

# ‘PSYCHOANALYSIS AND WAR’: A SUMMARY†

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**ABSTRACT** *This paper develops a contrast between Buddhist and psychoanalytic perspectives on war. I discuss dissociative mechanisms that allow people, soldiers and civilians, to avoid coming to terms emotionally with the horror of war. Copyright © 2007 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.*

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In 1915, plunged into the vortex of World War I, Freud (1915) wrote ‘Thoughts for the time on war and death’. Freud thought that war strips away the veneer of civilization to reveal an underlying ruthless, violent nature. Peacetime might allow for the illusion that people are basically good, altruistic. Later, in 1932, in a letter to the pacifist Albert Einstein, Freud (1932/1933) sounded considerably more optimistic as he allowed that anything that promoted cultural development and the bonds between people would make an end to war more likely.

As much as the Kleinians emphasized the death instinct, their influence in the long run, it seems to me, has been to make war seem less like an expression of the deepest levels of human nature, and thus less inevitable than Freud’s analysis suggested. In particular, resort to violence, from a Kleinian point of view, tends to be seen as a paranoid schizoid phenomenon, a manifestation of the manic defense, a defense against

depressive anxiety and guilt. Violence rests on a perception of the other as all bad; violence, along with the accompanying fantasies of conquest, also manifests omnipotence, a failure to accept limitation. So from a Kleinian point of view, there is hope that an enhanced ability to contain depressive anxiety and guilt should make it possible to resolve disputes peacefully, without imposing one’s will on the other by violent means.

The idea that war is avoidable draws further support from the intersubjective theory of Jessica Benjamin (1988). Benjamin shows how relationships organized around dominance and submission, on levels from the interpersonal to the societal, manifest a failure of intersubjective recognition. Intersubjective recognition, insofar as it entails seeing one’s own point of view and that of the other at the same time, provides the groundwork for resolving impasses organized around doing and being done to, or

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around victimizing and being victimized. Benjamin shows how clinical impasses and political impasses can have the same structure and thus be susceptible to the same sorts of creative resolutions, as long as both parties can see the point of view of the other without losing their own perspective. Seeing the point of view of the other entails bearing guilt in that, from the point of view of one's adversary, one shows up as a victimizer.

Ideas about the sources of war also vary cross-culturally. Buddhists, in particular, reverse Freud's ideas about reality and illusion in human experience. Whereas for Freud, sexual and aggressive impulses form the bedrock of human nature, with benevolence and altruism being largely defensive overlays, for the Buddha and his followers, sexual and aggressive impulses are largely a function of attachment to an illusory ego. Basic reality, for Buddhists, is human connectedness. Because the individualized self is transient, attachment to the ego and all the aggressive behavior that flows from it is the major source of human suffering. Without such attachment, people would feel a selfless sort of love for others and the impulse to war would disappear. In Hinduism, from which Buddhism sprang, the situation is more complex.

I think there is a way to retrieve an aspect of Freud's ideas about war that uncovers a fundamental reality about human experience. My way of thinking about human suffering, perhaps a variation on the Buddhist idea, is that there is a disjunction between human feelings of love and connection with others and with the ways in which the universe is, in a very basic sense, indifferent to our feelings and our attachments.

Are we then to strive for acceptance of war along with acceptance of death? No, because war is not a necessary fact of life, Freud notwithstanding, like death. War, in fact, derives from just those egoistic attachments and the

associated greed, arrogance, and sense of omnipotence that seek to deny death. In my view, then, war does not strip away illusion to reveal the basic realities of the badness of mankind and of death. War derives from the illusions of power and pride that seek to mask the reality of death and limitation, as if death could be avoided by killing. Of course, like all neurotic and defensive behavior, war brings about precisely the outcome that it seeks to evade or deny.

Trauma deriving from war can be thought of, in Bionian terms, as having to do with unthinkable experiences, unbearably painful experiences of torture, murder and being witness to such events, encountering sadism and the extremes of cruelty of which human beings are capable in the context of war. These unthinkable experiences live on unmetabolizable in the psyche, potentially destroying hope and faith in the goodness of people, or returning to retraumatize the person endlessly in the form of flashbacks.

One way we try to ward off the despair and rage about the unnecessary death and suffering all around us is to numb ourselves, to induce states of euphoria: with coffee, drugs, television. A state of dissociation around war and other suffering is fostered these days in ways that are quite new. The killing itself is sometimes done to a great extent from airplanes flying at such high altitudes that those who drop the bombs do not have to encounter the reality of the suffering being inflicted.

What happens when dissociation works, when people are able to insulate themselves from the suffering of their fellow human beings? What are the psychic and social costs and consequences of efforts to dissociate away pain in the ways I have mentioned? One way to think about the status of the dissociated is that it haunts us, generating a chronic state of fear that can be exploited to justify acts of 'pre-emptive' violence.

Dissociated and unformulated experiences tend toward bodily expression, as we have learned from studies of trauma. Those who have been traumatized tend to dull their pain, or buttress their dissociation, with substances. Efforts to insulate ourselves from our fellow human beings also conduces to a sort of competitive individualism that can profoundly shape our lives.

The resurgence of interest in post-Kleinian psychoanalysis in parts of the US seems to me to speak to a counter-dissociative need to engage psychic pain more fully. The increased efforts in some psychoanalytic circles to engage the political surround with both political action and efforts to understand what is going on psy-

choanalytically seems to me to reflect a breakdown in our own field's splendid isolation as the war comes home all around us.

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