

## Corona Crisis, the Death Drive and the Education of the Subject

By Fernando Murillo, PhD

*“How can man, that is to say a living being, have access to knowledge of the death instinct, to his own relationship to death? The answer is, by virtue of the signifier in its most radical form”*  
*Jacques Lacan, Seminar VII - The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*

*“Where, O death, is your victory?  
Where, O death, is your sting?”*  
*1 Corinthians 15:55*

In the final paragraph of the novel *The Plague*, Albert Camus closes with a rather puzzling statement: that the germ of a plague never really dies but can lie dormant for decades until the day it comes back “for the sorrow and the education of man”<sup>1</sup>.

In what ways could something traumatic as a pandemic, and that can quickly become a decisive factor between life and death be possibly considered educational?

In this brief commentary I approach the question just posed thinking through it with the Freudian notion of the death drive and its further development in Lacan, in order to make sense of the possible relation between crisis and the education of the subjectively existing individual. While the function of the death drive has often received less attention compared to the discussion of Eros, I claim that it is in the death drive that we can find a renewed understanding of the urgency of an education understood as the cultivation of inner life, the process of assertion of oneself.

While in intellectual circles it is not uncommon to use (and abuse) the metaphor of death to talk about people or God, to refer to changes in fields of knowledge, or to exaggerate the imagined outcomes of political ideologies unpopular among academics, death has suddenly become real in alarming and ever-increasing numbers of flesh and bone human life losses all around us at the time of this writing. In Lacanian terms, it can be said that we are now quite literally torn between the two deaths: one of symbolic nature and the other of potential physical factuality. Amidst the Corona crisis, death has become Real.

Symbolically, and following Lacan, the death drive can be felt in action in the compulsion to repeat, in the jouissance experienced in the (painful) process of reaching out for the object cause of our desire. But symbolically, it is not only repetition. As Lacan indicates in book VII of the ethics, the death drive “is also a will to create from zero, a will to being again”. Such will to

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<sup>1</sup> In the upcoming new translation of *La Peste* by Laura Marris.

reconstruction is -I claim- a formative drive, a necessary condition for the sustenance of any educational endeavor. Seen as such, we are reminded that in his own reconceptualization of the drives, Freud came to consider that perhaps it is not the case that there are two separate drives (Eros and Thanatos), but actually two contradictory manifestations of a single drive (an example can be seen in this famous instance of the sexual act, which involves both love and aggressivity). In this sense, an acknowledgment of our own relationship to death triggers at the same time a manifestation of the Erotic drive: a will for reconstruction, unity, and reconciliation.

Education, understood in this framework of a dialectic of death and Eros, appears as a process of subjective reconstruction. The process of educational experience dramatizes the dialectic of both manifestations of the drive: subjective shattering on the one hand, and reconstruction on the other. Anyone who has undergone a serious process of education can identify moments associated with each.

In a time of widespread suffering through the health crisis (and the other crises of meaning that have exploded in violent forms in the Americas, a pure manifestation of the death wish), the acknowledgement of our own desires involved in our sufferings, fears, and hopes, hold the promise to restore the dialectic of our subjective reconstruction in our present-day context. For this, symbolization of experience through the use of the signifier is key (as Lacan notes in the quote from the epilogue), and a good reminder of one of the central discoveries of Freud's talking cure: the importance of the flow of the signifying chain through transference, a phenomenon that can be said to be the basis of an educational relation.

The education of the subject as a process of assertion of the self is not only an ethical demand for each individual and for traditional educational institutions, such as schools and universities. It is also a demand for the professional formation and practice of analysts. In *My Teaching*, Lacan points at that directly: "the end of my teaching is, well, to train psychoanalysts who are capable of fulfilling the function known as the subject, because it so happens that it is only from this point of view that we can really see what is at stake in psychoanalysis" (2008, p. 43).

The Corona crisis has caused a traumatic disruption of life as usual, bringing closer to our attention the disruption or ceasing of things as we knew them, and our own relationship to death. But if a crisis is indeed, as its original meaning in Greek indicates, a *purification*, we can begin to have a glimpse of the productive possibilities of working through it within ourselves and with others to activate a "will to begin from zero, a will to begin again", in Lacan's words.

Now more than ever we need the impossible professions of analysis and pedagogy to recover what Lacan referred to as the pastoral function, something that throughout human history has been a necessary type of relationship of care to self and others to alleviate suffering. Seen in this light, education, or the process of "assertion of the subject of the unconscious", in Hilda Fernandez's words, can be truly conceived as "the ultimate labour of love" (Murillo, 2018). And as we know from the Psalmist, love is stronger than death, a reminder that helps us ask emboldened and in confidence "Where, O death, is your sting?".

## References

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