte medievale în Cetatea Sighișoarei; foto: Corina Isabella Csiszár

¹⁰ V. Dem. Zamfirescu, *op. cit.*, p. 314-315

of morality (behaviors analogous to morality), there is the idea that human morality, at its turn, has also a natural component.

Nevertheless, how could one explain the fact that in human society, where violence and crime are strikingly present, this principle Lorenz had formulated does not seem to function. The answer could be found in the explanations Lorenz has given to destructiveness. This phenomenon that can be observed only with humans, is neither an expression of the death instinct Freud was writing about, nor is it a manifestation of the aggressivity instinct analyzed in ethology, since its aim is the conservation of species, thus of life. The rather slow desynchronization of rhythm in biological evolution and the extremely accelerated rhythm of social development are the explanation in ethology of the human being as subjected to destruction and inclined towards destructiveness, this real „cancer” on the healthy body of the aggressive instinct. If, from the beginnings of history till our days, there have been numerous radical changes in the evolution of social life, the genetic fund has remained the same since the remote period of hunting and gathering (that had lasted approximately a million years).

But, man’s genetic code, as it appears today, had been structured exactly during that period of a million years of hunting and gathering. Those some thousands of years of civilization have been enough for man to subject himself *biologically* to the new environment he created. Thus, an explanation of man’s destructive aspect could be explained if we take into account two important consequences of the phenomenon called civilization: namely, the creation of artificial weapons and the construction of the anonymous society with its most pregnant expression, the city. Man’s natural weapons not being dangerous, the inborn inhibition of aggressivity created by evolution to control them is very strong, but not enough for two empty handed men not to injure each other badly. Unfortunately, it is a long time since men had confronted each other with natural weapons, a period stretching from the arrow and bow to nuclear missiles. In no other case „is more striking the discrepancy between the products of civilization and the phylogenetic adaptations. The instruments of human counter aggressivity made on the model of man’s less harmful natural weapons are incapable to keep at bay the artificial weapons which are more and more departing from nature”¹¹. Thus, artificial weapons (especially fire arms) have considerably increased the distance between the belligerents and, in the latest decades, mass destruction systems have metamorphosed both victim and attacker simply in abstractions. Such a stage is reached when the aggressor cannot detect the signals which with *Homo Sapiens* had the role of inhibiting aggressivity, as he is at a distance of hundreds or thousands of kilometers away from its victims. On the other hand, on the plane of individual relations aggressivity would degenerate into destructiveness due to the intervention of another element: the coexistence of individuals in the anonymous society. In this situation, the meeting between the biological rules of social human behaviour (inscribed in the genetic code during the long period of hunting and gathering) and the overpopulation, the decrease of individual distance in advanced communities resulted in the weakening of native social reaction, disengagement but also destructive aggressivity. Suggestive in this respect is the fact that statistics record very high percentages of violence exactly in crowded urban areas: the quintessence of the anonymous society.

In conclusion, taking into consideration the researches from this area of science, ethology, we can remember that biology does not confirm the existence of a death instinct. No doubt, aggressivity is an instinct, but its aim is not destruction but the conservation of species, thus of life.

¹¹ V. Dem. Zamfirescu, *op. cit.*, p. 319.

Without being observed in the animal world, the intra species destructive spirit is not an instinct, but only a pathological reaction generated by lack of adaptation — “phylogenetic adaptations” — to the social determinations imposed by human civilization. On the other hand, as Eros is concerned, the contribution of ethology can be summed up as making evident the non-sexual elements of life instinct, in essence identical both with humans and animals, but underestimating the importance of sexuality as a coherent human force.



Camera de tortură din Turnul cu ceas, Sighișoara; foto: Corina Isabella Csiszár

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