

## **Freud's and Our Paranoid Myth of "the Beast"**

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In *The Uniqueness of Man*, the distinguished biologist Sir Julian Huxley (1941) argued that now that the battle waged on behalf of Darwin by his grandfather, Thomas Henry Huxley, had been won, we could afford to turn our attention to what a unique and truly bizarre kind of animal we are, both biologically and psychologically. It is my experience that, today, any mention of this line of thought, any stress on the discontinuity between humanity and the rest of nature, any emphasis upon our uniquely symbolic consciousness, is likely to bring down on one's head a chorus of criticism of the supposed arrogant anthropocentrism entailed in any such claim and its blindness toward humanity's ecological destructiveness. Such critics generally don't seem to realize they themselves are now making the case for "the uniqueness of man": the uniquely destructive consequences for both human beings and their ecosystems that follow from our relative freedom from the instinctual controls and biological determinants governing the behaviour of other species.

We seem reluctant to recognize the uniqueness of our destructiveness. We like to think of it as "inhuman" when, regrettably, it is one of the things most characteristically human about us. We engage in massive projection of this uniquely human destructiveness on to animals that, unlike us, mostly fight and kill to survive and protect their young, not to impose their favored abstract ideologies upon one another, nor to amass great wealth while impoverishing others, nor to enjoy sadistic pleasure. The latter requires the uniquely human capacity for empathy, by which I do not mean sympathy but the purely cognitive capacity for what George Mead (1934) called "taking the role of the other"—

imagining oneself in the other's shoes, as it were. Without this capacity the sadist would be unable to enjoy the other's pain or humiliation. Empathy and sympathy are two quite different things. My students say, "But my cat is sadistic! Look at how it tortures and toys with the mouse it has captured!" I point out that if you take away the mouse and substitute a crumpled bit of paper, the cat will do the same thing. It enjoys batting around the mouse or the ball of paper, but not because it attributes suffering to either. Sadism is a uniquely human capacity that we prefer to think of as "inhuman."

Look at our everyday language. I will try to be gender inclusive.

"He's a real animal!"

"She's a parasite."

"He's a leech."

"She's a bitch."

"He's a snake in the grass."

"She's a bloodsucker."

"His behaviour was beastly."

"She's a cow."

"He's a dirty dog."

"She's a vulture."

“He’s a total rat.”

“She’s a vixen.”

“He’s a pig.”

“She’s a Black Widow.”

“He’s a cockroach.”

Then are the famous human “monsters” we “bestialize”:

“Julius Streicher: the Beast of Franconia”

“Ilse Koch: the Beast (Witch, Bitch) of Buchenwald”

“Clifford Olsen: the Beast of British Columbia”

“Ilse: She-Wolf of the SS”

Freud too engages in such projection and it seriously derails his thinking about human destructiveness and our discontent in civilization. In *Civilization and Its*

*Discontents* Freud (1930, p. 111) writes:

The element of truth behind all this, which people are so ready to disavow, is that men are not gentle creatures who want to be loved, and who at the most can defend themselves if they are attacked; they are, on the contrary, creatures among whose instinctual endowments is to be reckoned a powerful share of aggressiveness. As a result, their neighbour is for them not only a potential helper or sexual object, but also someone who tempts them to satisfy their aggressiveness on him, to exploit his capacity for work without compensation, to use him sexually without his consent, to seize his possessions, to humiliate him, to cause him pain, to torture and to kill him. *Homo homini lupus*. [“Man is a wolf to man.” Plautus]. Who, in the face of all his experience of life and of history, will have the courage to dispute this assertion?

Freud goes on to say that all this “reveals man as a savage beast to whom consideration towards his own kind is something alien” (p. 111).

Now, of course, I am in no way disputing the fact of the human aggressiveness, destructiveness and sadism to which Freud calls our attention, only to his characterization of it as bestial or animalistic, when it is obvious that animals themselves do not behave in these ways, only humans do. Freud and we are engaged in projection onto animals of the dark, uniquely human traits we do not wish to acknowledge in ourselves.

Such projection led Freud to argue that our raw passions of sex and aggression arise from biological, somatic sources—from our bodies. He resorts to a biological rather than a psychological or existential conception of human passion.

Yes, the human *triebe* or drives differ from animal instincts in being far more open to learning and social influences in their aims and objects, which can be displaced, reversed, etc., and are to a considerable extent acquired rather than biologically fixed or pre-programmed. But in “Instincts and Their Vicissitudes” Freud (1915) insists they arise from a *somatic* source— despite his admission that he could never specify the precise somatic source of the aggressive drive. The result is Freud’s (1923) mind/body dualism in which, adapting Plato’s metaphor, reason (ego) is the human rider attempting to guide the beast Appetite (id) upon which it is precariously perched:

The functional importance of the ego is manifested in the fact that normally control over the approaches to motility devolves upon it. Thus in its relation to the id it is like a man on horseback, who has to hold in check the superior strength of the horse; with this difference, that the rider tries to do so with his own strength while the ego uses borrowed forces. The analogy may be carried a little further. Often a rider, if he is not to be parted from his horse, is obliged to guide it where it wants to go; so in the same way the ego is in the habit of transforming the id's will into action as if it were its own (p. 24).

While the image is vivid and evocative of our profound sense of conflict, it is ultimately misleading. For our sexual and aggressive passions do not in fact “bubble up” from our animal bodies but “trickle down” from our uniquely human minds. Freud himself may have begun to recognize this when in 1920 he finally (implicitly if not explicitly) broke with Darwin and his own earlier drive theory and resituated psychoanalytic theory on the basis of a new Greek dualism that echoed the work of his pre-Socratic precursor Empedocles for whom all of reality reflects the struggle between *philia* (love) and *neikos* (strife). The fact that Freud chose to give capitalized Greek names to his two new forces, *Eros* and *Thanatos*, is an indication that he was moving far beyond his earlier biological reductionism, subsuming the earlier sexual drive in a far wider “principle” of life, integration and connectedness, while counterposing this to the utterly un-

Darwinian notion of a “drive” toward death.

This is not the place to trace Freud’s own and his follower’s struggles to interpret in shifting ways the meaning of *Thanatos*. Nor to explore the pessimistic consequences for social theory of Freud’s biologizing of human passion. Instead, Sagan (1988) raises a thoroughly psychoanalytic question: what in all this is Freud really, more or less unconsciously, giving voice to? Beneath the manifest story of a frustrating civilization demanding instinctual renunciation and engendering in us resentment and discontent Sagan discerns the latent image of our first boss, first tyrant, first oppressor: the preoedipal mother who, in the other of her split incarnations, is our first nurturer, rescuer, soother—figures underrepresented for many years in Freudian discourse due to its flight from mother to father, from the preoedipal (mere foreplay) to the oedipal (the main event).

In the hands of Melanie Klein and her followers our fundamental conflict is seen not to be between mind and body, civilization and drive, but between *Eros* and *Thanatos* which, for all intents and purposes, are the passions of love and hate, grounded in preoedipal identifications with the nurturer on the one hand and the aggressor on the other, matters of the human heart and mind, irreducible to the body or the animal in man. The animal in man is not the problem. Nor is the problem the conflict between an antisocial animalistic id versus a prosocial human ego-superego. If the past century has shown us anything, it is the involvement of human reason (ego) and human ideals and ideologies (superego) in the perpetration of evil. No, the problem is not the animal in man, it is the conflict in our hearts and minds between our love and our hate, between our employment of our uniquely human capacities for reason, idealism and empathy in the service of nurturance or of sadistic aggression and revenge.

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